AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF THE GASCONADE

By Dru L. Pippin

Hear ye, hear all! I am the Gasconade, born in the wooded hills and glens of Wright county and nourished by hundreds of cold springs, everflowing northeasterly, going about my meanderings in much the same fashion as I did in 1540 when Don Francisco Vasques de Coronado set forth from the Kingdom of Neuva Galacis (Northwestern Mexico) to discover and conquer the seven cities of Cibola. That was long ago and my memory fails me, but it was just possible that Coronado and DeSoto camped so close together near my mouth, one July or August in 1541, that an Indian runner might have carried tidings between!

When you read about the other waters in Missouri, it is some human telling the story, but no one talks for me! I am the Gasconade and if there is to be any Gasconading about me, I intend to do it myself. I have every right to brag or be extravagant if I want to; Noah Webster gives me special permit by saying that a Gasconader is one who is a 'braggart, given to blustering and boastful talk.' That's me: the Gasconade, a true-blue, one-hundred-per-cent Missourian!

I am pretty sure that Du Tisne gave me my first name, Blue river, but it was too commonplace; after the year 1718 I was called Gasconade by everyone. I am unable to tell you who gave me this noble title but I am sure it is not Indian nor is there any tradition of Indian origin. I think someone from the province of Gascony in southwestern France named me. The people of Gascony were long noted for their extravagant claims for the fine vintages of their province and were called Gasconaders by neighbors jealous of their skill.

I think a few of these Gascons sailed from France, up the St. Lawrence, and through the Great Lakes, down the Mississippi, and up the Missouri and at last were trapping on my shores. Surely one of these fellows was awed by my beauty, entranced by my swishing rush over shoals, and soothed by the tranquility of the clear blue eddy below. Perhaps this stillness reminded him of his ocean voyage and the calm before a storm. Probably my roar over the shallows reminded him that I, too, was boasting; to him I might have been Gasconading. I cannot say, but Gasconade it was, and Gasconade it is for all time to come.

If I could only remember accurately, I could tell you about the primitive men of centuries ago who used me, but never abused me, who made war on their enemies for violating sacred rights, and who finally laid their leaders to rest on my highest bluffs under piles of mounded rocks. Still others lived in caves by my shores and buried their dead in the mouth of these caves; today those interested in what went on a millennium ago have dug as deep as thirty feet to find a layer of dirt, a layer of wood ashes, a body, then another layer of dirt, additional ashes and more bodies showing that generation after generation lived, loved and died on my shores. The trinkets of stone, burned parts of earthen ware, stone hammers, axes, spears and arrow points that are dug up or washed up in my fits of flooded anger leave it to your imagination as to whether the makers of these were the Indians of 1540--or a more civilized people who preceded them.

I think the first white man I ever saw was a Spaniard. Oh, I know it is generally thought that the Frenchman was the first to discover me, but I'm almost sure that the men I saw were detached from DeSoto, who crossed me in reaching a point in Missouri about where Springfield now stands, before turning southwest to Arkansas. The only chance of my being wrong is that they might have been with Coronado instead of DeSoto. They should have kept a chronicle to bear me out. Maybe they did, but it was never found; all you have for this thought is my word for it. The first fellow who ever took time to put in writing what he thought of me was that Canadian, Du Tisne, who in the summer of 1718 tells of the forest of walnut, sycamore and oak and the 'very beautiful country of hills and rock.' In writing of his trip up the Missouri, he calls me Blue river and says that I am not of much

Someone wrote, "Down in Ozark Mtns. on Gasconade River," below the picture on this postcard. The view is of a cabin on the Gasconade south of Dixon. Courtesy of Sue Hansen.

consequence! Obviously, he was wrong. The fool!

The reason I know he was talking about me was that he named the next river upstream the Riviere des Osage. On his return he went cross-country, which led him across the broken highlands of the Meramec, Gasconade and other tributaries of the Missouri and later he reported on my beauty and named me the Blue river.

In my age-old travels, I have observed a lot; in my everflowing rotation--to the gulf, evaporation, clouds, winds, temperature changes and back in rain drops--I have had ample time to compare olden days with the present. I well remember when it took me much longer to make a round trip than it does now, because as a raindrop I soaked down deep into the leaf mold and the underlying porous soil. Now it is a race as to which drop can reach my stream bed first; something has happened to the humus that formerly sustained me and there is nothing left to do but run down hill as fast as possible. My earliest human guardians sought only food, water and shelter; in satisfying their simple wants from my shores and my waters, they had security. They destroyed only that which was necesssary for their self-preservation.

Then one day I heard men speaking of fabulous wealth, gold and splendor; and there was an air of restlessness, and a searching for riches. I paid little attention to this until about 1744 when about 200 Frenchmen living on the Missouri started commercialization of furs. Laclede, Dominique Ducherme, Juan Munie, Manuel Lisa and Lewis and Clark, who camped at my mouth on Sunday, May 27th, 1804, brought news of unlimited trapping possibilities. From that time on I noticed a change. Men wanted something besides food, water and shelter; they wanted to kill for the fur and to trade this fur for a thing called money. I gave it little thought at the time, because there was still an ample harvest without hurting the supply and nature's ability to replenish, but I realize now that this was the beginning, that men would destroy natural resources faster than they could be replenished. I was to find out that some to follow wanted my timber while others wanted the stored-up fertility of preceding ages, and were eager to chop, saw, grub, and plow to transform this virgin fertility into things that could be exchanged for gold! Who can eat gold?

In 1808, I well remember, only two families lived on my banks but by 1813 Sylvester Pattie had started a grist and saw mill, using me as his vehicle of transportation to get lumber to St. Louis. In 1811 Isaac Best had established a horse mill near my mouth. His was a tough time, for his steeds were prizes for unfriendly Indians who routed him and his family and were away with the horses. When Isaac Best had his mill, a little hamlet sprang up and took the name of Gasconade. Years later it came near being named the capital of Missouri, missing by but two votes. It still stands as the village of Gasconade, with its Army

boatyard in my mouth.

I'm going to tell you something that may shock you. Did you know that I am considered, by those who know me best, as the most crooked river in the world? I have never done anything dishonest that I know of, except to steal good Huntington Silt loam from my farmers' bottom fields, but I can't help that; I get my belly so full of water that I cannot hold any more and there is nothing for me to do but spread out. And the fuller I get the faster I flow and, naturally, the more I pick up. If my human friends would only watch the forest fires, harvest just the timber which is ripe for market, replenish with new growth, plow on the contour, terrace the slopes, do everything they can to hold the raindrops where they fall, and practice good land use management, I'd stop a lot of my taking ways and help bring back conditions as I remember them. Then the things that walked, swam and flew all got along under nature's laws with the things that talked.

But how did I get to telling you about my belly ache when I was talking about my crookedness? Every drop of me comes from Missouri and while I have numerous feeding streams, from where I start to where I end cannot be over 150 miles as the crows fly. Yet as I meander through the valleys from Wright county to Gasconade county I imagine I run close to 500 miles. It's a wonderful run, too, steep bluffs, gorgeous cuts, hairpin turns, and lazy eddies; hardwoods, softwoods and dogwoods, hidden logs, protruding boulders that weathering has tumbled from adjacent cliffs, wild flowers and shrubs, birds and bees, four-legged creatures quenching their thirst at my water's edge, while listless white clouds float above as though convoying my trip.

If you have floated me you will know the beauties I offer. I harbor the smallmouth bass, his cousin the bigmouth, and that red-eyed glutton, the rock bass; I boast of channel cat and crappie, all species of perch, drum and jack salmon as well as the so-called rough fish that round out nature's balance. I have fish that love worms or dough, like minnows

Church group from Crocker pose on the bank of the Gasconade River in front of Bat Cave near Crocker. Courtesy of Sue Hansen.

or crawdads, prefer the tricky plug or lie in wait for that deceiving fly. From an inconspicuous beginning of Wolf, Whetstone, Clark, Elk and Beaver creeks, to be joined by the Osage Fork, Roubidoux, Big and Little Piney and many other creeks and springs, I finally reach grown-up proportions near Vienna--which recalls to me the memories of days when steamboats fought against strength to take away the resources that I nourished before man discovered Quivira, the land of fabulous wealth.

To me the years have gone swiftly because I have been a busy river helping those pioneers in their building program. Thousands upon thousands of pine logs from the Piney branch of my family were rafted down stream. Untold numbers of railroad ties came from every section of my drainage area to be transported by me to Gasconade City, or Gore, there to be loaded on flat cars of the Missouri Pacific railroad, while others were snubbed at Arlington and shipped over the Frisco. I'll never forget those weather-defying, grizzled men of the rafts: Bob Miller, Obidah Bludsoe, Bill Reed, Joe Thompson, Steve Owens, Emil Boyer, Charlie Mitchell, Bub York and many others whose names slip me now; their's was a life of adventure, exposure and hard work. they got a daily wage of seventy-five cents to a dollar--and boarded themselves! When their rafts were delivered by me, transportation home was no problem for each had two strong legs to carry him cross-country for the next trip.

Later on, open hull barges were put into operation. These were flatboats with open hull bottoms and a board walk on each side, with three men on a side to pole the boat along and a steersman behind to steer or snub as the case required. My shoals never became too shallow for these boats to operate and you'll be surprised to know that many times they carried two car loads each of grain or livestock. These were commonly called 'jug boats' because when they started upstream from Hermann or Gasconade they usually carried a supply of jugs, and these jugs *started* out filled with barleycorn. Many tie rafters rode the jug boats as far as they went upstream, before changing to 'shanks mare.'

The first steam boat I remember was the *Lottie Lewis*. She was looked upon with skepticism by many people who said I was not navigable, and her subsequent sinking at the 24-mile mark seemed to prove for the time being that I was a jug boat river only. In 1878 that grand old river captain, William L. Heckman, Sr., took the sidewheeler *Washington* upstream as far as Rich Fountain. Then came the largest boat I ever floated, the steamer *Gasconade*, along with the smallest and fastest of them all, the *Kingfisher*. She successfully brought out wheat and livestock at dead low water. The farthest any steamboat fought my strength was when the steamer *Royal*, in charge of Capt. Heckman, Sr., went upstream as far as Arlington, 107 miles from the Missouri, in the year 1883. She carried two car loads of wagon timber from Rever Rock to Arlington.

Like father, like son. Capt. William L. Heckman, Jr., in 1892, piloted *Mill Boy* from Herman to Vienna each week during a season beginning March 1st and lasting until July. Captain Bill still lives at Hermann and still loves me. He is, even yet, a commissioned pilot and holds a federal license to operate steamboats on my waters. You'd probably find him fishing if you want to see him; he's only in his eighties.

There are many other pilots: Henry, Gustav, Gilbert and Albert Wohlt, and the five sons of Capt. Heckman, Sr.: William, Samuel, Frederick, Ed and John. I remember Henry German, Frank Blaske, Henry Burger, Hal, Tom and Sterling Dodd, Hanson Chadwick and Henry Zibelin. There were others, all honorable, fearless men who lived by the sweat of their brows and their ability to master the strength and treachery of swift, shallow shoals, submerged logs and hairpin turns that I would throw against them. Oh, they were worthy opponents, those men.

When I look back over the years, starting with the red man

Postcard view of Bat Cave on Camp Gasconade. Courtesy of Sue Hansen.

who lived on the fish and wild creatures I nurtured, the traders and trappers who commercialized the furs, the rafting of my timber, the miles upon miles of railroad ties that I have carried, the plowing of my fields, the burning of my undergrowth, the present pressure of fishing and hunting, I marvel that I have been able to foster as much wildlife as I still have today. I saw the older Heckman and his sons, Sam and William, Jr., catch 200 pounds of bass on a float trip from Mt. Sterling to Second creek and they threw away every bass that did not weigh two pounds. I had many otter and beaver at Scott's Island in 1887; the otter disappered but the beaver are coming back now. I have seen ducks and geese resting so tightly on the water that late comers had to light elsewhere. I remember when Simon Boeger at Bay bought a world of game, even remember a Mr. Flitch selling him my prize wild turkey gobbler, that weighed 45 pounds, for 75 cents. It took a good deer to bring four dollars. I probably will never live to see as much wildlife again as I had in the olden days but on my daily meanderings I note a few wild turkeys, many more deer and--maybe I imagine it--I'll wager I have more fish than ten years ago. I hear people discussing what can be done to make my waters more productive. I say to them this one simple thing: I'll be as productive as before, and as well behaved, if you will make my soils fertile, if you will follow good soil and timber management practices. You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours.

An adventure that many of you have never heard about happened on November 1, 1855. The Pacific railroad (now the Missouri Pacific), was under construction from St. Louis to Jefferson City and the first excursion train carrying notables to the opening of the Missouri Legislature was being run. A bridge had been spanned across me at Gasconade and thought to be strong enough to carry the train because it had successfully supported a gravel train the day before. When the excursion cars came to the bridge the steam was turned off and the train allowed to drift across the bridge. But the speed was too great; the engine broke through the bridge and fell into my waters, killing 43 persons and injuring many others.

Probably the most colorful and eventful pages of Missouri history could be written about the experiences I have had with my other railroad, the old South Pacific, later the Atlantic and Pacific and now the Frisco. Until 1867 the terminus was at Arlington and Jerome (then called General Fremont's Town). It was the first railroad destroyed by Confederate forces; later, completion westward changed to a new right of way, leaving for present generations discarded fills, tunnels and cuts, all dug with pick and shovel, black powder and mule-drawn conveyors. Workers claimed by accident or sickness reside in an unmarked plot of ground called the Irish Grave Yard. The terminus at Arlington seemed destined to be a large settlement, right on my shore line, and until recently the first courthouse still stood as a reminder that here had been the seat of law, order and justice in five successive counties, St. Louis, Gasconade, Crawford, Pulaski, and finally, Phelps. Business moved on with the completion of the Frisco westward, and this once thriving center of population became just another historic spot, ending its colorful part in history by being sold as a town in its entirety to an individual for the rumored sum of $10,000 in 1946.

The years of '61 to '65 were trying times, with my people divided on issues of state and nation, and my waters carried the red blood of young manhood, shed in pitched battles between North and South. The battle of Hartville on January 11, 1863, resulted in seven Federals killed and 64 wounded while Confederate losses were claimed at 300 killed and wounded with two officers and 27 privates taken prisoner. General Marmaduke in his report of February 1, 1863, claimed it as a Confederate victory, though, with 33 killed, 203 wounded and 29 missing and 303 Federals taken prisoner and paroled. There were several skirmishes, running fights, and many incidents of pillage and murder during the trying Civil War period.

I remember in the fall of 1861 the majority of the people in Pulaski county, especially near Waynesville, were southern sympathizers and even erected a Confederate flag on the courthouse lawn. The Union command at Rolla sent word to take it down. When their warning went unheeded, troops under Col. Albert Sigel rode into Waynesville--to find that a few minutes before the flag had been cut down and most men of military age were on their way to join Confederate forces to the west. Col. Sigel built a fort on the bluff overlookind Roubidoux spring, which now supplies the water for the trout fishing branch of my family. This fort was of earthen works thrown up from a moat or ditch about 4 x 4 feet wide and deep; behind if was the real stockade, surmounted with rock and timbers and pierced with port holes. This post had control over the surrounding country and was an important link in the Federal communication line from Springfield to St. Louis over the 'Trace' or old wire road. Three companies of soldiers lived off the fat of the land and fought the bushwhackers who made lives miserable in the area, quite apart from killing a few prominent citizens because they were thought to have hidden treasure. Despite this, and an occasional holdup of the stage coach on the the wire road, my people weathered their misunderstandings and continued to send their sons and husbands to fight for the cause they deemed right.

Summer visitors inspect the breathtaking view from Cave Lodge on the Gasconade River near Crocker in the "Roarin' Twenties." Courtesy of Sue Hansen.

I played my part in World War II by furnishing some 90,000 acres of land on my Big Piney tributary for Fort Leonard Wood, where thousands of troops used my waters for engineering training that they might better protect freedom. Yes, I have seen a lot; I have played my part in history and my prayer is that generations yet to come will let me flow unmolested and unimpounded by man-made dams, that I may continue to bring peace, relaxation and wealth to the people who use me.

My big springs--Miller, Prewett, Stone Mill, Roubidoux, Schlichts, Bubbling and Bartlett, Shanghai, Piney, Boiling, and many others--keep me ever cool and clear. Time will not permit me to tell you the individual story of each spring; their basic tale is one of turning the wheels that spun the old French stone burrs to grind the corn and wheat that nourished my people. Their's is almost a lost art, pushed aside by steam and electricity, but still claiming a finished product that modern invention could not surpass in quality and food value. Their's is a story of gathering places for men hungry for human association and the exchange of news; their's is a story of hardships and simple pleasures, of sweat and toil that polished the rough diamond and handed down a heritage to each succeeding generation to use and not abuse.

I am Old Man River, a Gasconader from 'way back, just trying to tell you that in my hills and on my waters God still speaks in a voice not muted by the noises of civilization nor choked by the smokes of industry. My dancing waves beckon you to come breathe of the clear air, feast your eyes upon my variegated autumnal dress, or gaze through my misty purple haze at sunset. I invite mankind to visit me and partake of that spirit of romance that permeates my region. To walk besides my clear sparkling waters and to lose yourself in my natural charms is to realize that man is not alone upon the earth.

I am the Gasconade. I have spoken.

Mr. Pippin, a Missouri Conservation Department official and a resident of Waynesville, wrote this article for the Department's publication, 'The Rivers of Missouri,' which is now out-of-print.