

Legend of the Memorable Earthquake of 1811

The Western Pilot by Samuel Cummings, pp 138-142, 1847

Among those who lived in the borders of the Mississippi Valley, in the latter part of the year 1811, there are few, if any, who do not recollect the tremendous earthquake that shook not only the whole of this great valley, but also the vast mountains that partly surround it. The origin or cause of this earthquake is supposed to be, oxine matter under the bed of the St. Francis river, some thirty or forty miles from the Mississippi, west of Madrid; and its materials, it appears, are not yet exhausted, as scarcely a year passes, but that several shocks are felt in the neighborhood of Madrid, from these explosions.

The following narrative I obtained from an old and very respectable friend of mine, now living near the scene of its action. I will give it, as near as I can recollect, in his own words:

"In the year 1809, in the thirteenth year of my age, my father with his family emigrated from the State of Kentucky, to the south-eastern corner of the state of Missouri, and located on the bank of the Mississippi, in the village of the Little Prairie. The inhabitants of that pleasant little village were all French, except my father's family, (the most of them were from Canada,) and scarcely any of them could speak a word of English. However, there was no difficulty in getting acquainted with them, and we soon became, like the rest of the villagers, all of one family. Now, to point out the former location of the village of Little Prairie, would be almost impossible; but it appears to me, that the bank of the river where the village stood, has washed away near three quarters of a mile back, and the bank on the other side, has made near the same distance towards where the village once stood: so that, the happy scenes of my boyish days are extinct. The chief employment of the French people consisted in raising cattle, hunting, fishing, and trapping. In hunting, my soul delighted from my childhood, and, being a Kentuckian, I was wedded to my rifle by nature. I soon imagined myself a favorite in the village, learned a little of the French language, and made a bosom friend of one Jean Baptiste Zebon. Baptiste was a man of about twenty-two; he knew the ranges of the deer and bear, and was expert with the rifle. He was also a famous trapper, which sport, at that day, was lucrative, for beaver and otter were plenty; and often, for two weeks at a time, Baptiste and myself were on hunting and trapping excursions, alone by ourselves, without creating the least uneasiness amongst the villagers at home. The last trapping expedition we had, by me will never be forgotten. Forget it -- no! Its recollections, were I to live till I was as old as Methuselah, I would carry to my grave.

Up to this time, we never had felt an earthquake, and were comparatively happy. We had been told by an Indian, that about ten miles from the opposite bank of the river, in Tennessee, there was a lake of some considerable magnitude. This would be a new trapping ground to us, and Baptiste and myself were not long in making up our minds on trying our luck in Tennessee. Accordingly, about the 24th of December, 1811, we shouldered our rifles and our traps, and bid adieu to our friends, all except my father, who accompanied us across the river, for the purpose of bringing back the canoe. When the old man had bade us good bye, we took up our line of march as directed, due east, until about two o'clock, P.M., when we struck upon the margin of the little lake, and after reconnoitering it some hour or two, we found it was, on the west bank, of a crescent form, about half a mile wide, and something like three miles long. While surveying the lake, I shot a large buck that had come

to water; near that spot we selected a place for a tent, and whilst Baptiste barked the trees, and built the tent, I was engaged in taking care of the venison, taking off the skin and saddles, and jerking the meat. This employment consumed the remainder of the day. Our hard day's travel through the heavy cane-brakes had given us an appetite for our suppers, and after toasting our feet, and roasting our fresh meat over the fire, and eating for about an hour, we wrapped ourselves in our blankets for a snooze. It was some time before I could sleep.

It was natural my anticipations were great--my fortune was made on the banks of our new discovered little lake, and my castle was built high in the air several times before I could get asleep. Next morning, we were up before the sun, and eat breakfast. This little lake had evidently been, some day or other, a part of the river, and it was as full of beaver and otter, as any lake I had ever seen, crawling around its banks, and swimming like flocks of geese in the water, until nine o'clock in the morning. But to my story. The most of this day was consumed in setting traps for the night, and when night came we eat our suppers and went to sleep, and slept soundly until about four o'clock in the morning, when we were awakened by a noise like distant thunder, and a trembling of the earth, which brought us both to our feet. The dash of the water against the bank of the lake, and rattling of the limbs in the tree-tops--now and then the falling of a dry branch in the water, or near us on the ground--all these things first led me to believe there was a storm approaching. But no. There was not a breath of air stirring. What was it? was the inquiry.--It soon became still. My friend said--`may be, he is de shake of de earth--may be de whirlwind!' An earthquake I feared it was, and the mention of it ran through my soul with terror. Now imagine my feelings. But a boy, scarce fifteen years old, ten miles from a human being, except my friend, and in a dark night. Baptiste said--`we will be down again, it was nothing but the whirlwind.' I knew he was only trying to pacify me; and, to please him, I turned in again; but there was no sleep for either of us.

The thoughts of being in a wilderness amongst wild beasts, and the terrors of the earthquake, ran in my head for near an hour, and I really thought it would never be day. At length, against my companion's will, I got up and built a fire, and day began to dawn. My mind soon began to freshen on our traps, and when about to rouse Baptiste, came the next shock. It was awful! Like the other--first, a noise in the west, like heavy thunder, then the earth came rolling towards us, like a wave on the ocean, in long seas, not less than fifteen feet high. The tops of the largest sycamores bending as if they were coming to the ground--again, one rises as if it were to re-instate, and bending the other way, it breaks in twain, and comes to the ground with a tremendous crash. Now the scene became awful in the extreme. Trees were falling in every direction--some torn up by their roots, other breaking off above the ground, and limbs and branches of all sizes flying about us, and the earth opening, as it were, to receive us, in gaps sometimes fifteen feet wide--then it would close with the wave. The water of our little lake was fast emptying itself in these openings, and as soon as they would close, it would spout high in the air--and soon, as far as I could see, with the alternate wave of the earth and water of the lake, there was a crashing of timber, and spouting of water. At one time, I would be splashing about in the water, and then holding a tree top, until the shake began to subside, when I espied a spot of ground above water, and in attempting to reach it I got into a crevice, where I lost bottom, but being somewhat amphibious, I at length reached the place. The earth now became quieter; but my thoughts were, that the world was at an end, and this time and place was selected by me to offer up a supplication to my God. With fervency I dropped on my knees, raised up

my eyes and hands toward heaven, when my friend bawled out, at the top of his voice, `stop!--what for you speak to de God now? why you no speak to de God three months?--come back--take care de b-r-a-n-c-h?' The earth and lake becoming still quieter, my friend commenced a lecture. We were both yet alive and unhurt, and thinking the earth was every where destroyed except the spot where we stood, says Baptiste, `if de God kill all de rest, and leave us, me no want to stay--and if de god kill us, and live all the rest, he not de God me take him for.' My friend seemed much braver than myself; but more than once, during the worst of the shake, saw him raise his eyes toward the heaven, and say, `sacre bon Dieu! Senior!--then bawl out, `take care of de b-r-a-n-c-h!'

The shock had now subsided, and every thing had become still; the day had fairly dawned, and the change of the scenery was visible. The whole forest seemed as if an awful hurricane had completely destroyed it. The soft alluvial earth was opened in many rents of great depth, in which our little lake had completely lost itself. What was to be done, was the next question. Shall we seek our home--or have we a home? Our camp was completely demolished, one of our guns, and all our meat and ammunition, flint, punk, steel, and blankets, lost in a deep crevice, and our bodies wet and cold. Something must be done, or we will freeze. So without much deliberation we bent our course westward, and after climbing over the treep tops that had fallen, and scrambling around cracks in the earth, so wide that we could not leap over them through mud and cane-breaks, now worse than ever, until near sundown we reached the bank of the Mississippi, immediately opposite our once beloved village. Hungry as we were, not having eat a particle since the night before, our hearts leaped with joy. But my friend's countenance changed, as we were seated on a log, surveying the opposite side of the river--he turned pale as death. The cause was soon visible. No smoke arose from the chimneys of our habitations, and not a single human being could be seen. A solitary cow lowed as she stood alone, deserted by her thousand companions, and all else seemed desolate. Fatigued and hungry, we wandered up and down the shore, gazing on the other side for the appearance of some human being, until dark night--none approached. Our clothes were not yet thoroughly dried, and a cold night approaching, we were chilled and hungry; we had no means of lighting a fire, and again death seemed to stare us in the face. Shall we lie down and freeze, or stand up till we famish for want of food? It was but little difference which. However, one gleam of hope yet remained. If we lived until the next morning's sun, contrive to build a raft of floating logs, and with sticks paddle across the river. To do this it would be necessary ot build our raft a mile further up the river, so that we could make the landing on the other side. On this we resolved, and as we were compelled to keep ourselves in motion to keep awake, and from frreezing, we were on the spot a dozen times before day. That was the longest night I ever experienced. The last shock of the earth the morning previous seemed to me to keep the ground vibrating half an hour, but I suppose the whole time did not consume more than four minutes. But the night ensuing seemed as if it were three months long. Still imagining some awful change of the world, my friend several times remarked, `there would be no day!' But the day did come, and, with the little strength we had left, we set ourselves to work; but I should judge it was near noon before the raft was in readiness; and when in the act of shoving it out in the stream, a man made his appearance on the river bank, at the village. Baptiste hailed--we were too far--he did not hear him. We left the raft, and ran down the shore nearly opposite to him, and hailed again. The man seemed to notice us--but without answering, he ran from us as if the wolves were after him. A man had been in sight--a canoe was under the bank near him--but he was gone!

The raft was now our only alternative. Here again we were disappointed. The raft, as poor a make-shift as it was, had gone a-drift. We were both too much exhausted to swim in the cold water after it, and all hope from it was inevitably lost. We walked to another driftpile, but were too weak to even attempt another raft, and we sat ourselves down with our eyes towards the village. `When in de tar,' said my friend, `and got plenty money, then me got plenty friend--sacre! when me in the tar, with de darguin, then me want no plenty friend--me want de friend now--me want him bring de canoe.' During this conversation, I picked up a honey-suckle, had split it apart, and was about to devour it. Baptiste hollered at me, knocked it out of my hands, saying, `what for you want to die and leave me by myself!' He thought that it was poison, and that I wanted to destroy myself. But a man again appeared, we hailed him at the top of our voices; he answered, descended the river bank, launched the canoe, and came over for us. It was my father. He informed us that on account of the shake, the inhabitants had all left the village, and encamped some two miles back in the prairie, and that the village was a mass of ruins--that some two hours before, they had selected one of their Frenchmen to repair to the village, and report its condition--that he had returned at full jump, out of breath, and the first words they had got out of him were, that he had seen a ghost or the devil on the opposite side of the river. This information reminded my father of us, and he accordingly came in search of us.-- The village, sure enough, was all a heap of ruins, but there had been no lives lost. We made ourselves comparatively comfortable in our camps for a few days, until every thing was in readiness for a grand march. Often did I endeavor to give a history of my frightful adventures to my friends, but was as often interrupted by their story of the earthquake, so that I could scarcely get a word edgeways. We all kept company as far as New Madrid; here, my father with his family took leave of the French people, crossed the river at the Iron Banks, and once more in Kentucky, we settled down for the winter. From New Madrid, the French preceded northward to St. Louis, and the greater part of them went back to Canada. Our stock of cattle was very large, and the most of them were left behind at the Little Prairie. They fared as well through the winter, without us, as if we had been with them, as the prairie grass was high, and there was plenty of cane.

I left my father in the spring, and returned to Little Prairie, and found the stock in good order; and being the natural heir to Little Prairie, I have made it my home ever since. I afterwards met Jean Baptiste Lebon, in the latter part of the last war, above St. Louis. He was in the army. On meeting, we both wept with joy. Our time together was short; but he promised faithfully, when his time of service had expired, he would join me at the Little Prairie. I have never heard a whimper of him since.