

## Coming Through

Too often, history is considered a dim, forgotten thing, like a faded photograph, the events of the past lose their clarity. Imperceptibly blurring with age. But there are places where history remains in sharp focus. Places where the built environment forces us to reflect upon the builders. Where the past, just for a moment, becomes a reality, and history comes to life. One of these places, is a small Missouri river town called Arrow Rock.

Hi, welcome to Arrow Rock. This historic town on the banks of the Missouri River seems to have been untouched by time. Except for the cars, it looks very much like it has for the past 150 years. Take this old tavern for example, it's been around since 1834, serving up great food and drink to weary travelers passing through, and it's still serving great food today. Travelers are really what this town is all about. In the mid-1800's America was on the move, and Arrow Rock was on the path of westward migration. In this unit, we'll take a look at three very different men who lived in this area during these exciting times and each of them achieved national recognition. One was an artist, who's art now hangs in the world's finest galleries, one was a man of medicine, a pioneer physician whose research into the treatment of fever brought him world-wide fame. But first, let's take a look at an explorer and merchant, whose quest for Spanish gold opened the door to the American Southwest.

Imagine this scene: it's 1822, in the town of Franklin, just across the river from the site of Arrow Rock. A man named William Becknel returns from a long journey west. As he's unloading his saddlebags, one of them breaks open and a fortune in Mexican silver pours into the street for all to see. Becknel had traveled nearly 800 miles across the prairies to the town of Santa Fe. The era of trade with the Mexican southwest had begun. While the tale of Mexican silver may be more legend than fact, it does underscore the importance of the Santa Fe trade to frontier Missouri. In fact, Mexican silver was widely used in Missouri as currency into the 1840's. A meal at the tavern cost 12 ½ cents in Mexican coin. During the first 20 years of the trade, Missourians made almost \$3,000,000 with the Santa Fe trade, and it all started with Becknel's journey across the plains.

Our company across the Missouri near the Arrow Rock ferry on the first day of September, 1821. The next morning, being warm and cloudless, we proceeded on our journey over a beautiful rolling prairie country. And traveled 35 miles crossing the petite Osage plain which is justly accounted one of the most romantic and beautiful places in the state.

This is the Cise Gun Shop in Arrow Rock. It was built in 1844, but it might have looked similar to the ones across the river in Franklin, where Becknel would have stocked up on supplies, and he would've needed guns. Previous parties headed south into Spanish territories had encountered hostile tribes, or had been jailed by a suspicious Spanish government upon arrival. So why did Becknel want to make the trip? He was in it for the money. The town of Santa Fe was 1,600 miles from the Mexican port of Vera Cruz. That's more than twice the distance to Arrow Rock. Americans could provide better quality goods and could offer them at lower prices. For years, the Spanish authorities tried to discourage trade with the Americans, but in September of 1821, the Mexican people gained their independence from Spain. They were willing to open up trade with the Americans and Becknel saw an opportunity.

The effect of the Santa Fe trade on frontier Missouri was pretty profound. It brought an influx of hard currency, in mainly silver and gold coin, into the state and as early as 1828, Governor John Miller acknowledged that the greatest part of the coins in circulation in Missouri were Mexican coins. The other aspects of the Santa Fe trade that became very important to the state's economy was the fur trade. Of course, a number of trappers actually went to the mountains north of Santa Fe, brought back beaver pelts,

bear, any number of other fur bearing animals, and one of the lasting legacies of the Santa Fe trade was the importation of mules. And, most of the Missouri mules, for which we were very famous, had their origins in Mexico and the Santa Fe area.

The trade Becknel and others pioneered brought new wealth into Missouri. The influx of gold and silver from the southwest created stability and wealth on the Missouri frontier. And this prosperity led to the development of occupations, a bit removed from the simple subsistence activities of the frontier. Who would have ever imagined an artist coming from a backwoods town called Arrow Rock.

This is the home of George Caleb Bingham, widely regarded as one of Missouri's premiere artists. His depictions of river life have captivated audiences worldwide. Bingham began his career here in Arrow Rock in the 1830's signs and portraits gave way to ambitious depictions of frontier life. His masterpiece, fur trappers descending the Missouri, explores not only the personalities of the trappers, but gives a feel for the landscape as well. The county election is pure American democracy in action. Looking at both the dignified and the disorderly of the political life with an unblinking eye. And who can't be moved by the joy and emotion of the jolly flat boatmen in port. A poetic rendering of the lighter side of life on the river. Bingham was always passionate about his work, and from an early age he tried to better himself as an artist. In an 1835 letter to his fiancée he wrote:

I am fully aware of many deficiencies as a painter. Nearly 3 years have elapsed and I have yet scarcely learned to paint the human face. Yet, while I am frequently under the influence of melancholy when my prospects appear dark and gloomy before me; yet I have never entirely despaired and the determination to do my utmost to rise in my profession has ever remained strong in my mind.

Today, Bingham is universally acclaimed as one of our country's greatest artists. His works hang in museums all across the nation. We are lucky to have had such a talent to preserve these images of the frontier for all time.

There's one more place near Arrow Rock I'd like you to see. This is Prairie Park, built by William Sappington in 1845. It's one of the few great pre-civil war mansions still standing in Missouri. The Sappington family was large and prosperous, and much of the family's wealth can be attributed to William's father, Dr. John Sappington, who lived in this home the last few years of his life, until his death in 1856. Though now thought as a tropical disease, in the early 1800's the mosquito-borne disease, malaria, was a serious problem in the swampy Missouri and Mississippi river bottoms. The common cure was bleeding the patient, which frequently led to the poor victim's demise. John Sappington had different ideas. He refused to bleed patients and began to experiment with the bark of a South American tree, chicon, which yielded a drug called quinine. His views were considered radical; he was even denied membership in the prestigious St. Louis Medical Society, who accused him of being a quack. But, Sappington's anti-fever pills worked. They stopped the dreaded fever and chills and kept them from coming back. His medicines were hugely successful, making the doctor a very rich man in his day. In 1844, he published his book, the theory and treatment of fevers. Giving the public the benefit of his years of research and helping to stop the ravages of a dreaded disease.

Sappington was apparently quite a distinguished figure. And even toward the end of his life, he inspired the respect and admiration of his countrymen. Sappington, Bingham and Becknel were certainly exceptional men. Their energy and determination brought them national prominence. But there were hundreds of motivated men and women on the frontier, toiling in obscurity, but with no less industry, persistence and vision than the more famous sons of Arrow Rock.

You can almost feel them all here at the old tavern, the spirit of the western frontier here at present-day Arrow Rock. Check it out, it's a part of your Missouri heritage.