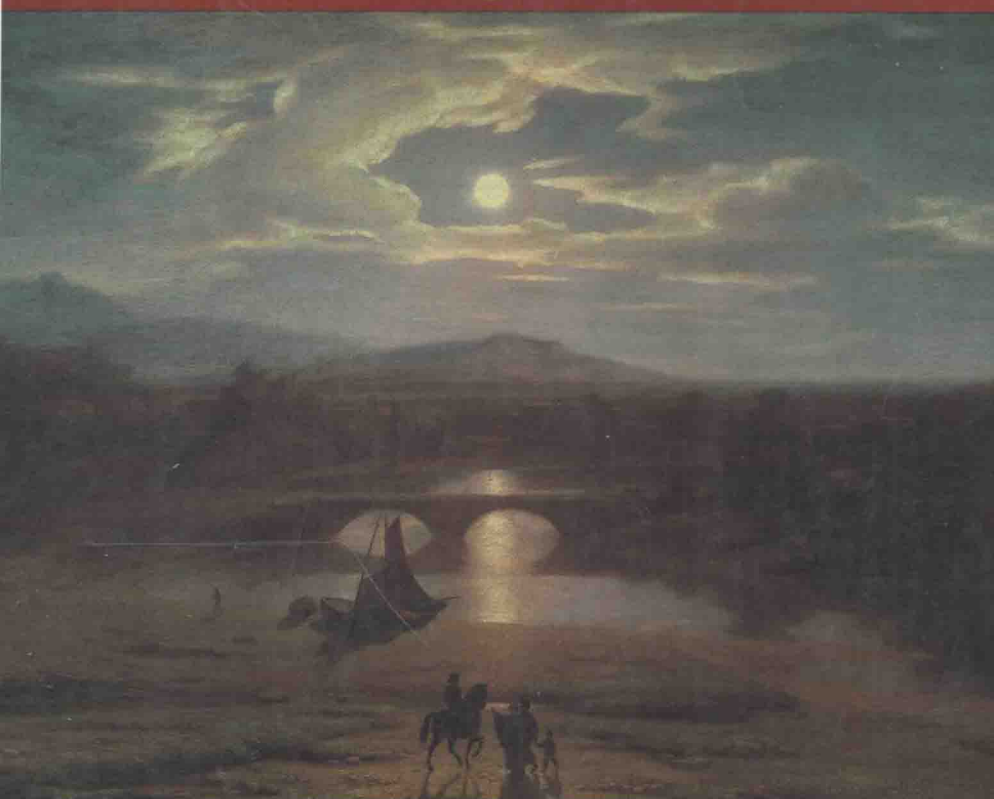
Sixty Miles from Contentment

Traveling the Nineteenth-Century American Interior



M. H. Dunlop

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Preface

Nearly twenty years ago, I was beginning a search for early narratives about the region now called the Midwest when I came upon Reuben Gold Thwaites's *Early Western Travels,* a twenty-six-volume collection of narratives. I remember thinking how convenient it was for me that Thwaites had collected all the available material in such beautifully edited volumes that were such a pleasure to handle. I did not then know the extent of travel literature about nineteenth-century America, and in fact neither I nor anyone else knows it now; I have searched for, borrowed, bought, and scrolled through hundreds of nineteenth-century travel books, and still the field expands before me. Each book is a delight; many are very long, many are tediously detailed, none has any suspense—and as a result each is a series of surprises. The books are predictable on just one count: there is scarcely a travel writer in this rich literature who does not open the book with a brief preface asserting that he or she never intended to write a book and most definitely did not intend to write well. They were in a hurry, they said, and had more important matters to attend to than the niceties of style. Out of their conventional disclaimer comes their very freshness today. Most did not work over or organize their impressions of America; instead they rushed their books into print before the upheavals of change in America rendered them out of date. Their voices—asserting, complaining, laughing, questioning, marveling—dominate books that otherwise display, in many cases, no ordering devices whatever.

Their challenges for me lay not in reading them but in finding them, forgotten as most of them are, and most of all in discovering a

way of working with them, writing about what they wrote about without pushing them into the background, and rendering their collective excitement over the old interior—Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, Michigan, Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota—an area whose interest has, since they left it, been too often blurred, forgotten, ignored, sentimentalized, and erased. Because I wanted my readers to be able both to hear them speak and to listen to what they spoke about, this book is an effort to bring a clamor of voices to the page and to reveal the subjects over which they clamored. I made no exclusions: every travel writer I could locate who visited and described a region that was to each of them entirely distinctive is included here, no matter the form of the book; the social and cultural matters they tackled I tackle here, taking care not to avoid or gloss over the disgusting, embarrassing, and painful and not to miss the surprising, puzzling, and wonderful. The region, during the century that they traveled it, was unsettled while being settled, and no one of the travelers said the final word on the interior. Nor do I.

For their aid, support, and interest in my project, I wish to thank Dale Ross, Ted Nostwich, and Jamie Stanesa of the Iowa State University English Department; Ed Goedeken, humanities librarian at Iowa State's Parks Library, for his prompt and knowledgeable help; and my editor, Steve Fraser, for his vision of what I could do with the material I had and for the extraordinary sharpness of his organizational eye. I owe more than I can express to my mother, who furnished me with a lifelong example of the indefatigable reader, to my father, whose excellent memory and fund of railroad knowledge I tapped again and again, and to my husband, Donald, without whose imagination, expertise, knowledge of American culture, and attention to detail this book would not have come to be.

For Donald, Amy, Meg,
and Ray

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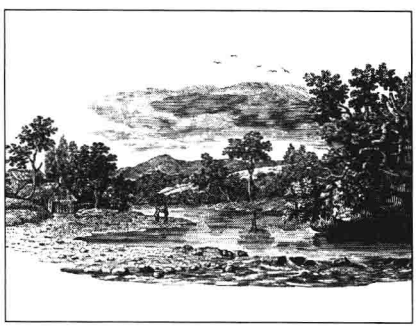
Contents

Chapter 1

Secrets of the Interior



The American interior, in the first half of the nineteenth century, was the place to be. Five centuries of exploration and encounter had left only the North and South poles and continental interiors unvisited; early in the nineteenth century, a few explorers aimed for the poles, but ordinary travelers set out for the Ohio and Mississippi valleys, the expanse that was the focus of intense international interest. Uncounted thousands of travelers—American, French, English, Irish, Welsh, Scots, Spanish, Italian, German, Scandinavian, Russian, Austrian, Mexican, Australian; women, men, and children; persons of nearly every social attitude and political persuasion, every level of education and privilege—roamed the interior, and uncounted hundreds of them rushed into print accounts of their travels and observations. Of these texts a few are still read; some are lost; three hundred of them are the meat of this study. Together these travel books brought to visibility for readers around the world the daily life of the American interior.

There was no specific point of arrival in the interior, no single port of entry, no certain jumping-off place. The interior had no center and no set destinations that could mark either the end or the goal of a journey through it. Travel writers circled and wandered and roamed,

never certain of exactly what they ought to see in three weeks, three months, or three years on a landscape unlike any other: for them, travel writing became a matter of framing observations and narratives that would somehow assess an expanse of barely differentiated landscape features on which everything was changing hourly and across which nearly everyone was moving. From their books, the interior emerged as the most important locale for the most detailed examination of landscape ever conducted in North America and the vantage point from which to inform an intensely listening and watching audience of the greatest and most rapid experiments in social equality and landscape alteration that had ever occurred anywhere on the globe.[1]

The heyday of travel in and description of the interior was intense but limited. Late in the eighteenth century the French traveler Constantin François Chasseboeuf Volney climbed a ridge in the Alleghenies just to "taste how the wind blew" from the interior; nearly every succeeding traveler descended the western side of the ridge and set out, on foot, on horseback, or by coach, to see it. By 1850, however, travelers were beginning to look farther west, across the Missouri, for new material, and by 1880, in their rush from the East Coast to the Rockies, travelers ceased even to glance at what lay between. Never again would so many observant eyes be trained so closely on the expanse of the interior.

The area travelers scrutinized during those decades stretched from Ohio in the east to the Missouri River in the west, bounded on the south by the Ohio River and southern Missouri and on the north by the border with Canada, an area now encompassing eight states—Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, Michigan, Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota—and a half million square miles. No traveler then called it *the Midwest*, no one thought that it extended into any southern state, and everyone experienced the area as distinctive—full of internal differences and variations, but nonetheless distinctively different from the East Coast and the South.[2]

Many claimed they had not seen America until they reached the interior: it defied their expectations, and its very unexpectedness often eluded characterization. Most found that, in the words of James Leander Scott, it "expanded amazingly upon reaching it," and some very American phenomena, though not necessarily peculiar to the interior, seemed peculiarly intense in the interior and more observable there than elsewhere. Its very newness and distinctiveness challenged even the most experienced travelers. When English travelers went to Greece, for example, they conceived of themselves as traveling in space but also as traveling back in time, to antiquity; likewise, Americans who traveled to Europe saw themselves as going back in time to

the Old World, to society as it had been before America came into being. But travelers to the American interior before 1860 found themselves in the novel situation of traveling into the future, to a society emerging on an unfamiliar landscape aswirl with a mobile population. Many travelers underwent shock: if half the international travelers thought they had met their "kindred" in America, the other half thought they had visited an "entirely foreign" people. If some British travelers made efforts to see Americans as "brothers and cousins," Americans in the interior saw those same British as backward strangers embodying what Americans had rejected. Travel forward in time meant meeting a way of life and a set of attitudes invigorating to some and completely alarming to others. Locals displayed none of the characteristics of colonial powerlessness familiar to experienced travelers: they did not smile, sing, appear happy-go-lucky, offer gifts, or attempt to ingratiate themselves with the visitors; they displayed neither colorful native costumes nor curious but remote rituals. The locals that travelers encountered in the interior were not simple, were not peasants, and were not the folk, and their customs and practices were, though never exotic, often mysterious. The tension for travelers of expecting familiarity and not finding it—of having everything from table manners to nature itself defamiliarized—was never restful and at times was explosive. Caroline Kirkland pronounced the scene to be inexhaustible by observers: "It is," she wrote in 1845, "like nothing else in the wide world, and so various that successive travelers may continue to give their views of it for years to come, without fear of exhausting its peculiarities. Language, ideas, manners, customs—all are new."[3]

Travelers were further challenged by the effort to describe a landscape in flux. Between 1835 and 1837 alone, 38 million acres of public land in the United States were sold, with perhaps 29 million of those acres bought as speculative investment; between 1810 and 1870 the population of the United States increased from 5.3 million to 35 million, and a sizable segment of that population was on the move. The massive movements of life and property across a landscape in such flux of ownership, speculation, and alteration demanded that travelers revise old ideas. When every section of the landscape was either under alteration or available for alteration at a dollar and a quarter per acre, who was doing what to the landscape of the interior—altering it, disturbing it, eradicating its native cover—became a question of the most intense interest. What was "natural" was not the question. Nor was it to the point to apply familiar town-and-country divisions to a landscape where many towns were imaginary, or where within weeks tactics of rapid landscape alteration could be

applied to a section and lo! a bank, a church, and a grid of numbered streets replaced the prairie. In observing that rapid alteration process, travelers recorded the near disappearance, within a fifty-year span, of the prairie landscape unique to the North American interior.

Travelers' individual motives were of far less moment to their accounts than were their distinctive capabilities as observers. From the earliest encounters with America—whether those of Leif Eriksson, Prince Madoc, or Christopher Columbus—travelers of course bore motives with them to America. They came for gold, for fishing grounds, for access to persons they might press into servitude, for valuable artifacts, for botanical and geographical knowledge, for personal profit, for a place to live, for an affirmation of cultural superiority. Travelers to the American interior in the nineteenth century revealed themselves motivated by desires to escape debts, hunt, gain asylum, do missionary work, visit friends and relatives, collect bones, rocks, and wildflowers, settle, dig for treasure, act as land agents, spy, promote rutabaga culture, demolish other travelers' reputations, analyze the American experiment, and see for themselves what America was all about on the expanse most available for seeing exactly that. Some appear to have traveled only because they had read the novels of James Fenimore Cooper, and they hoped to encounter a simulacrum of the noble Uncas. It was not, however, their motives that mattered; it was their personal equipment for observing that made a difference. The many pairs of traveling eyes that scanned the antebellum landscape belonged to persons who joined a powerful interest in landscape features with some highly developed abilities for describing it. Many among them were devoted botanizers, interested in the taxonomy of bugs and birds, eager to know the details of geology, and fascinated by the beginnings of archaeology; none of these fields of knowledge had yet been taken out of their hands by professionals. Their interests should not, however, be read as innocent, and the interior that was ripe for the exercise of such interests should not be seen as a source of innocence. Travelers' knowledge of natural history fed sharp-eyed appraisal and assessment more often than it indicated an interest in landscape aesthetics, and appraisal was not driven by an innocent interest in natural beauty. Instead, travelers' knowledge of and interest in landscape features allowed them to glimpse the costs of the settling, "improvement," and landscape alteration going forward in the interior—costs that will emerge throughout this book.[4]

Between 1810 and 1870, movement was the central experience of life in the American interior. Both the local population and crowds of international travelers and potential settlers were on the move; travel writers sped their observations into print and many Americans just as

speedily wrote back and constructed their own views of the rapidly changing interior. Everyone who wrote was new to the landscape, there were few old settlers to serve as local informants, and there was little lore; everyone traveled in the same storm of rumors, speculation, and interpretation. When the population was not performing movement, it was reading about the movements of others, and travel books furnished the most popular and widely discussed general reading of the time, outstripping even the novel in popularity. In the interior, residents kept abreast of who was bringing out a book and when; they subscribed to it before publication or they rushed the bookstores on the day it was delivered. The harsher the book's judgment of the American scene, the better it sold: when the German traveler Francis Lieber approached a publisher about writing a sympathetic book on his American travels, the publisher said, "Anyone who writes on this country ought to know that the severer he is the better his book will sell."[5] Books by the alpha wolves of the traveling pack—a Basil Hall or a Frances Trollope—caused regional uproars and furnished the materials of daily conversation in the interior. In a cultural climate in which travel books were eagerly received, read with critical attention to every detail, searched for mention of the reader's own current habitation, collected, compared, discussed, toted about, and consulted in planning the reader's next move, these books became a household literature. No one, least of all angry local reviewers, thought that the American interior had given up its meanings to the travel writer easily, if at all. Although travel literature had no more of a center than did the interior itself, as a body of detailed description it nonetheless functioned to assemble the interior, shape it, people it, interpret it, and create lasting representations of it that readers could actually occupy.

Travel literature constitutes a literature of public life and the visible landscape. Even though traveling women had greater access to private domestic spaces than did traveling men, in fact most travel books focused on public life in the interior. Nonetheless, travelers had unparalleled access to daily life because, with nearly everyone on the move, much of the private and personal was carried on in public in the nineteenth-century interior—at meals taken in great public halls, in rooms and even beds shared with strangers on the road, in the public sleeping arrangements on steamboats, in the public combs dangling over public washbasins at public inns, and in public spitting. Furthermore, through repeated description, travel literature created a public agenda of notable sites and items on the visible landscape: the banks of the Ohio, the English Prairie settlement in Illinois, old French villages along the Mississippi, mounds, earthworks, Indian tribes, the confluence of the Ohio and the Mississippi, the 1811 earthquake damage at

New Madrid, worm fences, girdled trees, Cincinnati, steamboats and steamboat luxury, squirrel behavior, hunting, prairie fires, prairie flowers, the prairie itself. Most travel books had much less to say about presidents, states, political events, and local conflicts than they did about the dailiness of life, the sweep and the details of landscape, the tensions of mobility, and the irritations of manners. The events they ignored or missed occur and fade, and the noted personages they failed to meet pass into myth or oblivion, but the dailiness they observed persists, shifting, looping, backtracking, leaping forward, reappearing.

The books that came of their efforts tend to thicken around certain subjects they believed their international audience expected to hear about, and around those that defined what was distinctive about the area they were visiting: the landscape of the American interior—its features, its cover, its weather, and the behavior of its horizon; its unexplained prehistoric remains that dotted the landscape; its aboriginal population; and the effects of its sale, settlement, and "improvement" at the hands of white settlers. Also under continual interpretive contest were the features of the culture evolving while the landscape was being altered—the habits of mobility, the position of women, and the local views of food and eating, animals, sport, amusement, health. From travelers' books emerge the potential interactions between the landscape and the dailiness of the lives being lived on a shifting landscape, and finally, an interior far more interesting and strange than many have since chosen to believe. Many of their observations thicken even further around one question that was for them a very great one: the question of comfort—a matter of daily life and a topic of near obsession to nineteenth-century travelers, especially to the British among them—and how comfort was to be defined in and by the interior. To speak of comfort is to speak of the objects that fill and the attitudes that govern everyday life, and of these matters in the interior travelers spoke constantly. The subjects that troubled travelers continue to be troublesome; they suggest the uneasiness of a living past that is in no way comfortably disconnected from the present.

To tease out the texts' living contemporaneity and bring them into collision with the present, I went to their only contemporary equivalent—the literature of tourism issued by the eight states of the old interior—to see how and where in that literature nineteenth-century travel literature's subjects might emerge. Leading the tourist-literature barrage are state agencies that issue four-color photography on slick paper; local areas follow with newsprint pages stapled inside slick cov-

ers; bringing up the rear are hand-addressed mailings and photocopied sheets of local history from towns with populations of only two hundred. As I read through the materials I had accumulated, the interior washed over me in waves of food, lodging, and attitudes toward the weather. In the southernmost parts of the interior, travelers are invited to see Civil War battles reenacted, to eat barbecue, and to venture outdoors at any season. Northward across the dairy belt appear the cheese shops and the dozens of festivals dedicated to single fruits or vegetables, each with its accompanying craft fair. Fast-food shops and chain motels are everywhere. In the middle latitudes, travelers are assured protection from the weather and the outdoors, summer and winter, in the form of skywalks, domed facilities, and enclosed malls. Moving farther north, travelers pass through a fudge belt, a sausage belt, and a walleye belt. Everywhere up to this point in the interior, there is an explosion of bed-and-breakfast establishments, everywhere food is fried, everywhere there is pie, and everywhere towns compete for travelers with numbers of Christmas lights—a quarter million lights here, a half million lights there, finally 625,000 lights illuminating Holly, Michigan. Tribally owned casinos dot the map. Still farther north, bait shops appear and, in the face of eight months of winter, fast-food outlets and golf courses diminish in number. Specifics about a tourist site's distance from "the blacktop" or "the groomed trail" become common. Then farthest north of all, in the forests and bogs, in the guide-service belt, even the previously ubiquitous bed-and-breakfasts disappear. At 249 days of winter, the outdoors is once again made available year-round.[6]

In the paper deluge of contemporary tourism I searched for patterns in the interior's current construction of itself for travelers, for hints of discoveries yet to be made, for experiences to be had there and not elsewhere, and for intimations of the curious and hidden. As I read, many subjects around which the commentary of travelers in the interior once clustered reappeared before me, some reshaped, some partially submerged, some unaltered. Just as in the nineteenth century, the landscape of the contemporary interior is continually implied to be without risk or danger to the traveler, and a certain warm and homey welcome is claimed to be ubiquitous. Few nineteenth-century travelers regardless of gender or age perceived the interior as a physically risky or dangerous place; they claimed they could wander it "armed with a pocket knife and a reporter's notebook."[7] They discovered its dangers only when they risked solitude on the landscape. Nineteenth-century travelers in the interior liked to represent themselves as lone explorers, though few actually were such; they suppressed information about the numbers of their companions and

cherished fantasies of being first and only at a given site. But the actuality of traveling alone (or even with a guide whose language a traveler did not speak) was for those who tried it such an agony of monotony and silence that halfway through their solitary itineraries they changed their plans and sought the society of the steamboat or the stagecoach. Although certain locals apparently knew how to be alone on the landscape, they did not open that secret to travelers. Neither the photographs nor the text of contemporary tourist literature suggests that the interior is even now a place to be alone or to seek solitude: couples, families, and groups populate all photos, and in isolated areas where, according to the brochures, "the silence is so absolute that you can hear the wing beats of the birds flying over," offers of six-person packages and four-bedroom cabins subtly encourage travelers to visit in groups. The other major source of risk perceived by nineteenth-century travelers came from the interior's weather, but the veering, extreme, and unpredictable weather that astonished and even terrified travelers has been repackaged in tourist literature and is rarely a subject except in the far north, where it is handled matter-of-factly by resort owners who declare, for example, that they "have unpredictable weather. It can be cool, hot, rainy, or dry. Occasionally all four within a 24-hour period." Tourist literature never offers the weather as spectacle: there are no photos of floods, ice storms, or tornadoes, and Cape Girardeau's brochure never mentions its historic standing near the epicenter of the 1811 earthquake that rang church bells as far away as the state of Virginia. Nonetheless the climate that nineteeth-century travelers encountered is still in effect, even if some tourist literature likes to attend to the seasons only as recreational possibilities. No tourist brochure from any state in the interior speaks of "normal" weather; there may be averages but there are no norms. Some resist the subject openly: the state of Michigan, under a heading "Tips for International Visitors," tries to persuade those innocents that Michigan is exempt from ferocious weather because it has "a moderate climate that is unique to the Midwest—a coastal climate in the heart of a continent." Other well-known weather theaters avoid the direct lie but tend to offer information without attention to its consequences: Minneapolis offers without comment a table of average daily highs and suppresses information on average daily lows. Walker, Minnesota, just above the 47th parallel, says flatly that it experiences 116 days between hard frosts, leaving it to the traveler to guess what that means. Detroit Lakes, west and slightly south of Walker, says, in a tone of lyrical wonderment, "Seemingly overnight the brilliant colors of fall are replaced by a blanket of dazzling white snow," but goes on at once to note that many businesses nonetheless prepare to "greet the

hardy visitors." Farthest north of all, where January and April can strongly resemble each other, the weather becomes a travel destination: "We have snow when no one else does," says Ely, Minnesota, near the 48th parallel. The dense and busy insect population of the interior, a much-discussed torment to nineteenth-century travelers, is today even less often mentioned than the climate. Only two of the hundreds of local festivals in the interior celebrate an insect: the Mosquito Fest in Zoar, Indiana, and the Boxelder Bug Festival in Minneota, Minnesota.

If the twentieth-century interior often fails to be candid about physically felt features that startled nineteenth-century travelers, those matters are as nothing compared to its great secrets, its near-total silence about matters of the first notice not only to nineteenth-century travelers but to anyone who enters the interior today. Foremost among these is the look of the landscape. Today's tourist literature represents the interior as a landscape of lakes, forests, waterfalls, and gorges. Tourist booklets reaching for the picturesque and scenic try to supply what the past notably lacked. Nineteenth-century travelers, many of whom loved and desired picturesque views and traveled in search of them, now and again located a picturesque scene in the interior but always complained that the picturesque's rare appearances were separated by hundreds of miles of something else. That something else is utterly concealed in contemporary tourist literature; although distances between picturesque sites are just as great as they were 150 years ago, what lies between one waterfall and the next is now entirely squeezed out of view, never mentioned, erased, secret. If travelers to the interior do not already know they are entering an eight-state area in which 185 million acres are under cultivation, tourist literature is not divulging that secret to them; furthermore, in a full season's stack of travel brochures from eight states, there appeared not one telltale aerial view of the grid. On the cover of the Western Illinois booklet appears the only photo of a cultivated field, and the lone visible combine in all of the interior is at work in that lone cornfield. Inside the booklet a traveler may learn that the pictured $120,000 air-conditioned combine belongs to no particular farmer and the field to no particular farm: the photo advertises John Deere Headquarters in Moline, Illinois. All else tourist literature suppresses: the photogenic landscape judged suitable for luring late-twentieth-century travelers to the interior holds, across its half-million-square-mile expanse, not a single visible silo, machine shed, feedlot, confinement house, or grain elevator. Of 657,000 farms on this expanse, the only farms pictured belong to Amish farmers who, wherever possible, have been snapped driving something antiquated and