

New Look at Old West Through Eyes of Prince

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OMAHA — In May 1832, a Prussian prince with an extraordinary eye for detail boarded a sailing ship bound for Boston. Now, a century and a half later, scholars are completing a translation into English of his comprehensive and long-overlooked field notes that provide an important window into the Western frontier of the 19th century.

The journals of Prince Alexander Philipp Maximilian of Wied-Neuwied, a naturalist who ventured up the Ohio and Missouri River valleys, are soon to be published.

Maximilian's writings, particularly when coupled with the drawings and paintings of the Swiss artist Karl Bodmer, one of the prince's traveling companions during the 1832-34 North American sojourn, are considered by some to be on a par with the journals of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, who took their celebrated voyage up the Missouri and beyond in 1803-06.

'He Recorded Their Culture'

Nowhere is Maximilian's attention to detail more evident, nor more valuable to today's scholars, than in the daily diary entries on the Mandan Indian tribe. One of the Mandan villages was close to Fort Clark, a fur trading post near what is now Bismarck, North Dakota, where the prince's party spent the winter of 1833-34.

The Mandans were nearly wiped out by a smallpox epidemic several years after the expedition passed through, said W. Raymond Wood, professor of anthropology at the University of Missouri. Thus, he said, the journals "provide a view of a way of life that otherwise might be lost forever."

Indeed, the prince's field notes are "a data base, almost a time capsule" of the landscape, plants, animals and people he encountered along the route, according to Dr. Joseph C. Porter, curator of western American history and ethnology at the Joslyn Art Museum's Center for Western Studies here.

"He recorded their culture, history, language and religion," Dr. Porter said. "And once you read the daily entries, certain individuals appear again and again, obviously close personal friends of Maximilian. This means we pierce the veil of academic information and get to know some of them as dis-

tinct personalities within the cultural milieu."

Dr. Porter is leading the effort to publish in English Maximilian's North American works, which include the journals, Indian vocabularies, letters and other documents. The manuscript for the first of four heavily annotated volumes is scheduled to go to the University of Nebraska Press, a leading publisher of Western Americana, this fall.

Enthusiasm for the endeavor spans a wide range of academic and scientific disciplines: historians, anthropologists, naturalists and others are delighted at the prospect of working with precise translations. Currently, the primary English account of Maximilian's trip is a severely edited, imperfect translation of material he wrote, based on his notes, after returning to Europe.

"The journals are terrific early studies in natural history of the Missouri River area," said Richard E. McCabe, director of publications at the Wildlife Management Institute, a scientific and educational organization based in Washington. When used with the Bodmer pictures, "there will really be nothing quite as good."

Under the terms of his contract with Bodmer, Maximilian owned the artist's drawings and paintings from the trip, Dr. Porter said. After the prince wrote his account of the voyage, the diaries and pictures were stored at the family castle in Wied, where they remained until the late 1940's, when a German museum official rediscovered them.

Film Is Being Produced

The family sold the artworks and diaries to a New York art dealer, who in turn sold them in 1963 to a natural gas company in Omaha, according to Dr. Porter. The gas company loaned and ultimately gave the works to the Joslyn Art Museum.

The museum arranged for a rough translation in the early 1970's, and in the process discovered how much more valuable the diaries were than the abridged versions from the past, Dr. Porter said. And beginning in 1981, work began in earnest on the precise annotated translation that is continuing today.



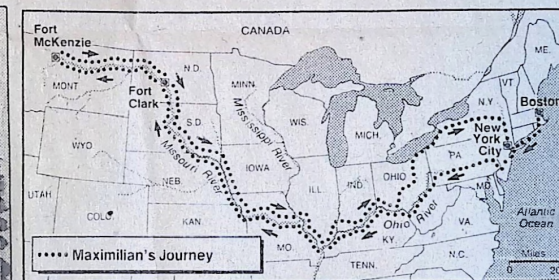
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The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York is producing a film about the Maximilian-Bodmer journey, with particular attention to the Missouri River portion. The film stems from a Bodmer exhibition, "Views of a Vanishing Frontier," that appeared at the Metropolitan in 1985, according to Amie Knox of the museum's office of film and television.

Indians descended from tribes visited by Maximilian and Bodmer are also eagerly anticipating the publication of the works.

Product of the Enlightenment

"We can know about our heroes, our brave early men," said George Horse Capture, curator of the Plains Indian Museum of the Buffalo Bill Historical



Center in Cody, Wyo. "This isn't about a lost people. It's about a vital people who, despite all that was inflicted upon us, have survived."

Maximilian, born in 1782, was the eighth of 10 children. A product of the Enlightenment and Age of Discovery in Europe, a time of enormous intellectual ferment and wide exploration, he studied natural history and ethnology.

Accompanied by Bodmer and David Dreidoppel, a personal retainer, he left for America in May 1832, landing in Boston. After a stop in New York, where he visited the family of John Jacob Astor, also a native of Germany, Maximilian and his companions went to Philadelphia to comb the Peaie Museum, which was the major repository of artifacts from the Lewis and Clark

expedition.

Traveling under the name Baron von Braunsberg in an unlikely attempt to make himself less conspicuous, Maximilian spent his first North American winter in New Harmony, Ind., a former Utopian colony that had become a scientific center. He pored through the colony's library while Bodmer made sketches and paintings in the eastern states and along the Ohio River valley. Bodmer, whose paintings and sketches are "almost clinical in their accuracy," according to Dr. Porter, also took a side trip on his own to New Orleans, sketching the lower Mississippi Valley, before returning to New Harmony that winter.

The spring of 1833 brought the party



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Prince Maximilian of Wied, second from right, as he and Karl Bodmer were greeted by Hidasta Indians in 1833. Maximilian kept a detailed diary, above, which Mr. Bodmer illustrated as they traveled across North America.

to St. Louis, then a young, bustling hub of the fur trade. There, Maximilian met and became friends with Clark, who provided maps from his own expedition and sent the prince to the American Fur Company, coincidentally owned by Astor. The company's steamboats became the European explorers' transportation up the Missouri.

The prince's party left St. Louis in April 1833, returning the following summer after a 13-month meander that took them as far as Fort McKenzie, an American Fur Company trading post in central Montana.

In addition to compiling notes and sketches, the party also collected native clothing, artwork and tools as well as plants and animal and bird skins, which were shipped to Europe for further examination.

The prince's scientific focus did not stop him from having feelings about what he saw. His journals show, for example, that he disliked fences and despised slavery — the latter thriving, he noted, "in this land of vaunted lib-