A Tour in the George Rogers Clark Country

By VIVA W. SPIETH

From my personal acquaintance with that part of Indiana where General George Rogers Clark spent a number of the years of his later life, I should like to take you on an imaginary tour of that area. Although I have come to know the locality well, I see it largely through the eyes of my mother-in-law, who, during her lifetime could tell remarkably fascinating stories of the old Clark community, and those of my husband, who still regards those hills and streams with the romantic imagination of the boy that he was when he roamed there.

We start at my husband's home, located across the river from Louisville, and between New Albany and Jeffersonville, three cities that grew up at the Falls of the Ohio. We shall stand first on ground that was once part of a small tract granted to Richard Chenoweth for services rendered when under command of George Rogers Clark during the Revolutionary War. All around us, but for the most part to the north and east, lie 150,000 acres of land, known as Clark's Grant, which was awarded by the Commonwealth of Virginia to Clark and his soldiers. This land was not of much value at the time of the gift, but it was their only pay. I have read that few of the soldiers ever settled in the Grant. Nevertheless, many of the present occupants bear names identical with names on the Clark roster, a fact which justifies our believing them to be descendants of the soldiers whom Clark led at Vincennes.

Would you like a drink of cold spring water before we set out on a walking tour? At the well we look down upon Silver Creek, called thus from a rock formation along the banks which closely resembles silver ore. Assayers have proved that there is no particle of silver, but geologists have found the rock formation to be interesting as well as the shale which forms the cliffs, so high here that at our level we look into the tops of the trees which grow at the water's edge. Exuding from crevices in the shale we see a yellow substance—sulphur. A band of modern Indians who once presented Hiawatha near-

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1 Mrs. Fred (Louisa) Spieth, Sr., who died in 1931.
2 William H. Spieth of Lebanon, Indiana.
3 Silver Creek flows into the Ohio between Jeffersonville and New Albany. It forms the boundary between Clark and Floyd Counties for a few miles from the Ohio.
by, having been told how their ancestors came long distances
to Silver Creek for sulphur, themselves scaled the cliffs to col-
lect a quantity.

Below us of a certainty once passed the canoes of the rest-
less Shawnees. I am sure Clark’s boat knew the stream well.
Tradition tells us that LaSalle once passed this way. There is
no documentary evidence to bear this out, but history does
tell us it is possible that LaSalle passed up the Ohio River on
an exploring expedition. If so it is natural to believe that,
finding himself blocked by the Falls, he turned up Silver Creek.
There is a romantic legend in the community to the effect that
LaSalle carried with him a treasure of gold. Being pursued
by Indians, he turned into Silver Creek and continuing to the
third branch of the stream hid himself among the bushes and
buried the gold.

When my husband’s parents first moved to their farm in
Jeffersonville Township, Clark County, many years ago, an
old man in the neighborhood regularly dug for the hidden
gold, while an old lady claimed to have dreamed three nights
in succession of the exact spot where it could be found. Go
back with me in time and sit with the young married couple
on the wisteria shaded porch of an old log cabin on a sum-
mer’s evening. Presently in swampy ground not far away
on the farm we shall see the passage of a luminous ball of
light; it settles at the foot of a tall sycamore tree which stands
beside the “third branch of Silver Creek.” This will-o’-the-
wisp may point out the buried treasure, but we shall not in-
vestigate.

In the logs of the cabin bullets were imbedded, and long
after the family moved into their new home, the children used
to find musket balls in the ground as they played about the
old house. It had been, of course, the dwelling of some early
pioneer, perhaps of William Foster, on whose grant the cabin
stood. Whoever dwelt there, undoubtedly the cabin home had
been attacked by the roving Shawnees, or other Indians on the
warpath.

We leave the farm now and follow Silver Creek going up-
stream along a winding, improved road, originally laid off by
General Clark, and shortly we come to Clark’s Ford. Beyond
the shallow water we see a very narrow, rough, clay road, to-
day as it was when Clark and his men cut through the hill
probably at some time when setting out northward against the Indians. The cut is kept clear of growth, and not many years ago a group of men found a cannon ball imbedded in the clay bank.

We shall not follow the cut, but retrace our steps and proceed down stream about a mile when we shall reach a spot near where Silver Creek empties into the Ohio. We are upon what was an early wilderness road, paralleling the River. We turn eastward and presently pass an old Indian burial ground. Boys used to haunt the place in search of relics, for whenever high waters came they undermined somewhat the banks of the Ohio and each spring found new treasures exposed. Many of the best relics found there are, I believe, in a museum at Borden, Indiana. My husband once unearthed an Indian pendant of beautifully polished green stone, perfectly pierced through the center.

An old Indian told George Rogers Clark a legend about this spot, relating that once upon a time there was a tribe of Indians whose skins were much lighter than those of the other tribes. These white Indians fought a bitter battle with the dark-skinned Indians. The outcome was that they were exterminated on a little island where they had taken refuge. The Indians slain in that battle were buried here. Research has given credence at least to the fact that it was a burial place for warriors who fell in battle, but no explanation has been made of a pottery field at one end of the ground.

Let us imagine we are making our tour in the spring. We breathe deeply of the fresh earthy odor arising from rows of upturned sod left in the wake of some farmer’s plow, while an occasional “gee” or “haw” breaks the lazy silence of the fields. Very high above us we hear a meadowlark’s song, and upstream the low moaning whistle of a steamboat.

Along this old wilderness road farmers plow over six or seven oblong mounds of unique appearance and size, at one time built by an early people. Clark, who was much interested in such matters, was informed by an Indian chief that similar mounds in Illinois had been built by their ancestors more than five hundred years before as palaces, but an Indian of our locality explained that the mounds here were a mystery to their oldest and wisest men.
Presently we reach Clarksville—a shabby little village where General Clark dreamed of building the capital of a great new state. One thousand acres were set aside by the Virginia legislature for the future city, and lots were laid off. Here Clark built the only home of his own he ever knew after he left the parental roof. His parents had moved to Louisville after the War of Independence where they died. The General spent several of his later years at Clarksville, alone, bitter, disillusioned, often drunken, only a shell of that high-spirited, gallant young man of twenty-five, who dared and accomplished so greatly that he did much to win five future states for the Union, and that with but little bloodshed, supported by but a few hundred men and meager resources. He who had sacrificed for his country love and marriage, who had spent his own small fortune for military supplies, who had mortgaged his whole future life both financially and physically, asking and receiving no pay, lived in poverty, neglected by his state and his nation until near the end of his life.

From his door facing the Falls of the Ohio his baby brother, grown to manhood, started with Meriwether Lewis on the great western expedition. Once came Audubon to consult with Clark about the birds and wild life of the country. Here he was visited by his veterans and by friendly Indian chiefs. Here a victim of paralysis he fell before his fireplace. Alone and unconscious his leg was burned so badly that it had to be amputated. While the surgical operation was being performed, around and around the cabin marched four friends playing two drums and two fifes while Clark beat time to the music. From here he was borne to the home of his sister in Kentucky, a short distance outside of Louisville, where he died about ten years later.

The log cabin is gone, but we stand near a small monument marking its location and look out over the bluff upon the river he loved. A mile farther east, if the water were low enough, we could see a few rocks, all that remains of the seventy-acre Corn Island from which as a base, the youthful Clark set out for Kaskaskia and Vincennes.

We shall not continue beyond Clarksville up a picturesque cobblestone road, along which only fifty years ago ox teams

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4 Clarksville is on the north bank of the Ohio east of Silver Creek and west of Jeffersonville.
and donkeys yet transported baggage over the portage from the head to the foot of the falls or vice versa. The old road remains, but the Falls hardly exist now, for a canal and government dam have opened the river.

Our tour is almost ended, but before we separate perhaps you would like to go into Louisville to Cave Hill Cemetery. Here in company with several of his brothers, lies George Rogers Clark with only a small marble slab to mark the site. He who originated, planned, and executed the conquest of the Northwest rests in a grave thus almost unmarked in the very city he fathered. The man whose vision not only foresaw the central plains green with growing corn and golden with the harvest, but also made possible that transformation of the wilderness, has not yet been accorded adequate credit and honor by the nation which enjoys the fruition of his dreams.