

Confluence

Author(s): TAYLOR BRORBY

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Confluence

TAYLOR BRORBY

THE YELLOWSTONE AND MISSOURI RIVERS meet in North Dakota like a Y-bone—the Missouri from the west, the Yellowstone from the south, both from alpine springs nestled in the intermountain West.

The Yellowstone slips in sideways, a smooth ride into the mighty Missouri. Lewis knew the Missouri better, and Clark the Yellowstone—this, the Confluence, their rendezvous point.

But that's not quite right.

Geologically speaking, the Missouri is a young river still searching for its bed. The channels change, the silt shifts, and all the while the winter snowpack high in the Gallatin Mountains swells eddies, fills in whirlpools, speeds up the Big Muddy.

In its infancy, the Missouri was three rivers—one flowed north to the Hudson Bay, another flowed south near the Mississippi, and another ran west to east. In the last ice age, a glacier pressed and pushed sediment, rolled rocks against mud, against water, and changed the course of these rivers. When the glacier began to retreat, when it created potholes on the prairie, the largest water highway on the continent was unveiled, was revealed.

The two rivers, as short as 150 years ago, met head-on. More than ripples, beyond gurgling, rapids roared at the Confluence, made passage difficult for steams, keelboats, and canoes. No rocks below to break wooden bows, just a constant washing machine chirring and churning, waiting to overturn anything coming its way.

Now, the two rivers meet—the line where the Yellowstone pours into the Missouri a fusion. That's how it looks when you stand in the sand, slowly sinking, the sun streaking over your back, staring at the meeting point—a ripple, a squiggle, nature in itself—as two western rivers merge into one.

IN THE AFTERNOONS, DURING summer, pelicans sun themselves

at the Confluence, a white sheet of feathers flapping against a brown background. And toads the size of nickels burrow into baking mud, search for cool cover. Cottonwoods flicker in the afternoon breeze.

If you lie down at the Confluence, silt your belly, legs, and arms, push yourself out to the point like a turtle and submerge your head, you can hear the Yellowstone speak in one ear and the Missouri whisper in the other. Two rivers, together, pull you towards the Missouri, float you like a log, and roll you towards the sea.

IN FALL, FISHERMEN WEIGHED DOWN with treble hooks, thick fishing line, and sturdy rods line the Yellowstone and Missouri. This is paddlefish country.

The paddlefish, a large, slate-gray fish, is ugly. Tiny onyx-colored eyes lodged in its head, a heterocercal tail balances its head, and a large, paddle-shaped snout protrudes from its face. The snout is shoveled into the bottom of the silt-heavy rivers to dislodge roots, small shellfish, and anything meaty.

The paddlefish is not a delicacy. But it is a hell of a fight. Fishermen cinch treble hooks to monofilament and hurl them far from the riverbanks. Once the hooks begin to sink, the fishermen start to pump their poles, ripping the razor-sharp hooks through the water. When a paddlefish is snagged, the fishermen holler; hooks scurry across the river's surface, and the fight ensues. The paddlefish does not want to be hooked—the barb lodged into its muscle tissue dislodged only by chance, or if the fish can take so much line and break it from the pole. More often than not this doesn't happen.

Depending on its size, the paddlefish fights for hours—swims upstream, then swings down, the

tug and pull of the rod tires the fish. Eventually the whiz of the reel ceases and the rod tip bends—the heavy pump-and-reel commences. The fish has given up or, due to stress, died.

I SUPPOSE I MEAN TO SAY THIS PLACE, this gathering spot of water, contains significance. More to the point: This place contains story—a story of two men sent by a redheaded president in search of the watery Northwest Passage. A story of a seventy-million-year-old fish that sucks and slurps zooplankton. And a story of convergence, of joining, of Confluence.

Humans relish stories. We repeat stories to stay alive. We dig through stacks of yellow paper, search for something sensational, something memorable. Like this: When a lady from out East asked a leathery Missouri River captain why he drank the silt-heavy water of the Big Muddy, the captain replied, "Cause it scours out your bowels, ma'am." Or this one: A thousand miles beyond the Confluence, when debating which side of the Columbia River to build Fort Clatsop, Lewis and Clark put it to a vote. York, Clark's slave, and Sakakawea, the Shoshone guide woman, participated, marking the first time in this country's history a black man's and a Native American woman's vote counted as equal to a white man's.

The New York journalist Horace Greeley wrote upon seeing the Missouri that "its color and consistency are those of thick milk porridge; you could not discern an egg in a glass of it." So I keep gazing for the story of my life, an egg in a glass of river water.

For me, the Confluence serves as the best framework to understand myself—I, like the Missouri, shift and change as life, like the Yellowstone, continues to come at me from the side. □