

Monday, June 29 1846

Louisville, Kentucky. After two years travelling and two years painting, John Banvard unveiled his Grand Moving Panorama of the Mississippi River. Described by The Louisville Morning Courier as “destined to be one of the most celebrated paintings of the age”, the 12-feet-high, 1300-foot-long canvas depicted detailed scenes of Mississippi life, sketched by Banvard as he sailed the river’s 2300 mile course as a trader between 1842 and 1844.

Wrote an enthralled friend of Banvard’s: “The remarkable truthfulness of the minutest objects upon the shores of the rivers, independent of the masterly and artistical execution of the work, will make it the most valuable historical painting in the world, and unequalled for magnitude and variety of interest, by any work that has been heard of since the art of painting was discovered.”

Perhaps so, but the people of Louisville needed more than hyperbole to get them to part with their 50 cents. The Panorama’s opening night was entirely free of visitors.

1200 miles northwest of Louisville, at Cottonwood Creek, Wyoming, near what is now Guernsey State Park, the Boggs Company wagon train, consisting of an estimated 100 vehicles, bedded down for the night.

Two days earlier, one of their party had written: “We arrived here on yesterday without meeting any serious accident. Our company are in good health. Our road has been through a sandy country, but we have as yet had plenty of grass for our cattle and water... Our provisions are in good order, and we feel satisfied with our preparations for the trip.” The author’s name was George Donner.

In mid-April of that year Donner and his family, along with those of his younger brother Jacob and James F Reed – totalling 31 people in nine wagons – set out from Springfield, Illinois. They were heading West, to California, the promised land described by Lansford W. Hastings’ in his 1845 book *The Emigrants Guide to Oregon and California*:

“In a word, I will remark that in my opinion, there is no country, in the known world, possessing a soil so fertile and productive, with such varied and inexhaustible resources, and a climate of such mildness, uniformity and salubrity; nor is there a country, in my opinion, now known, which is so eminently calculated, by nature herself, in all respects, to promote the unbounded happiness and prosperity, of civilized and enlightened man.”

On 19 July, George Donner led a breakaway wagon train to meet Hastings himself, who would guide them through the Hastings Cutoff, named after himself: an alternative route West that ought to have shaved hundreds of miles from their journey. They missed Hastings, and what began as a shortcut lead only to unimaginable hardship, despair and death.

Things swiftly improved for John Banvard, however. After the ignominy of his opening night he offered local sailors a free show. Before long they were recommending the slow-rolling Panorama, and the artist’s lively narration, to their passengers and fellow traders who flocked to it in droves.

Flush with success, Banvard added more scenes, extending the canvas to 2600 feet and his monologue to almost two hours in length. By the end of 1846, Banvard’s epic had relocated to Boston, where dramatic lighting and a piano accompaniment were added to the show. Over the next six months a quarter of a million people would see it. Banvard became a rich man and an international celebrity. In Britain his show was enjoyed by Queen Victoria (in a private audience, of course) and Charles Dickens.

For the Donner party, these were six months of elemental hell. Exhausted first by the treacherous Wasatch Mountains on the western edge of the Rockies, then by the desolation of Utah’s Salt Lakes, the 87-strong party was finally trapped by blizzards at the Sierra Nevada. By 29 April 1847, when the last members of the party reached safety, 41 were dead.

To stay alive, the survivors had eaten leather, animal hides, bones, pets and, ultimately, each other.

Today the sorry tale of the Donner expedition is part of American folklore, while John Banvard remains largely forgotten, his creation lost to time. But both stories are entwined in *Destiny Manifest*, a major new exhibition of works by Catharyne Ward and Eric Wright. Through sculptures, film and, at its heart, a panoramic canvas of near-Banvardian proportions, their project explores the landscape of promise and disaster that was the American frontier.

- MARK PILKINGTON

Mark Pilkington runs Strange Attractor Press and edits its anthology, *Strange Attractor Journal*. Other books published by SAP include *Tender Vessels* (2010), a monograph of Cathy Ward and Eric Wrights collaborative work and *Liberty Realm* (2012), a monograph of Wards solo work.

Pilkington has written two books, *Mirage Men* (2010 - also released as a film) and *Far Out: 101 Strange Tales from Science's Outer Edge* (2007). The latter collects the Far Out science articles Pilkington wrote for The Guardian newspaper between 2003 and 2005.

Pilkington's writing has also been published in numerous magazines and anthologies, including *The Anomalist*, *Fortean Times*, *Frieze*, *Sight & Sound*, *The Wire*, *The Time Out Book of London Walks Vol.2* and *London Noir*.