

Paul Cyr

Paul Cyr was born in the northern tip of Maine in 1832, in a community that had become a refuge for Acadians fleeing British persecution in Canada. Like his French-Canadian family then, half of the people in the tiny town of Grand Isle still speak French at home. There he grew up and attended local schools. In his early twenties, he left Maine to go west, and landed in Helena, Montana Territory, in 1856.

Like many others, he headed for Butte to work in the various placer mines around the new settlement. While in Butte in 1867, he wrote a poem about his experiences of coming to the young territory of Montana. As was natural to him, he wrote the verses in French, and entitled the poem "Chanson de Montana" or "Song of Montana". As he played the violin, he wrote the verses as a song, and set them to the tune of another popular song of the day called "Charming Eric." As far as is known, this was the first poem to be written about Montana.

The verses were translated by Louise P. Arnoldson, a French instructor at the University of Montana and read:

"Let us sing the muses of a pilgrim,
Of a traveler in the mountains,
Camped in a little ravine,
Along with simple country folk,
Where there's neither milk nor wine to drink,
Nor faces to see save that of men.

"Among the miners, strangers all.
Each one performs his little task.
Few give a thought to autumn near
If there's enough to drink and eat.
And even those who work with zeal
Do it to keep their muscles fit.

"You have to cross the western states
To see wild goats and buffalo,
The riches of our Uncle Sam
Are spread upon the prairies there
And 'long the Mississippi banks
And on the broad Missouri shore.

"Many dangers did we face,
Crossing the river and the plain –
The Indians kept us on our guard,

CHANSON DE MONTANA

Compose en 1867 par Paul Cyr. (Sur air de la charmante Erie). Prix 40 cts.

Chantons les muses d'un pelerin,
D'un voyageur dans les montagnes,
Campe dans un petit ravin,
Avec des gens de la campagne,
Ou ce qu' on n'y boit ni lait ni vin,
Et qu' on ne voit que du masculin.

Parmis ces mineurs etrangers,
Chacum fait sa petite besogne,
L'orsqu' on a de quoi boire et manger,
Tres peu s'occupent de l' automne,
D'autres qui travallient avec ardeur,
C'est rienque pour avoir la couleur.

Pour voir les buffles et les cabris,
Il faut traverser les etats de l' ouest,
C'est la qu' il y a des belles prairies,
C'est la qu' Oncle Sam a ses richesses,
Le long de la Mississippi,
Ainsi que la riviere Missouri.

En parconrant bien des dangers,
Passant les plaines et les rivieres,
Des indiens fallait se garder,
Dans un temps qu' on y songeait
guere,
Pendant que nous etions a souper,
Nos mulets ils sont venut voler.

Resident pres de la Missouri,
Dans ces montagnes si celebres,
A vingt six cent miles de St. Louis,
La ou l'on ose y faire des greves,
Pendant les travaux de l'hiver,
Creusant dans la terre et la pierre.

Dans ces montagnes si elevees,
Il y a un climat tres agreable,
L'on voit croitre l'herbe dans janvier,
Quoique cela paraisse tres redoutable,
C'est neanmoins la verite,
Qui est tres facile a certifier.

Dens ce pays ademi—sauvage,
On marche sur l'or, ah! Je vous jure,
Dans ces montagnes couvertes de nuages,
L'on y trouve de l'or qui est tres pure,
L'on y trouve aussi des rubis,
Qui sont aussi d'un tres grand prix.

Les vallees sont d'une rare beaute,
Elles cedent des richesses admirables,
L'on y recolte du bon ble,
Il y a aussi de bons paturages,
Les montagnes donnent le bois et l'or,
Et chacun y choisit son sort.

At moments when least in our minds –
Even at supper, while we ate,
They came and stole our mules away.

“Dwelling near the Missouri,
In these famous mountains,
Twenty-six hundred miles from St. Louis
Where they dare to build their dykes
During the winter’s labors,
Digging in the earth and rock.

“In these mountains, reared so high,
The climate’s all heart can desire.
In January the grass still grows,
However improbable that may seem.
Nevertheless, it is the truth,
Which is very easy to verify.

“In this region that is half wild,
I swear to you, one walks on gold –
In these great mountains, veiled in clouds,
One finds much gold—gold that is pure.
And rubies, too, one finds in them,
Whose worth is also very great.

“The valleys are of beauty rare.
They teem with riches admirable.
They yield good wheat in harvest time,
And give us pasture lands as well.
The mountains give us wood and gold.
And there each one can choose his fate.”

Leaving Butte, Cyr moved to the Missoula area and took a placer mining claim on Cedar Creek.

He returned to Maine in 1872, leaving his claim behind, but returned after only a few months. He moved to the Kalispell area, where he taught school briefly. He then moved into the town of Missoula, building a stone house there, and entertaining his friends with his music and stories, and scrambling to make a living. In December 1892, he had an almost fatal accident, fording an icy river on horseback. The horse slipped and fell. Cyr could not swim, so held onto the horse. After some time, the river was shallow enough for him to wade out, but he was stranded and soaking wet. Another man heard his shouts and picked him up in a boat, barely in time to save him from death from exposure.

When he was 76, in 1907, his health began to fail, and he prepared to leave Montana for Boise, where relatives were living. One of the things he did before he left was to give a friend, W.C. Peat, two copies of his poem. Peat gave one copy to the University of Montana, but it was lost at some point. Peat was deeply proud of his own copy and

treasured it. As far as is known, this is the only poem that Cyr ever wrote, though he composed his own music for his violin. Cyr died in Boise in 1908, and Peat wrote a heartfelt tribute to his friend, which was published in the *Missoulian*.

Sources:

Missoulian, "First Montana Poet Remembered," October 18, 1908

Missoulian, "Grass Valley," January 3, 1893

Missoulian, "Song of Montana,' First Poem About State, Written in 1867," February 27, 1928

Rocky Mountain Husbandman, "Montana Song Made in 1867," August 3, 1933

Photo Credit:

Missoulian, October 18, 1908