

DR. SAUGRAIN'S RELATION OF HIS VOYAGE DOWN
THE OHIO RIVER FROM PITTSBURGH TO
THE FALLS IN 1788.

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BEFORE giving the translation from the French of Dr. Saugrain's Relation it may be well to give a sketch of his life.

Antoine François Saugrain de Vigni was born in Paris, February 17, 1763. His family had for generations been publishers and booksellers. As early as the sixteenth century his ancestor, John Saugrain, born in 1518, had been printer to Charles IX. in Lyons, and afterward to Henry IV. of Navarre. His son served in the same capacity Catherine, queen of Navarre, and thus to his own time, almost without exception, there was in each generation some Saugrain bookseller, publisher or both. His family was related also to the well-known publisher, Didot, Dr. Saugrain's sister, probably, having married into that family. Another famous name may be mentioned here, for another sister, Marie Thérèse, married Dr. Joseph Ignace Guillotin of unhappy memory. To Dr. Saugrain's name is often appended "de Vigni." His grandson, A. P. Saugrain, Esq., of St. Louis, says of this name: "It may not be uninteresting to state the reason for this. In those days, and it may be the custom still, children almost immediately after they were born were given out to nurse, and the mother rarely saw her child until it had attained the age of probably four or five years. The child took the name of the hamlet, town or village near which it was reared. Hence the name, Vigni, for my grandfather, which, I find,

he retained in his family for many years after reaching the age of manhood and probably kept it through life. So cherished was the custom that a grandaunt of mine (Dr. Saugrain's sister) on the birth of a child shortly after arriving in this country, determined from the stress of circumstances to nurse it herself. This was thought at the time so strange that one of the family painted a portrait of the mother in the act of nursing the child; we have the portrait in the family to this day."

Little or nothing is known of Dr. Saugrain's early education, but there can be no doubt that his parents gave heed to the bent of his mind, and his studies, beyond the obligatory Latin, must have been of a scientific and practical character. As a young man he studied phisic, surgery and mineralogy. To judge from dates and his age, it is not probable that he ever practised medicine in Paris.

The first of his three visits to America was made upon the invitation of Don Galvez, Spanish Viceroy of Mexico. What parts of the country he examined is not known, but he was employed as mineralogist and as a student of the natural history of Mexico. His patron, whom Humboldt calls "the enlightened Galvez," writes in a letter still extant, of Saugrain's scholarly attainments and expresses regret for his absence. The death of the Viceroy forced Dr. Saugrain to return to France. In 1787, in company with M. Piqué, a botanist, he made his second visit to America for travel in Kentucky and along the course of the Ohio. Brissot de Warville dined with the two naturalists at Dr. Guillotin's the day of their departure from Paris. Upon arrival in America they hastened to Pittsburgh, but were there detained by the early setting in of winter. The enthusiastic young men, however, were not discouraged nor made idle by their detention and the partial failure of their plans. They established themselves in an abandoned cabin a few miles from town, were their own hewers of

wood and cooked their own food, for the greater part venison and potatoes, for bread was scarce and dear. They used their time in various scientific pursuits. Dr. Saugrain tried his hydrostatic scales in testing the capacity of different woods in the production of potash, finding corn-stalks the most fruitful. He examined many mines in the neighborhood and found iron, lead, copper and silver. The two naturalists set out from Pittsburgh March 19, 1788, with the adventures given in the letter translated. M. Piqué was killed by the Indians; Dr. Saugrain arrived in Louisville March 29th. There he remained till May 11th of the same year, when he went back to Philadelphia, overland as far as Limestone, then by boat to Pittsburgh, reaching his destination June 17th.

How long he remained in Philadelphia is a matter of conjecture, as is also his occupation in Paris up to the time of his third voyage to America with the Scioto emigration. Special consideration was shown him by the agents of the Scioto Company, both on account of his acquaintance with the Ohio country and his skill in medicine and mineralogy. William Playfair, as director of the Scioto Company, made a contract with him in Paris April 22, 1790, by the terms of which he was to receive two hundred acres of land, his passage to America as well as that of three servants, tools, seeds and beasts for the proper working of his land, provisions for a year and aid in building his cabin, all in consideration of Saugrain's knowledge and experience, who on his part agreed to give the Company his services, making himself useful in any way he could, for the year after his arrival in America.

Dr. Saugrain landed with other immigrants at Alexandria, in Virginia, in May, 1790. With them he shared the delays, disappointments and unavoidable hardships of the journey from the coast, over the mountains, to the Valley of the Ohio. He married in Gallipolis, but did not remain many years there with the so called Scioto Colony, for in

1797 we find him a resident of Lexington, Kentucky, where his first child was born.

Mrs. Mentelle, herself the daughter of one of the unfortunate immigrants, contributed to the *Saturday Evening Chronicle* of July 14, 1827, an article about Dr. Saugrain, in which she says: "Dr. Saugrain had acquired a great degree of reputation among the inhabitants of Kanawha by his success in inoculation for the smallpox. . . . He had besides many other resources; he had brought with him a quantity of phosphorus, glass tubes and quicksilver; besides other things he made aërometers and barometers. All these articles were disposed of at wholesale for Kentucky and elsewhere, or in retail to the traders and those who came from different parts to visit the colony." Mrs. Mentelle makes mention of a party of Indians who visited Gallipolis on their way to the seat of government. "As they went about the town, they were led to Dr. Saugrain's and there examined his different machines with great curiosity. The doctor had an electric apparatus and thought it would be highly amusing to give them a shock; he placed a coin on the electric plate and told the interpreter to desire some of the Indians to keep it if they could take it off. One of them after some hesitation ventured to lay hold of the silver and received such a shock that he rushed out of the house in the greatest and most hideous fright. Dr. Saugrain, picking up the coin himself without any effect from the exploded machine, left the interpreter and the other Indians impressed with the most profound awe for the magician who could work such wonders."

Henry W. Brackenridge, author of "Recollections of the West," gives an amusing account of his year's residence in Dr. Saugrain's family. Brackenridge's book was written forty years after the events recorded and, I fear, is more entertaining than accurate. He speaks of the doctor as "a cheerful, sprightly little Frenchman, four feet six, English measure (but the doctor's children add a foot to this scant

computation) and a chemist, natural philosopher and physician. . . . The doctor had a small apartment which contained his chemical apparatus and I used to sit by him as often as I could, watching the curious operations of his blowpipe and crucible. I loved the cheerful little man and he became very fond of me in turn. Many of my countrymen (the native Kentuckians) used to come and stare at his doings, which they were half-inclined to think had too near a resemblance to the black art."

In the year 1800, at the urgent request of his friend, Trudeau, Governor of St. Louis, then belonging to the French, Dr. Saugrain removed to that town, going down the Ohio to the Mississippi in a flatboat and then working up the latter stream. Many weeks were consumed in this tedious trip. Five years later he received from President Jefferson a commission as Assistant Surgeon in the army and was assigned to duty at Fort Bellefontaine, a post on the Missouri River a few miles from St. Louis. For several years he was the only physician at St. Louis, and he continued in practice to the time of his death. "He could have amassed a large fortune," says Mrs. Mentelle, "but with a heart and hand always open and a very large family, he never felt a desire of accumulation and died poor, regretted and beloved by all." His death occurred in 1821. He left six children, four of whom were daughters. His grandchildren were thirty-one in number.

The original of the following translation, with many other documents, was put into my hands several years ago. I am inclined to think it the draft of a letter sent by Dr. Saugrain to his friends in France.

My Friends:—The ice having caught us at Pittsburgh, you know that we were obliged to remain there the space of four months, and that in the end, the Ohio having opened, we saw with regret our first boat depart, carried away by the ice. We had another one made, in which we

embarked to the number of four, to wit: M. Piqué and Raguét, French, Pierce, American, and myself. We set out from Pittsburgh March 19th (1788). We stopped at Wheeling (Woulige), and at Muskingum, and at Limestone (now Maysville), a place where a fine town should be built: in short we continued our voyage without accident until the 24th, always admiring both banks of the Ohio, which in places are magnificent. But on the 24th at half past four in the afternoon nearly, being opposite the Big Miami, as the wind had thrown us a little upon the shore of the Ohio, on the Pennsylvania side, and while we were preparing to put ourselves rather more out in the current to go faster, M. Piqué called my attention to a flatboat which was upon the same bank. Alas! he was far from thinking this same boat would cause his death. As we were getting away from the shore mentioned to gain the stream, we heard ourselves called by the Indians, who at the same time fired upon us. At the first shot they killed my mare, and in struggling the poor creature pushed against M. Piqué's, which gave me a kick in the belly, throwing me flat, and with another she would certainly have killed me, had she struck me, but she only grazed the skin on my forehead. As the mare had thrown me flat the Indians thought surely they had killed me. I conjecture that from the shore they fired nearly twenty times, but none of their shots hit us, except that M. Piqué was just grazed in the head as I thought, but as he did not complain I believed it a matter of no consequence.

To get beyond the range of the balls we all four took to the oars, but we saw that the Indians all went aboard the flatboat we had seen near the shore and in front of which they had put some planking to prevent their being seen, and in this same planking they made holes to put their guns through so that they might fire upon us without danger of being killed themselves. I left my oar to see if our guns were in order. Of the three we had, I found two loaded; one of these was mine, the other, M. Raguét's carabine. I hastened to load the third as well as to prime two pistols belonging to the same M. Raguét. During this time the Indians advanced upon us and as they did not fire, one of us, I know not which one, proposed to raise a white handkerchief in sign of peace, judging it would be better to be

a prisoner among the Indians than to be killed. They got nearer and nearer to us, even with some sign of friendship, and as they were near us, one of them was on the point of entering our boat and as this unhappy man held a knife in his hand, I judged with some reason, I believe, that he had no praiseworthy intention. I seized a pistol and sent two balls into his stomach. The pistol was no sooner fired than all the Indians, who were then standing, threw themselves flat in the boat and in this position fired upon us. Then M. Raguet took his carabine and fired in turn upon them and I did as much. Raguet fired three or four shots, but unluckily in his haste he put in the ball before the powder, which a little retarded the quickness of the firing, and when, having reloaded his carabine, he wished to fire, not well seeing how to aim, he put his arm outside the boat and it was at once broken by a gunshot fired by the Indians. [In a note at this point Dr. Saugrain adds: Some one at the Falls of the Ohio said that I did wrong to fire; I think so too, for in the boats which have been taken before and since no one has been killed, inasmuch as no one has made resistance.] I, who put my hand outside to hold my gun better and aim better, I had a finger of my left hand broken. At the first shots that the Indians fired from their boat into ours the American who was with us jumped far out and swam to land. This did us much harm, for then the Indians, who perhaps had left us, fired much more. M. Raguet had his arm broken and I my finger. I think I fired but once afterward. As for M. Piqué, he did not wish to fire, thinking, I believe, that the Indians would do him no harm if they took him prisoner, and instead of aiding us in our defence, he followed the example of Mr. Pierce. As there were left only M. Raguet and myself, we both threw ourselves into the water. As he had his arm broken and did not know how to swim, I believe he was drowned, preferring, as he told me, to be drowned to being scalped by the Indians. I had not yet reached the shore when I saw M. Piqué and two Indians waiting for me, and I had no sooner touched the shore than they took me and bound my hands behind my back with some girths which serve them to hold up their blankets. They had no sooner finished tying me than I saw one of the two who held me go to M. Piqué, throw him upon the ground and

after having opened his coat and pulled open his shirt, give him four stabs with a knife on one side and one on the other, and he scalped him. He put his scalp into a pocket-book, which M. Piqué had in his pocket. I leave you to think, my friends, what a spectacle for me! I expected for myself, as you well imagine, a like fate. But instead of killing me they made me run to overtake the boat which, although it was headed towards the shore, had drifted nearly a quarter of a mile from the place where we swam ashore before they could come up with it. When we got opposite our boat, one of the two went into the water and wished to take me by the hair to lead me, for the boat could not come near the shore on account of the trees which prevented it. As for me, such cruel fear seized me, seeing that he had not killed me and that he wished to cross the Ohio—I believed that he wished to burn me on the other side—in short I made an effort violent enough to break the straps that held me bound and I threw myself into the water and I swam with such force that he did not wish to run the risk of following me, and he did well, for my plan was, if they came after me, to seize one of them and drown with him.

Those who had jumped from their boat—swimming—to take us on shore, got into the one they had just taken from us and began to cross the Ohio. As for me, I held on to a tree with my arms about it. Those Indians who were in the boat fired at me and wounded me in the neck. When I saw the boat midway of the Ohio, I regained the shore and when I went to see if M. Piqué were quite dead, I perceived Mr. Pierce who had concealed himself in the ravine. He came to me and we went to see M. Piqué, who was quite dead, and in turning him over, I saw that the Indians had not taken his watch. I took it and likewise a knife and two dollars he had in his pocket. Mr. Pierce cut a piece of his coat to cover his feet. I had not the same forethought, of which I much repented. We left there M. Piqué and we began to walk. It was very cold and I had nothing upon me but a shirt and a pair of large breeches. I lost my shoes while swimming. At first we went a little away from the bank of the Ohio through fear of being seen by the Indians who were on the other side. After having made about four or five miles night began to come on. I

was very tired; I lost much blood by the wound I had in my neck, and as we found ourselves in a good place to sleep, there being much dead grass there, we lay down and Mr. Pierce had the kindness to pull up a quantity of the dead grass and we covered ourselves with it. I slept nearly three hours and my companion awoke me. We went back to the bank of the Ohio and he began to wish to make a raft. But he never could have succeeded seeing that he was alone, for my neck was so swollen that I could not move my right arm and my left hand was much swollen. Seeing that it was useless to work, for the vines of which he made use to fasten the pieces of timber all broke, we abandoned the attempt at a raft. And we began to walk and walked a great part of the night. At last about four o'clock we lay down again. A fallen tree was the place Mr. Pierce chose. He lay down under it and I got as near him as possible. It came on to snow and as my feet did not come under the tree and as it rained a little, I found my feet frozen when I awoke. I rubbed them a long time with snow but uselessly. They caused me no pain, so we made a good day's march, always following the bank of the Ohio in the hope we might see some boat which, going down to the Falls, would take us in. We were obliged to cross three or four creeks. The number of deer, of turkeys and of pheasants we saw is quite inconceivable. We saw also four or five troops of buffaloes, which came so near us that with a pistol I could have killed some. Night came on and we lay down. It still rained—little it is true—but that not the less caused much pain to my feet. The next day I could hardly walk, and my companion who was impatient left me often very far behind him. But I found a way of making him come—it was to sit down, and he after having waited for me some time, thinking that something had happened to me, retraced his steps and seeing my feet as black as coal and that I could not walk, he gave me his arm and he cut a piece from his shirt to wrap up my hand. My neck was extraordinarily swelled, but it did not bleed any more. I chewed up a sort of agaric, which I put on it. We kept on walking but very slowly. I saw a stinking beast (*bête puante*), and Mr. Pierce had no sooner seen it than he ran after it and with a blow with a stick he killed it. After skinning it he wished to eat some of it, but he

could not. As for me, I cut off some little bits and I swallowed them like pills. This did me little good, I assure you. We could have cooked it had it not been for fear that the Indians would come to us, seeing the smoke. I could have made a fire without much trouble. The sun shone and I had two watches, the crystals of which would have made a lens by filling them with water and fitting them together. At last after making so excellent a repast and a considerable halt, I took the rest of the stinking beast and put it in my shirt to carry it. About five o'clock in the evening we came to a house which had been abandoned. I was told (afterward) it was fifteen miles from the Big Miami, the place where we were attacked.

When we had rested half an hour a fresh desire seized us to make a raft and we put into the water everything we could, and while my companion did the heavy business, as carrying the doors of the house, some fence or poteaux de barrière, etc., I cut into pieces my companion's jacket, which was made of buckskin, for that is very much in use in America, to make cords and I cut the seat from my big breeches to make some socks and cover my feet. The whole affair went on very well; the raft was made and we were going aboard when from the other side of the river Indians fired at us. This did not alarm us much, considering the distance but what did make us afraid, and especially me, was the Indians who replied from the side where we were to the cries of those on the other side. Then I took to my heels and never in my life do I think I made so good use of them. My feet no longer made me suffer; in short I felt nothing. My companion, however, was still more alert than I, and in two minutes I lost sight of him. At last I was obliged to stop because in running a piece of stick ran into my foot. My companion in misfortune retraced his steps, and as night protected us from the Indians we lay down, and it was one of the worst nights I have passed in my life. I could not sleep, and at each moment I thought I saw Indians, and the march the next day was still worse, for although wide-awake, I saw Indians behind all the trees; each bit of wood was a gun and I believe, to alarm us more, all the deer had conspired. I had great need of food—much exercise, involuntary baths, the quantity of blood lost—I ate some more stinking beast, “polecat.”

Before sunrise we were on the march; for the time I walked more on my hands than on my feet. I drew myself along, I know not how. We came to a creek, which, I believe is a few miles from Big Bone Lick and there for the first time Mr. Pierce and I had a little dispute. The question was about crossing a large creek. Mr. Pierce wished to go up to cross it; I was strongly for swimming across it. Seeing that he wished absolutely to make the grand *détour* and leave the bank of the Ohio, I did as I always did. A violent part seemed to me the best.—How much he has since thanked me for it.—To put an end to the dispute, I went into the water. He had his back turned and could not oppose my plan. I was already in the water before he was aware of it. Thus I crossed fortunately and he did not delay to follow me. It was about eleven o'clock in the morning. We stripped ourselves stark naked and dried our clothes. This bath did us good. When we were dressed we continued our route.

Nothing unusual happened to us until we got to another creek, which was nearly four miles from the last one we had just crossed. As we were going to swim across it as we did the other, Mr. Pierce saw two boats coming down the Ohio. He called to them, but the boats kept off, believing we were Indians, but seeing our white shirts and our breeches, they determined to come to us. For this purpose they put all the men into one of the boats and left the other with the women and just one man to steer it. This took quite a long time, during which the current kept carrying them on. This time I did not have to beg Mr. Pierce to cross this creek as well as two or three others which followed it. As for me, I followed him, but much more slowly. At last we swam out to join them, for they could not approach the shore on account of the trees which prevented them. It was surprising to me, arrived on board, to see all the people of the boat that received us with carabines in hand. But the fear of being surprised by the Indians obliged them to be on their guard. Arrived on board, they undressed me, warmed some whiskey and rubbed all my body, which did me much good. I drank a little of it and ate a little bread, which seemed to me good. They dressed my neck, which was much swelled. As for my hand, they did nothing for it. They waited until we

should be at the Falls to cut off the finger—which was not done, thanks to myself. My feet were in a very bad condition and gave me much pain.

Two days' sailing were enough to bring us to the Falls, where I passed the night of March 29th. The next day, which was Sunday, I crossed the Ohio to go to a fort situate opposite Louisville, where I was most cordially received. I was introduced by Col. Blaine [here a footnote: whose acquaintance I made at Fort Pitt. He had come down some time before us and arrived at the Falls without accident]; and Major Willis gave me a reception for which I cannot be too grateful. In short I stayed in the fort with all possible comfort from March 30th to May 11th. For three weeks I could not move and every day they had to take out some portion of my foot which began to putrefy, but with the care of the fort's surgeon and with patience all has been well and my foot is quite cured except the place where the piece of stick went in when I was running away in the woods. Thus far I have been unable to cure it.

Louisville is quite small. Nothing wonderful is found in it. The ruins of an old fort (Fort Nelson) are to be seen; they are upon the bank of the Ohio, as is the town. I believe they do not at all exaggerate its unhealthiness. The city and its environs are very sickly. There are found even in the town low grounds, filled with water, from which exhales the most dreadful stench, especially in the heat of summer. It would not, however, cost much labor to drain these marshes which give the inhabitants fevers, which, if not mortal, are long in curing. The other side of the Ohio, where I stayed some time, where an American fort (Fort Steuben) is built and where there are two hundred men in garrison, is not more healthy than Louisville and there are few persons free from fever. This fort is in a very pretty situation. The land there is excellent and there are trees on every side.

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