

**Excerpts about St. Francis County, Arkansas**  
**from "Wild Sports in the Far West"**

**Released by Friedrich Gerstaecker in 1859**

by Paul V. Isbell, March 8, 2016

**After crossing the Mississippi river at Memphis.....The almost impenetrable swamps and the wretched weather, together with my long solitude, had considerably cooled my shooting propensities, and I resolved to seek human society. To get clear of the swamps as soon as possible, I directed my steps to the north-east, towards the St. Francis river, in hopes of finding letters from Cincinnati, or perhaps from home, at Strong's post-office, as I had written for them to be forwarded there.**

**In the evening, some mule drivers from Texas came having pitched their camp not far from the block house. They consisted of two whites and two Cherokees. One of the Indians spoke English very well, and I had a long conversation with him. He had adopted all of the habits of the whites, although he did not seem to have much love for them. I went to bed late, and dreamed of Indians and buffalo hunts. All next day I was obliged to remain quiet, on account of my swelled face, and was rewarded for my patience by nearly being well by the evening. As the baggage we had hitherto carried was too heavy, we resolved to leave some of it with these people till we knew what was to become of us. We had neither of us any settled plan. Our mutual wish had only been freedom and the forest, rightly conjecturing that all the rest would come of itself. As on the second day we continued our journey a great deal lighter, and with renewed strength. After several miles walk we came to a smithy, where, luckily, I could get my gun repaired, otherwise I should not have been able to shoot. This smithy was at a Mr. Strong's plantation, where the road branches off to Little Rock and Batesville. We were undecided which to take, when we were told that we should find more game on the road to Batesville.**

**As the sun rose I started, quite refreshed, and before sunset arrived at Strong's post-office, on the St. Francis. Communications by letter would be**

impossible in the thinly settled Western States, did not one of the farmers undertake the office of post-master. One is appointed for each county, but their duties are not severe. A postman, or mail rider as he is called, traverses the county on horseback, sleeping at certain fixed stations. The mail rider from Memphis, in Tennessee, with a pack-horse in addition, carries the mail for Little Rock and Batesville to Strong's post-office, about forty miles, taking back the return bags; from Strong's, one rider goes to Batesville, and another to Little Rock. I found a letter from Vogel, requesting me to return to Cincinnati, and telling me that three letters arrived for me from Germany. The following morning found me on the other side of the St. Francis, traversing the swamp which Uhl and I had had such trouble to cross nine months ago.

I was early on the march, and arrived towards evening at a neat comfortable looking house, surrounded by large fields of cotton and Indian corn, betokening the abode of a rich planter; on receiving a friendly affirmative to my inquiry for night quarters, I placed my rifle and game bag in the corner, and sat myself on an easy chair by the fire.

Strangers inquiring for night quarters must never suppose that they are to receive them gratuitously. The usual price for supper, bed, and breakfast—be the same good or bad—is half a dollar; but at Strong's I had to pay a dollar, which was an imposition. The charge for a horse depends on the neighborhood, and the price of Indian corn. In the swamps it was half a dollar; in Oiltrave Bottom, only a quarter, corn being cheap there; further south, the charge was higher, and to the north-east again it was cheaper.

On my entrance, I perceived that there were ladies in the house. I had been for some time alone, and as it grew dark, having had enough of my own thoughts, I took out my zither, and began to play. A negro boy, enticed into the room by the music, soon ran out again, probably to tell his mistress what a curious instrument I was playing upon. I soon had an invitation to join the ladies; but my costume was not the most suitable for a drawing room. For months, neither razor nor scissors had approached my head: my hunting-shirt had been ten months in wear, sorely battered by wind and weather, and not being of leather, the thorns had left their marks in many places: my leggins and water-proof boots were passable: my shirt, of my own washing without soap, in cold water, boasted various shades of red, from turkey's and bear's

**blood, which is much more difficult to wash out than that of deer.**

**The ladies received me very politely, almost too politely, and I began to play. The Americans have little feeling for German music; they are a people who live in a hurry, and every thing must go fast, even music: when they hear any which has not the time of a reel or hornpipe, they say that they do not understand it. The more educated class forms an exception, and of such was my audience. The younger lady was the owner's wife, very pretty, though pale; but indeed, I should like to know how any one could live in these vile swamps without being pale. The elder, a kindly, venerable matron, seemed to be on a visit; they were simply but tastefully dressed, as is the case with all American women, even of the lowest classes; every thing in the room seemed neat and orderly. I passed a few agreeable hours there; they were very much pleased with the instrument, having seen nothing like it before; and as they listened with marked pleasure to the sweet German and Scottish airs, it seemed as if they could never have enough of it, and it was past eleven before I got to bed. There was a piano in the room, but it had not been played upon sufficiently to perfect its tone. It was long since I had enjoyed the pleasure of accomplished society, and I shall never forget my friendly reception by this family. From hence to Memphis was thirteen miles, with a good road, and by two in the afternoon I was again on the waves of the Mississippi. The ferry carried me over to Tennessee, Arkansas lay behind me, and once more I returned to civilized society from the wild life of the backwoods; but who can decide whether to a happier one.**

**This settled the point. We waited till the cool of the evening to resume our march. While the smith was repairing my gun, the Tennessee man, with his family, arrived from the marsh. He had been three days and three nights coming the ten miles, and even now it is a riddle to me how he managed it. On the evening of the 26th of May, after a rich feast on the quantity of blackberries which grew by the way, we came to a house belonging to a man of the name of Saint, and decided on staying there to sleep; we found a better set of people than we had expected, and engaged in a long conversation with our host. After supper, to our no small horror we learnt that unless we could swim twenty-eight miles, further progress was not to be thought of, as the whole swamp between this and White river was under water. Uhl and I looked at each other, with long faces, as much as to say,**

**"quid faciamus nos;" but Saint was good enough to invited us to stay with him till the swamp had somewhat dried up, which at least would be about the middle of July; meantime we could go out shooting, and the game we brought home would well repay him for all our expenses. This, of course, was grist to our mill, and we soon made ourselves at home. On the following morning, almost before we were settled, we went to the forest with our host, a keen sportsman, to look for bears, taking seven dogs with us. And what a country he took us to! Swamps and thorns, creepers, wild vines, half fallen trees, half or entirely rotted, deep and muddy water-courses, bushes so thick that you could hardly stick a knife into them, and, to complete the enjoyment, clouds of mosquitoes and gnats, not to mention snakes lying about on the edges of the water-courses; such is the aboriginal American forest, and in such a scene we commenced our sport.**

**After an hour or two, the dogs started a young bear and followed him in full cry, but had not gone far when they were stopped by the river L'Anguille, or, as they call it here, the Langee; neither coaxing nor threats could induce them to take to the water, and Saint thought that if one of us swam over, the dogs would follow, and that we should find the trail again on the other side. Saint *could* not swim; Uhl *would* not; so I threw off my clothes, and plunged in. The river, which in summer is very shallow, and hardly seems to flow, was now much swollen, and had overflowed its banks. As soon as I had swum some distance, Saint began to cheer on the dogs, and I soon heard them spring into the water, one after the other, and follow me. I was swimming slowly with long strokes, and had reached about the middle of the river, when I heard two of the dogs close behind me, while Saint was still cheering them on from the bank, as if to attack a bear. The two near me were barking furiously, and the thought flashed upon me; suppose they were to seize me? If only one had attacked me, all the rest would have joined, and as they were strangers to me, if they had fallen upon me I should have had no chance; so I began to strike out as hard and as fast as I could to reach the shore. Exerting myself for my life, I came nearer and nearer the bank, but the excited dogs swam faster still, and I heard the snorting of one of them close to me when I felt the ground; in an instant I and the dogs were both on shore. The danger was over now, and they began to hunt; but either the bear had followed the stream, and landed lower down, or the ground was too wet for the scent; in**

short, we could not find the trail. We tried our luck at another place, with no more success, and returned home towards evening quite tired and out of spirits.

Our hosts to all appearances were very religious people, and we had prayers every evening. This evening we went early to bed, being all very tired, so that, as yet, I had hardly had time to take much notice of the people we were to live with. We had to be awakened for breakfast; afterwards, we strolled about the house and fields to realize our situation. Saint was a man of about forty, with a bright clear eye, and open brow; you were captivated by him at the very first sight. His wife, an Irishwoman, treats us very civilly and kindly, and proved to be an excellent manager. They had no children; but there was another person in the house, who demands more particular description. This was a duodecimo Irish shoemaker, or as he always insisted—schoolmaster, for such, by his own account, was his former occupation, though now he made shoes. Saint had bought a quantity of leather, and the little Irishman was to work it up, receiving a certain monthly sum. He had red hair, was pock-marked, stood about five feet, but was stout and strongly built, and may have been about fifty years old. He spoke unwillingly about his age, wishing to pass for much younger. Saint who loved to joke with him, told us, with a smile, that on Sunday we should see him in his best, when he would go to pay his court to a young widow in the neighborhood.

The house was built of logs, roughly cut. It consisted of two ordinary houses, under one roof, with a passage between them open to north and south, a nice cool place to eat or sleep in during summer. Like all block-houses of this sort, it was roofed with rough four-foot planks; there were no windows, but in each house a good fireplace of clay. A field of about five acres was in front of the house, planted with Indian corn, excepting a small portion which was planted with wheat. Southwest from the house stood the stable, which Saint was obliged to build, because he gave "good accommodation to man and horse;" otherwise it is not much the custom in Arkansas to trouble one's self about stables. A place, called a "lot," with a high fence, is used for the horses, hollowed trees serving for mangers. Near at hand was a smaller log-house for the store of Indian corn, and a couple hundred paces furthers was a mill which Saint had built to grind such corn as he wanted for his own use, and which was worked by one horse.

**About a quarter of a mile from the house, through the wood, there was another field of about five acres, also sown with maize. The river "Anguille flowed close in the rear of the house; another small building at the back of the dwelling was used as a smoking house; near it was a well about thirty-two feet deep. Saint seemed pleased with Uhl and I after we helped get honey from a tree that he and his brother in law felled, for he asked us to remain with him to look after his cattle, of which he had about two hundred head running loose in the woods. We might take our rifles and shoot at the same time. As this seemed to suit our plans, we took the subject into serious consideration, and on Monday, June 3rd, mad the following compact. We agreed to undertake the charge of Saint's cattle, to give them salt in the little prairie from time to time, where a tent was to be pitched for us, and whither we were frequently to drive them, to accustom them to it. We were to receive one-third of the produce, namely: every third calf as our property. Saint bound himself to provide us with pork, flour, coffee, sugar, and salt; also, as soon as he had time, to build a small house for us in place of the tent. So far so good; but the final clause was a jewel and the Irish schoolmaster who drew up the bond was not a little vain of his performance. It stated: "Neither of the undersigned parties is bound by this contract, if any one of them should think that he could do better elsewhere." The important document was signed by both parties, Saint making a cross, and then it was carefully secured in Saint's strongbox, the Irishman keeping a copy in his pocket, probably to show the widow this specimen of his abilities.**

**Having signed the agreement with Saint, and decided on remaining here some time, it was necessary to fetch our things, which we had left at Blackfish lake, and Saint kindly offered us one of his horses for the purpose; but they were running wild in the woods, and had to be caught. I became lost, and came upon a Methodist meeting. The next morning I struck out to Saint's place, about eleven miles, and found Uhl and a horse he had caught. On the 8th of June I rode off to Blackfish lake swamp, to bring away the things we had left at Hamilton's. I left that evening to return to Saint's place. On the following morning we began to build our house; we pulled down an old block-house, standing about three miles from the site we had chosen, and carted the logs to our prairie, where we could easily rebuild it. On June 22nd the grand work was all complete. In the afternoon we went to Saint's to fetch**

our things, and towards evening, as it was very warm, I plunged into the cool stream flowing past the back of the house, and had to pay for it severely on the following day, by a return of ague. Perhaps a rather too copious indulgence in blackberries, which abounded here, may have contributed to this result. Be the cause what it may, the attacks were repeated, when Saint, his brother in law and Uhl rode away for a buffalo hunt.

On the 2nd of July we rode off to a farm belonging to a Mr. Dunn, about eleven miles off, to drive home some cattle that Saint had bought. We did not arrive till dusk, and found Mr. Dunn at home; he was a fat man with a copper-colored nose, that seemed to do no dishonor to the sign before his door; and a bottle of whiskey soon glittered on the table. Saint drank no spirits, so only just tasted it once: we did not follow his example, but drank and laughed and talked till late in the night. I was much surprised next morning by the view from Dunn's house. We were again amongst the hills, the house standing on the eastern spur, which stretches out towards the swamps like a peninsula.

After breakfast we collected our animals, and drove them towards home, through thorns, creepers, morasses, cane brakes, streams, and woods. Driving a number of cattle, which have never been under the hand of man, is about as hard work as one can imagine, and a man who never swore in his life would be sure to learn it then.

On the evening of the 18th of October, Saint came back from Strong's, where he had bought a couple of negro children, and brought them home on a led horse. One was a boy about fifteen years old, as black as pitch, and with a regular Ethiopian cast of countenance; as he crossed the threshold, he examined every one present, with a rapid glance of his large dark eyes, and then looked unconcernedly at all the furniture, &c., as if that was of no consequence to him. The other was a little girl of about eleven, who seemed already to have gone through some hard work. When she saw so many strange faces, a tear glittered in her eyes: she had been sold away from her parents, whom she would probably never more behold, and stood an image of suppressed grief. The boy was from Maryland, had been taken by sea to New Orleans, and from thence brought here. He had been told that he had fallen to a kind master, and his countenance seemed to say that was enough, happen what might.

**Source: The author began his journey in the spring of 1837 from Bremen Germany. He arrived in New York on July 19th, 1837.**

**[https://books.google.com/books?id=PI5QAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs\\_atb#v=onepage&q=strong&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=PI5QAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_atb#v=onepage&q=strong&f=false)**

**Strong mentioned in this excerpt is Sheriff William Strong. He arrived about 1811 to the Arkansas County, Missouri. He performed the census in 1840 for St. Francis County, and afterwards, he retired to Shelby County Tennessee, and died, in 1863. See:**

**<http://argenweb.net/stfrancis/FAMILY/Strong.pdf>**