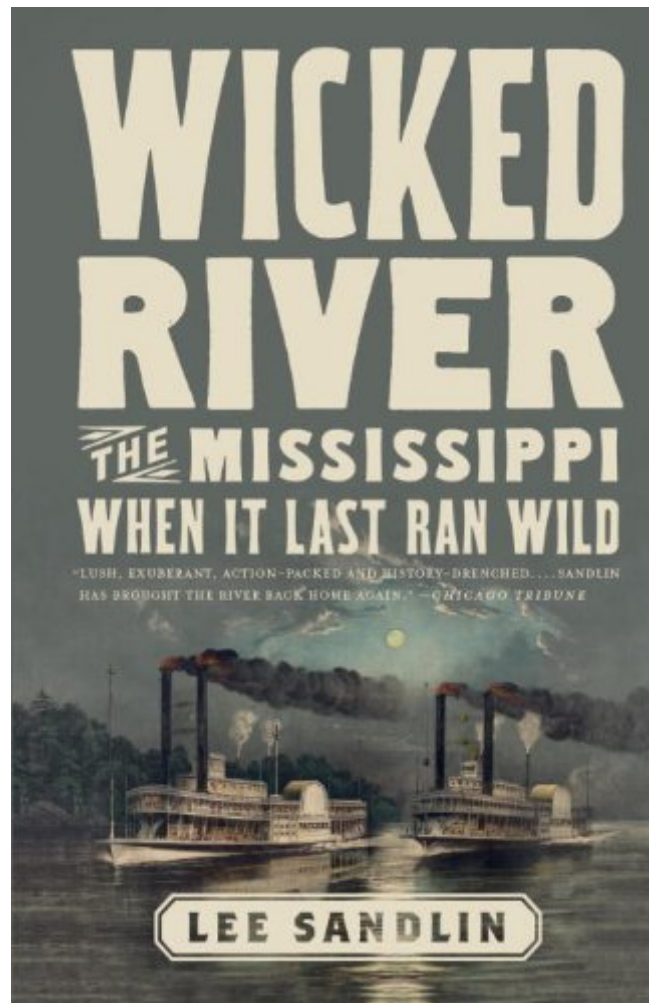


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Wicked River: The Mississippi When It Last Ran Wild



Synopsis

From award-winning journalist Lee Sandlin comes a riveting look at one of the most colorful, dangerous, and peculiar places in America's historical landscape: the strange, wonderful, and mysterious Mississippi River of the nineteenth century. Beginning in the early 1800s and climaxing with the siege of Vicksburg in 1863, *Wicked River* takes us back to a time before the Mississippi was dredged into a shipping channel, and before Mark Twain romanticized it into myth. Drawing on an array of suspenseful and bizarre firsthand accounts, Sandlin brings to life a place where river pirates brushed elbows with future presidents and religious visionaries shared passage with thieves—a world unto itself where, every night, near the levees of the big river towns, hundreds of boats gathered to form dusk-to-dawn cities dedicated to music, drinking, and gambling. Here is a minute-by-minute account of Natchez being flattened by a tornado; the St. Louis harbor being crushed by a massive ice floe; hidden, nefarious celebrations of Mardi Gras; and the sinking of the *Sultana*, the worst naval disaster in American history. Here, too, is the Mississippi itself: gorgeous, perilous, and unpredictable, lifeblood to the communities that rose and fell along its banks. An exuberant work of Americana—at once history, culture, and geography—*Wicked River* is a grand epic that portrays a forgotten society on the edge of revolutionary change. From the Hardcover edition.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

If you have read Mark Twain's wonderful *Life on the Mississippi*, you have seen the classic portrait of steamboating on the great river, with its sense of privilege, adventure, and (essential in Twain) comedy. According to Chicago journalist Lee Sandlin, in the splendid *Wicked River: The Mississippi When It Last Ran Wild* (Pantheon), "Twain never pretended to be writing documentary realism. His *Mississippi*, for all its historical specificity, was still at bottom a nostalgic daydream." You will remember how Huck and Jim fleeing on their raft did fine as long as they floated down the river; it was only when they tied up and got involved in activities on shore that they had trouble. "Twain's predecessors hadn't seen it that way," Sandlin writes. "To them the Mississippi had been crowded, filthy, chaotic, and dangerous." Sandlin has drawn upon the writings of these predecessors to describe something closer to the river as it was, rather than as the grand old man of American letters remembered it. Twain will always remain essential in our understanding of the river, for his understanding, nostalgic though it might be, is also authentic. But Sandlin's book is full of great stories, too, and corruption and plagues and floods and snags. It is not a corrective to Twain's picture, but a description of a different type of river in a different time. Before the steamboats, there were smaller, human-powered craft, all of which went generally down the river because there was not a way of easily fighting the current. Flatboats, for instance, carried plenty of cargo, but were worth little, so when they got to New Orleans and unloaded, they were broken up and sold for scrap, and were known as "the boats that never came back." The wild river was completely different from anything we know of now.

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