

MY COUNTRY EXCURSION

A JAUNT TO THE ALBION FALLS



Albion Falls 1895

On Sunday, June 3, 1883, two young men decided to spend the Sabbath out in the countryside surrounding Albion Falls. One of them, writing about his experience for the June 4 edition of the *Spectator*, admitted, “I guess my friend Tommy and I broke the sanctity of the Sabbath all up yesterday if we are to be judged by the good Calvinistic standard, but I don’t believe the recording angel has made a black mark across his book opposite our names.... Tommy said he felt real good and religious when he stood under the shadow of a big oak tree and listened to the songs of the birds that flitted around us from twig to twig, and heard the plaintive chirp of the ‘Bob White’, gazing the while with a sort of awe at the broad sheet of water as it dashed over the edge of the rock 200 feet above us and fell with a noise like ceaseless thunder upon the table rock at our feet, throwing up a million films of spray, glistening like strings of diamonds in the sun....”

The two young men met at City Hall at ten o'clock that morning and set out for Albion Mills on foot. They trudged along Main Street East at "a good swinging pace" and veered to the right, toward the mountain, upon reaching the Bartonville tollgate. "Tommy had an idea that the stream we were looking for wound through a ravine just the other side of this projecting rock," the narrator explained, "and so we trudged along the hard road, uphill, gaining new strength and better spirits all along the way."

Presently they came to a five-foot tall barred gate that stretched across the road. Whooping with anticipation, they scaled it and approached a nearby farmhouse to ask for a drink of milk. The good-natured farmer obliged. Learning of their destination, he gave them permission to cross his property and thereby take a shortcut to the stream. Careful not to tread on the growing wheat stalks, the boys headed downhill, into a ravine.

"I wanted to see that Albion Mills Creek principally because Tommy had aroused my curiosity by telling me that the water was of such a peculiar nature (that) he could light it with a match and it would burn," the narrator recalled. "I could hardly believe this, but he had borrowed a few matches from the keeper of the hotel at the Delta, and as we went hopping along from stone to stone, sometimes clinging to an overhead branch to make our chances of getting over the slippery stones more sure... he would stop at for a moment at a place where the stream rushed by over a shallow, and little side currents wandered off through the interstices of the rock, and form little pools eddying around some larger rock which, he obligingly informed me, had been placed there during the glacial period, whatever that was."

Tommy kept gazing intently into the water as if looking for something. Suddenly he stopped and declared, "Now I'll show you!" Stooping down, he lit a match and applied it to a small pool whose surface bubbled slightly. "There's your water on fire!" he shouted gleefully.

"Sure enough," his comrade wrote, "a little jet of flame did leap up from that stream two or three times and then die away in a second. The explanation of the phenomenon was simple enough. Tommy told me that all along the bed of that stream there are little gas wells, and that when we got to the falls I should see more gas coming out of the solid rock than I ever saw burning in a Hamilton gas lamp on a dark, rainy night."

Although tired by this point, the boys kept going. "We were a long time getting to the falls," the narrator admitted, "but when I saw the glorious beauty of the spot I felt amply repaid for my long walk. Imagine if you can an immense amphitheater, the slopes of which are covered with verdure and trees just leafing out in all the glory of springtime. One segment of the circle shall be of solid rock towering up 200 feet, and broken once or twice into tables of stone on which the water, rushing over the top, falls, dashes into spray, and gathering new force again, pours down into the bottom of the creek-bed, amid immense boulders that are worn as smooth as ivory by the action of the water. Then the stream goes flashing along through the one opening in the amphitheater's slopes, through sylvan glades to refresh the weary cattle in the fields below."

Enthralled by the majestic sight, the young men continued until they came to what the writer described as "a most prosaic flour-mill built right on the edge of the

ravine, and a part of the water which should go over the falls is diverted from its course... and made to do plebian duty in turning a turbine wheel to grind flour.”

“Now,” said Tommy, climbing up the steep rock beside the waterfall, “come up here and I’ll show you the place where a jet of gas has been burning for twenty years.” They presently came to a great fissure in the rock, from which a gas pipe ran into the mill. “Oh!” said Tommy somewhat ruefully, “things have changed since I was here last. But come, I’ll show you the gas yet.”



Albion Falls in 1900. Note the mill.

They entered the mill, and found four large gas jets burning brightly, the gas being fed through the pipe in the rock below. While they were gazing at this natural power source in wonder, a roughly dressed man passed them without speaking. They watched him go outside and head down the cliff. “He looked like a plowboy,” the narrator observed, “and after he had gone, and I wondered whether he could have anything to do with the mill, I thought no more about him.”

They left the building after a few more minutes, “went a short distance around the fall and on the road”, and cautiously approached the gorge. They stared down into the roaring, crashing water until they felt themselves become dizzy. Remembering all the local legends about people who fell to their deaths from that vantage point (voluntarily or not), they withdrew and headed back toward the city, flushed from

the sun and excitement. Both agreed that the raging beauty of Albion Falls, as well as the infiltration of the mill and the spectacle of the flaming water, had made their Sunday excursion well worth the effort.

-Rose Keefe

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