

Ol' Man River – Mighty Mississippi

2 x 50'

A film by Michael Schlamberger & Steve Nicholls

STEREO, 16:9

The Mississippi River is a river of superlatives. It drains 41% of the continental US as well as parts of 2 Canadian provinces, in all more than one and half million square miles. It is now a vast commercial highway for super-barges, but it is so much more than that. Its bayous and swamps hide a spectacular natural history, and not only does this vital waterway run through the heart of America, it also runs through American history and culture like no other. In 2 one hour films, Ol' Man River explores all these faces of the world's most famous river and reveals that, in the words of its most well known admirer, Mark Twain; *It is not a commonplace river, but on the contrary is in all ways remarkable.*

Ol' Man River is a journey through time and space, a story that starts in the steamy delta region beyond New Orleans and travels upstream, to find headwaters lost in great northern swamps. It also travels along Ol' Man River's greatest tributary, the Missouri, longer even than the Mississippi, and which should therefore, but for an historical quirk, have been called the Mississippi. Along the way, the films encounter a wealth of wildlife, from tropical manatees munching their way through mountains of vegetation to the spectacular mass spawning of ancient horseshoe crabs. This is also a world of primitive giant fish and colourful herons, of industrious beavers and deadly rattlesnakes. Along the Missouri, the journey takes us through vast herds of buffalo and prairie dog colonies covering hundreds of hectares.

At key points in the journey, Ol' Man River turns back the clock, to reveal what the river was like when the first explorers encountered it. With large scale dramatic reconstructions, the team travel with French, English, Spanish and American explorers as they met with Indian tribes and new and unexpected wildlife spectacles.

Director Steve Nicholls says:

Reconstructing these early expeditions certainly gives you an idea of just how difficult life was for those first explorers. While reconstructing Lewis and Clark's famous journey along the Missouri, we used a replica of a kind of boat – called a keel boat – that they had actually travelled in. We loaded it with men in the heavy woollen uniform of the day and pushed out into the river. The boat was an exact replica – just sails and oars and no motor. Then a stiff Nebraska wind blew up and we simply couldn't control the boat. No matter what we did, it just skimmed sideways over the water until it hit a sandbank. The first time, we were able to push it off with the oars, but the wind caught the high-sided boat again and in 10 minutes we were on another sand bank. We spent the whole day like this, bouncing from sand bank to sand bank. In the end our actors had to jump into shallow water and tow the boat back down the river, which worked well for the film. At the end of the day, they were all sun-burnt, soaked and completely exhausted, which, of course, was exactly how Lewis and Clark's men looked at the end of most days.