



Colorful Characters

Chapter 1 - by Kay Hively

Nine-year-old George Bingham looked out the south window of the Square and Compass, his father's inn and tavern. Heavy rain was falling on already-muddy streets.

The year was 1820, and Franklin, Missouri, was a bustling town on the Missouri River. It was a trader's town, but today the streets were empty.

The Square and Compass had only two customers.

The rain was depressing to George, who liked seeing teams of oxen pulling the big wooden carts up and down the streets. When people came to the inn, they told exciting stories, so he liked having many people at the inn. The rough and colorful bullwhackers, with long leather bullwhips at their sides, always had the best stories.

Strangers who came to the inn brought news that had been carried upriver by the

boatmen. Traders and the boatmen always had news, and they always had money. Sometimes George dreamed of being a boatman. But for now, his job was to help his parents and get an education.

Turning away from the window, George began cleaning the fireplace. It was his job to keep a good fire. That meant removing the

ashes each day and building a new fire so his mother could cook and keep food warm.

George carried the ashes out the back door and dumped them into a pit. As

raindrops fell on them, the ashes sizzled and popped. Usually George took time to draw in the black ashes, hoping to find a glowing coal to give a dot of color to his artwork. But the rain was too cold to spend time drawing pictures.



Hurrying back inside, he started a new fire. As the fire gently flamed, George's mother brought pots and kettles from the kitchen. George helped hang pots on the big hooks above the fire, and placed big black kettles on an iron grate. He liked helping his mother because she worked very hard in the kitchen and took care of his younger brothers and sisters.

With the new fire going, George went to the kitchen to wash the black smudges off his face and hands. Large crates of supplies had come that morning, so he stacked them away at the back of the kitchen. Because it was close to the Missouri River, the Square and Compass always had plenty of food and supplies.

When his kitchen chores were done, George went back to the dining room just in time to see the door open. From across the room he saw the silhouette of a large man in the doorway. The man's body filled the entire door frame.

As the stranger stepped inside, rain dripped off his coat and puddled on the floor. The man walked across the room to an empty table by the fireplace. Carefully, he set a large canvas bag on the floor.

Young George Bingham could tell this was no ordinary bullwhacker or boatman.

This man was different, and George suspected the stranger had a story to tell.

Next Chapter: A Wonderful Opportunity

Things to Think About and Do

1. On a U.S. map, find the Missouri River. Trace the river from its beginning out west until it dumps into the Mississippi River. Figure the length of the river between those two points.
2. The stranger was "silhouetted" in the doorway. Ask a friend to pose for you and then draw a silhouette of his or her head and shoulders. Color the silhouette with a black crayon.
3. George's family runs an inn and tavern called the Square and Compass that is important in his community. Use clues from the story to determine what roles the business serves. Look for ads in your newspaper for businesses in your community that fill similar roles.

Learn more about George Bingham by visiting the following Web sites:

<http://shs.umsystem.edu/famousmissourians/artists/bingham/bingham.shtml#boone>
www.georgecalebbingham.org/bio.htm
www.vangoghgallery.com/artistbios/George_Caleb_Bingham.html
www.binghammuseum.org

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