

Reflections on Middle-earth from a Middle American

By Josh Renaud

This personal talk was given at the inaugural Westmoot on May 10, 2025. It was written as a celebration of the Tolkien Society's surprise announcement it would create a new U.S.-based conference and host it in Kansas City, Missouri — practically my back yard.

Introduction

Every so often, I will show up outside my son's door and, like Gandalf in "The Hobbit," declare something like this: "I am looking for someone to share in an adventure that I am arranging, and it's very difficult to find anyone." (*Hobbit*, I)

His response is usually like Bilbo's — "Good morning! We don't want any adventures here, thank you!" (*Hobbit*, I) — except my son is usually more succinct: "Nope. Not happening."

But every once in a while, I can coax a reluctant acceptance out of him. And that's how, one crisp October morning, we found ourselves standing on the cobblestones of the riverfront in downtown St. Louis, Missouri, under the shadow of the Gateway Arch, our city's famous monument.

We had gathered there with a group of kids and adults for a unique biking and boating adventure. We planned to ride 11 miles northward on a trail beside the Mississippi River, then leave our bikes, get into canoes, and paddle back down the river to the Arch grounds downtown.

Now, I admit: we rode bikes, not ponies. We brought balaclavas and not pocket-handkerchiefs. And yes, our adventure took place in the heart of the continental United States, not England or The Shire.

Still, as we went "there and back again," we managed to catch glimpses of Middle-earth right here in the mounds, muddy rivers, and monuments of the Midwest, and I'd like to share those with you.

But first I need to introduce you to the setting of my story — the city of St. Louis, just a few hours away on the other side of Missouri.

St. Louis has been known by many nicknames over the years: "*Mound City*," because of the presence of many large earthen mounds built by Native Americans hundreds of years before the arrival of Europeans; "*River City*," because French fur traders founded the city near the confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi rivers.

But today St. Louis is best known as the "*Gateway to the West*." Thanks to its position near those two major rivers, St. Louis served as a port and a jumping-off point in the center of the continent for waves of traders, explorers, and settlers who headed west, especially after the Louisiana Purchase, which doubled the size of the United States. In 1965, we constructed a stainless steel monument 630 feet tall called the Gateway Arch to commemorate all this; and gained a new nickname in the process.

Anyway — mounds, muddy rivers, and a monument. Please keep those in mind now as I return to my adventure with my son.

Mounds and moulderings

With its soaring skyscrapers and the glittering Gateway Arch, it's hard not to be awed by the St. Louis riverfront. As I stood underneath it with my son that bright, cool October morning, I think I felt much like Pippin, when he got his first sight of the city of Minas Tirith riding with Gandalf at the beginning of the "Return of the King":

"Pippin gazed in growing wonder at the great stone city, vaster and more splendid than anything that he had dreamed of; greater and stronger than Isengard, and far more beautiful." (*RK*, V, i)

This passage could almost be describing the city of St. Louis and its impressive skyline. But that's not all that Pippin saw. The passage continues:

"Yet it was in truth falling year by year into decay; and already it lacked half the men that could have dwelt at ease there. In every street they passed some great house or court [...] and yet now they were silent, and no footsteps rang on their wide pavements, nor voice was heard in their halls, nor any face looked out from door or empty window." (*RK*, V, i)

Unfortunately, this part is *also* an apt description of St. Louis today. Like many midwestern cities, St. Louis has declined from its glory days. At the turn of the last century, it was the fourth-largest city in the nation, and hosted both the World's Fair and the Summer Olympic Games. The population of St. Louis city today (279,695) [1] is just one-third what it was at its peak in 1950 (856,796). [2]

My son and I began to see the results of this depopulation and decay not long after we left downtown on our bikes and began riding northward. St. Louis once teemed with immigrants and boomed with industry and manufacturing. But no more. On that day, we rode past brick warehouses, boarded up and abandoned; and concrete structures, many stories tall, crumbling and covered in graffiti.

We saw scrubby empty lots, with old stone foundations peeking up out of the grass, evidence of homes and buildings that once stood, reminders that these empty neighborhoods were once densely populated decades ago.

In "The Fellowship of the Ring," Frodo and his friends come across similar ruins after they leave the Shire. The foundations I saw in north St. Louis were probably much like those at the Barrow-downs where "[s]tone rings grinned out of the ground like broken teeth in the moonlight." (*FR*, I, vii)

These are the remains of the lost Kingdom of Arnor. The Hobbits learn the tragic history of the barrows from Tom Bombadil:

"There was victory and defeat; and towers fell, fortresses were burned, and flames went up into the sky. Gold was piled on the biers of dead kings and queens; and mounds covered them, and the stone doors were shut; and the grass grew over all." (*FR*, I, vii)

Tolkien's legendarium is full of burial mounds like these, from the Hill of the Slain that was raised after the Battle of Unnumbered Tears in the First Age, to the Barrowfield outside of Edoras in the Third Age.

The landscape of Midwestern America was once dotted with mounds, too. Hundreds of years ago, Native Americans built dozens of mounds on both sides of the Mississippi, from the enormous 10-story-tall "Monk's Mound" in Cahokia, Illinois, to the so-called "Big Mound" in north St. Louis.

Cahokia was a major city. At its peak around the year 1100, its population may have rivaled London and Paris. [3] By the time Europeans arrived hundreds of years later, Cahokia had been long abandoned — but the mounds there and across the river in St. Louis remained.

After Europeans founded St. Louis, the mounds within the city became a source of pride and mystery. But St. Louisans were ignorant like Tolkien's Rohirrim, who had "long forgotten" the ancient people who had built Harrowdale (*RK*, V, iii), even though descendants of those people, the Drúedain, still lived nearby.

While St. Louisans admired the mounds for many years, "admiration did not deter development," as historian Patricia Cleary has noted. [4] Gradually the mounds within St. Louis were desecrated and removed, including "Big Mound," which had been located at a site near the bike trail where I rode with my son. Today, only one mound remains inside the city limits. "Orc-work," Treebeard might have said. (*TT*, III, iv)

St. Louis' treatment of the mounds is tragic, but there is a glimmer of hope. As of this year, the Osage Nation has acquired most of the property of St. Louis' last mound and is working to preserve and protect it. [5]

Boats: 'quite tricky enough'

As my son and I kept biking north, the decay gave way to more natural scenes. Eventually we came to a park near the northernmost end of St. Louis city. Here we traded our bikes for canoes and headed down a hill to the sandy riverside.

Going into this canoe trip with my son, I was both excited and a little scared. Sure, I knew how to swim, and I had been on recreational lakes in pontoon boats many times. But I had never ridden in a canoe before, and I certainly had never done any boating on the Mighty Mississippi.

The Mississippi is no ordinary river. It's the tenth-largest in the world by flow, and it truly is dangerous.

I have to admit that, like most of my midwestern neighbors, I seldom interact with the Mississippi River directly, even though I live just five miles away. Sure, I might cross it by bridge or admire it from the shore. But never before had my son or I entered its waters like this. It was a daunting prospect.

This is something we had in common with Samwise Gamgee and many Hobbits at the time of "The Lord of the Rings." Like us, the Hobbits lived near rivers. And yet, as Tolkien explains in the prologue of the Lord of the Rings: "Most Hobbits regarded even rivers and small boats with deep misgivings, and not many of them could swim." (*FR*, Prologue, I)

Tolkien establishes a good reason for this fear early in the story when Gaffer Gamgee recounts how Frodo's father and mother drowned after they went boating on the Brandywine River. When some of the Gaffer's listeners begin to embellish the tale, he shuts them down, saying: "Boats are quite tricky enough for those that sit still without looking further for the cause of trouble." (*FR*, I, i)

I'm sure many city-dwelling midwesterners might agree — boats on big rivers are bound to be tricky. Because we're so disconnected from river life, we haven't learned any better.

Later in the story, the Fellowship plans to journey down the Great River from Lothlórien in light boats given to them by the Elves. When they take the boats for a trial run on the Silverlode, Sam is understandably uneasy: "Sam sat in the bows, clutching the sides, and looking back wistfully to the shore. The sunlight glittering on the water dazzled his eyes." (*FR*, II, viii)

But before the Fellowship get too far, they are intercepted by Celeborn and Galadriel, riding in a swan ship. They invite the Fellowship to a farewell feast in a field at the confluence of the Silverlode and the Anduin rivers. There, they rest and receive blessings and gifts before continuing their journey.

Back in the primary world, the organizers of our canoe trip did something similar. We began by paddling out to a large sandy island in the middle of the Mississippi, where we ate lunch, and swapped

stories. One of our guides told us an interesting tale: during the coronavirus pandemic, he quarantined not by staying at home, but by paddling out to this same island with his dog and living in isolation there for a month. I imagined him during that time as “his own master” — a Midwestern version of Tom Bombadil, “withdrawn into a little land, within bounds that he has set, though none can see them, waiting perhaps for a change of days...” (*FR*, II, ii)

When we finally got underway, the guides put us at ease. My son and I didn’t know what we were doing, but they did. I think the same was true for the Fellowship as they set out. Legolas, Boromir and Aragorn all had experience handling boats.

And, surprisingly, so did one of the four Hobbits: Merry Brandybuck. “Not all of us look on boats as wild horses,” Merry had told Celeborn earlier. (*FR*, II, viii)

With experts at the paddle, Sam slowly loses his fear over several days journeying down the river, deciding that “boats were maybe not as dangerous as he had been brought up to believe.” Still, unlike me and my son, Sam never enjoys the ride: the boat is uncomfortable and cramped. (*FR*, II, ix)

Rivers: ‘veins of the world’

The sea is a powerful image in Tolkien’s work, as is the idea of sea-longing. But it’s something many midwesterners have never experienced. Here in the middle of a vast continent, many of us are like the Hobbits, few of whom “had ever seen or sailed upon the Sea, and fewer still had ever returned to report it.” (*FR*, Prologue, I)

But whether the Hobbits realized it or not, The Shire was connected to the sea by the Brandywine river. Indeed, the *Silmarillion* tells us that rivers are the “veins of the world.” (*Silmarillion*, Valaquenta, II; *Silmarillion*, Quenta Silmarillion, I)

And so, just as Saruman could conceivably claim that the One Ring had “rolled down the River to the Sea,” (*FR*, II, ii); and just as the funeral boat carrying Boromir’s body was swept down Anduin the Great out to the Bay of Belfalas; so too in the primary world, the Mighty Mississippi flows thousands of miles from Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico; a connection between our midwestern towns and the wider world.

My son and I saw this connection at work as we paddled south in our canoe. We passed enormous barges heading north, loaded with goods, presumably from faraway lands. And because the Mississippi was historically low that year, the remains of rusted shipwrecks were exposed.

It was a reminder that the Mississippi and its tributaries have pulsed with trade and traffic since the days of Mark Twain, and even long before.

But that day, we saw few other vessels: no ferries, no fishing boats, no pleasure boats. Our afternoon adventure was surely much quieter than the Mississippi would have been in its heyday.

Indeed, according to the 1880 Census, more than 5,000 vessels plied the rivers of the Mississippi valley that year, carrying 6.7 million passengers. [6] And that was decades after the extension of railroads west across the Mississippi, when trains began to eat away at river traffic.

In Middle-earth at the end of the Third Age, a similar change has taken place: two river systems have become quiet and devoid of traffic. But these declines have been driven by fear and war, rather than changes in technology.

First, the Celduin or the River Running. In “The Hobbit,” we learn that while the people of Laketown “still thrive on the trade that came up the great river from the South,” there had been an earlier time when the town of Dale was “rich and prosperous” and “there had been fleets of boats on the waters,

and some were filled with gold and some with warriors in armour....” (*Hobbit*, X). But this ended with the destruction of Dale by the dragon Smaug.

Second, the Anduin River in “The Lord of the Rings.” During the nine days the Fellowship rode down the river in their Elven boats, they never encountered another vessel — unless you count Gollum lying on a log and paddling with his hands and feet. “Seldom in my life has any boat come out of the north,” says Boromir at one point as the Fellowship seeks a way around the rapids. (*FR*, II, ix)

But, as with the Mississippi in the primary world, the Anduin had not always been like that. Aragorn recalls that “light boats used to journey out of Wilderland down to Osgiliath, and still did so until a few years ago, when the Orcs of Mordor began to multiply.” (*FR*, II, ix)

The Fellowship gets a taste of this on the eighth night of their journey, when orcs shoot arrows at them from the eastern shore. (Thankfully my son and I didn't have the same experience!)

Majestic monuments

For me, the most powerful thing about being in that canoe with my son on a great river was how small we felt — “frail and fleeting as little leaves,” to borrow Tolkien’s phrase (*FR*, II, ix) — which led to a sense of awe and wonder near the end of our voyage as we encountered some of St. Louis’s architectural and engineering marvels in a new way.

I have often driven across bridges over the Missouri and the Mississippi rivers, or driven past the Gateway Arch on the interstate — but these encounters are fleeting, over in a moment. The experience is altogether different from the perspective of a small boat, moving slowly in the midst of a great river.

As our canoe drew closer to downtown, the landscape changed. Less green, fewer trees. More concrete and steel. We passed under a series of bridges: the Merchants Bridge, the McKinley, the Musial, the MLK, and finally the Eads Bridge.

Each one glided toward us slowly, steadily growing larger, until at last it filled all my vision. Then we were underneath, completely enveloped.

Then, the greatest marvel of them all: the silvery, stainless steel Gateway Arch, sparkling in the sun.

At the end of our voyage, I found myself awestruck, just like Frodo near the end of the Fellowship’s voyage down the Anduin.

“Frodo peering forward saw in the distance two great rocks approaching: like great pinnacles or pillars of stone they seemed. Tall and sheer and ominous they stood upon either side of the stream. [...] ‘Behold the Argonath, the Pillars of the Kings!’ cried Aragorn. [...] As Frodo was borne towards them the great pillars rose like towers to meet him. Giants they seemed to him, vast grey figures silent but threatening. [...] Awe and fear fell upon Frodo, and he cowered down, shutting his eyes and not daring to look up as the boat drew near.” (*FR*, II, ix)

I can’t read this passage now without experiencing it viscerally in my imagination in a way I never could before.

And I can’t help but contrast these two enormous monuments, the Gates of Argonath and the Gateway Arch. Both are magnificent pieces of architecture and major feats of engineering in their respective worlds, demanding the attention of any who pass by them or through them.

Yet, there is a key difference. The two Pillars of Kings, with their stony frowns and raised palms, serve as a warning to Gondor’s enemies: “Stay out!” They evoke “awe and fear.”

The Arch, in contrast, evokes awe and wonder. It's meant to be a welcoming monument, a celebration of St. Louis's role as Gateway to the West: an open door through which people poured as this nation expanded.

And so at last, we were back where we began, at the feet of the Arch, a towering monument, a reminder of American history.

I'll close with this. In the past and the present of the American Midwest, there is much to be proud of, and much to mourn. Tolkien's legendarium, too, is suffused with sadness and loss, but brightened by moments of wonder, of hope, and of eucatastrophe.

No matter where we're from, there will be times when we look around our primary world and feel that we are fighting a "long defeat" (*FR*, II, vii) like the Elves; or that we're surrounded by "the spirit of 'Isengard', if not of Mordor". (*Letters*, No. 181) In such times of confusion and fear and shadow, the stories of Tolkien's secondary world can be for us like a white star peeping through the cloud-wrack. They remind us that there is light and high beauty forever beyond the shadow's reach. (*RK*, VI, ii)

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Bio

Josh Renaud is a journalist at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. In his spare time he publishes computer history research on his website, Break Into Chat, and enjoys reading the works of J.R.R. Tolkien and Patrick O'Brian.