

BACK-TRAILING ON THE OLD FRONTIERS

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Back-trailing on the Old Frontiers by Anonymous

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ANONYMOUS

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THE OLD FRONTIERS**

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ILLUSTRATED BY
CHARLES M. RUSSELL

PUBLISHED BY
CHEELY-RABAN SYNDICATE
GREAT FALLS, MONTANA
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Seven Tablets - June 7, 1951

FOREWORD

THE fourteen stories in this volume are taken from the series, *Back-Trailing on the Old Frontiers*, illustrated by Charles M. Russell, which have appeared during the past year in Sunday editions of daily newspapers in all parts of the United States. There have been so many demands for the publication of these historical sketches of the old west in book form that it was decided to put them forth in three volumes at a popular price. This is the first of the three. It is planned to publish the other two volumes during the next year.

In the compilation of these stories, which narrate briefly some of the outstanding incidents of dramatic interest in the pioneering days of the "Far West," we wish to acknowledge our indebtedness to such volumes as *Pathfinders of the West*, by Agnes C. Laut; *The History of the American Fur Trade of the Far West*, by Hiram M. Chittenden; *The Conquest of the Missouri*, by Joseph Mills Hanson; *Beyond the Old Frontiers*, by George Bird Grinnell; *Indian Fights and Fighters*, by Cyrus Townsend Brady; and *the Overland Stage to California*, by Frank A. Root and William E. Connelley.

The illustrations by Mr. Russell, because of their accuracy of detail historically, are well worth close study. He is generally recognized as the greatest living portrayer of the frontier life of the West, and is probably the foremost living authority on the Northwest Plains Indians, whom he has studied for more than forty years.

These stories are of much interest to children, and have been used freely in history classes in the schools of Milwaukee, Minneapolis and the many other cities where they have appeared in Sunday newspapers.

THE CHEELY-RABAN SYNDICATE.

Great Falls, Montana, December, 1922.

Discovery of Rocky Mountains

WHEN France was mistress of half of North America the dream of the many bold spirits among her explorers and voyageurs was the finding of a northwest passage to the Western sea, as they designated the Pacific ocean, and to this end they devoted much valorous effort. It meant fighting their way across trackless wilderness for thousands of miles and the braving of countless dangers. These courageous men went forth into the haunts of wild beasts and the Indian country for the glory of France and adventure. The bones of many of them were left to bleach where they died, and all they left behind them was the record of a vain effort, as far as the finding of an outlet to the Pacific was concerned.

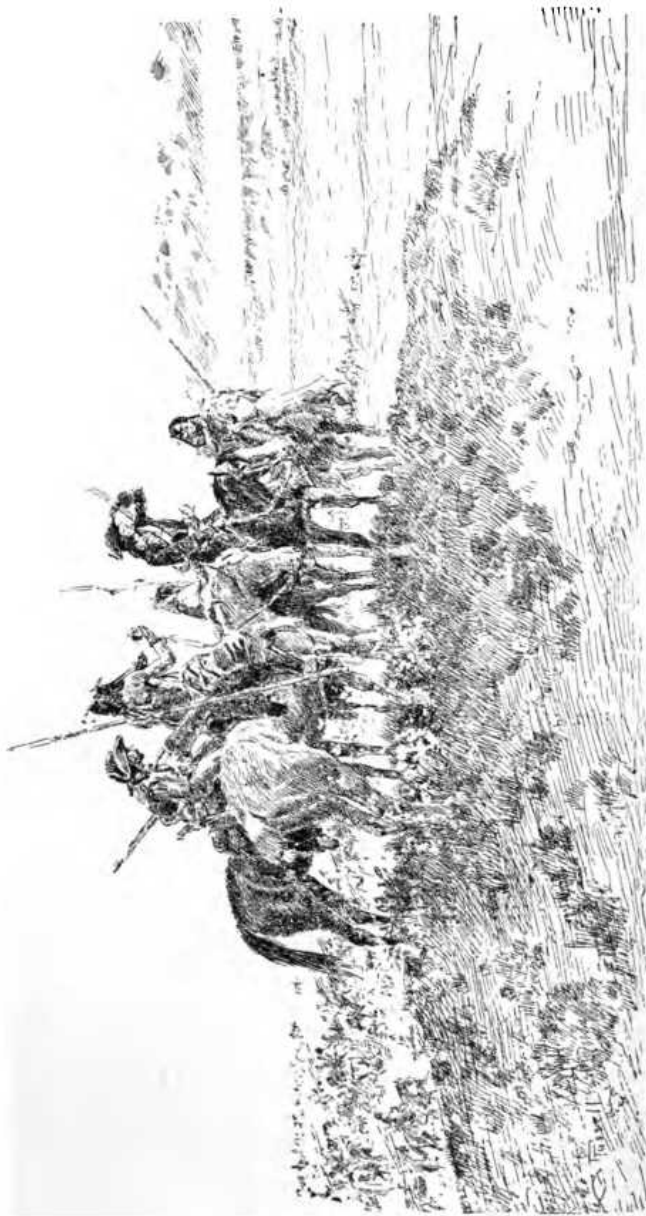
It was this quest that led to the discovery of the Rocky mountains. It seems singular that the great backbone of the North American continent, with peaks measuring three miles high from sea level silhouetting the sky for hundreds of miles north and south, was first seen by a man of the white race only 179 years ago.

Prominent among the gentleman adventurers and explorers of the New France of that day was the Sieur de La Verendrye. All his life he had ridden through the western wilds, going where no white man had gone before, seeking for that which he and his fellows could not find, and finally, in his old age, passing on the work of finding a passage to the west to his devoted sons, Pierre and the Chevalier, who had accompanied him on many of his expeditions. And although the La Verendryes failed to find a way to the sea of the west they carried the tri-color of France far into unexplored territory and helped to make possible the achievements and discoveries of those who followed them.

In one of his expeditions the elder La Verendrye went far into the west, reaching what is now North Dakota. There, on the Missouri river, he found the Mandan Indians and was the first white man to visit them. These Indians lived in comfortable huts and tilled fields and were far in advance of their red brothers of other tribes. La Verendrye established friendly relations with them, and it was because of the good impression that he made that the tribe afforded sustenance and shelter to many explorers who came after him, including Lewis and Clark.

The Mandans told La Verendrye of many things which interested him. They said that far to the west was a great body of salt water, a lake, the waters of which rose and fell, and on the shores of which abode white men who wore beards, and who worshipped the master of life in great houses which they had built for this purpose, "holding books, the leaves of which were like Indian corn, and singing in their worship."

From this La Verendrye assumed two things. Indians who had visited the Mandans had been on the shore of the sea for which he was looking, or had come in contact with Spanish settlements to the west. He thought perhaps the Spaniards were getting a foothold too far north and were putting French interests in jeopardy. So he made the long trip back from the Upper Missouri country to Montreal to acquaint his government with this important news and to get authority and money to lead an expedition farther west to block the Spaniard, and perhaps to find the Western sea. His tale was listened to by an indifferent governor, and no cash was forthcoming.



LA VERENDRYES DISCOVER THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS

By this time La Verendrye was in the winter of life, old because of the life of hardship he had led, and broken in health. He felt unequal to the task of continuing his work, which he must do on his own resources, and reluctantly passed his mission on to his sons, Pierre and the Chevalier, whom he had schooled in woodcraft, and who shared his enthusiasm for his purpose. Without means and with but two fellow countrymen, they went out into the west, their destination being the land of the Mandan nation, where, after a trip of great hardship, they arrived in the spring of 1742. Their purpose was to learn the source of the stories which the Mandans had told their father, and to continue the search for the passage into the west. The Mandans, their father's friends, received them most hospitably.

At that time the Mandans were expecting a visit from a tribe known as the Horse Indians, migratory redskins whom the Mandan chiefs believed could guide the French explorers to salt water. The La Verendryes waited for a month and then, with Mandan guides, started out in search of them. Instead, they found the Crows, who could but repeat the tale that had come to the Mandans, and sent them further west with Crow guides to the Bow Indians, of the Sioux family.

When the La Verendryes arrived at the Bow encampment they found these Indians about to go to war with the Snake tribe, and were gathering their warriors and those of their allies in great numbers. They knew nothing of the way to the Western sea, but suggested that the Frenchmen accompany them on their expedition against the Snakes, which meant traveling to the west and towards the mountains, where, from Snake prisoners or other western Indians they might be able to learn something of the much sought for passage. The Frenchmen gladly accepted the invitation, and the great force of warriors and their families moved slowly towards the country of their enemies, gathering strength as they traveled.

On January 1, 1743, a snow-capped mountain range loomed up before them, the peaks, in the far distance, scintillating in the bright sunshine like diamonds. The poetic Frenchmen named them the "Shining Mountains," as they are known in poetry and Indian legend to this day. For the first time the white race, through the eyes of the La Verendryes, was looking upon the great range of the Rocky mountains. Historians are agreed that the mountains which met their vision at this point was the Big Horn range, about 120 miles east of Yellowstone National Park. At that time the explorers and their Indian friends must have been near the northeastern boundary of what is now Wyoming.

In passing, it should be said that there was no battle fought between the Bows and Snakes at that time, as the tribes missed each other. The La Verendryes then parted company with the Bows and gave up their quest for a way to the Western sea. On an eminence, now generally supposed to be in South Dakota, on the banks of the Missouri river, they buried a leaden plate engraved with the arms of the king of France and built over it a cairn of stones.

At the end of 1743 they were back at the Assiniboine river. For thirteen years they had followed a hopeless quest. Instead of a Western sea they had found a sea of prairie, the Rocky Mountains and two great rivers, the Saskatchewan and the Missouri. On their arrival at Montreal the elder La Verendrye was decorated with the Cross of St. Louis and the two sons were given minor posts in the army. The father died in 1750, and after the English had conquered Canada, the eldest son sailed for France on a ship which was lost with all on board. The younger son remained in Canada.

The Story of Fort Benton

ON the banks of the Missouri river, more than 3,500 miles from where the waters of that stream flow with those of the Mississippi into the Gulf of Mexico, stand a square bastion and fragments of the walls of old Fort Benton. The ruins of this old trading post of the American Fur company forms one of the points of greatest historic interest to be found between the Mississippi river and the Pacific coast. Before the ruins of the old fort the turbid waters of the Missouri flow calmly past a mile of embankment that is one of the most historic water fronts in America and the most remote docking place from the sea for steamboats on any waterway in the world.

Half a century ago the levee along the river bank here, which for 30 years from 1859 to 1889 was the terminal port for steam craft plying between St. Louis and Fort Benton, was the scene of the greatest activity, with steamboats arriving and departing amid much bustle of loading and unloading cargoes. Today the river bank is grass-grown, with not a trace of its old uses being evident, and it forms a small riverside park for the sleepy little town that lives much in the past and takes great pride in its traditions and history. During the three decades that it formed an inland port of real importance, handsome river steamers from down river unloaded during the summer months each season vast stores of merchandise for the gold camps, army forts and trading posts of the Upper Missouri country, while millions upon millions of dollars in gold dust were taken aboard for transportation downstream to the eastern mints. Along this strip of river front stepped ashore many of the pioneers and soldiers who were to become outstanding figures in the history of the west. It was here, too, that the ill-fated General Thomas Francis Meagher, illustrious Civil war cavalry leader, was drowned one night while serving as governor of Montana.

Before these days, however, the old trading post whose crumbling ruins now attract the interest of the tourist had a history of thrilling interest, for in the '40s and '50s Fort Benton was equaled only in importance among Indian trading centers by Bent's Fort in Colorado and one or two other of the southwestern posts. It was the greatest American rival of the Hudson's Bay Company's trading outposts, and before the day of the steamboat on the upper river shipped annually great quantities of furs down the Missouri to St. Louis in mackinaw boats manned by French and American voyageurs of the earliest pioneer type.

Fur trading on the Upper Missouri, which had its beginnings as early as 1807 at Fort Manuel on the Yellowstone river, centered in 1831 at Fort Benton, at the mouth of the Yellowstone, which became the headquarters of the great American Fur Company. Various other trading posts were built on the river above Fort Union in the Blackfeet country, and most of these had short-lived, tragic histories. Then, in 1841, it was decided to build an important fortified post as far up the river as practicable, and Fort Lewis was erected five miles above the site chosen later for Fort Benton, and on the south side of the Missouri. This proving an unfavorable point for trading, Major Alexander Culbertson, then chief factor for the American Fur Company, began the construction in 1846 of Fort Benton.

Major Culbertson, who for 30 years was a leading figure in Upper Missouri history, entered the service of the American Fur Company in 1833, journeying from St. Louis to Fort Union on the steamer Assiniboine in company with