

**NARRATIVE OF THE EXPLORING
EXPEDITION TO THE ROCKY
MOUNTAINS IN THE YEAR 1842,
AND TO OREGON AND NORTH
CALIFORNIA IN THE YEARS 1843-44**

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Narrative of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842, and to Oregon and North California in the Years 1843-44 by J. C. Fremont

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OF
THE EXPLORING EXPEDITION
TO
THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS
IN THE YEAR 1842,
AND TO
OREGON AND NORTH CALIFORNIA
IN THE YEARS 1843-44.

BY
BREVET CAPTAIN J. C. FREMONT,
OF THE TOPOGRAPHICAL ENGINEERS,
UNDER THE ORDERS OF COL. J. J. ABERT, CHIEF OF THE TOPOGRAPHICAL BUREAU

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PREFATORY NOTICE.

THE immense region west of the Rocky Mountains, extending to the Pacific ocean, and bounded by the Russian frontier on the north, and California on the south, now attracts so much of popular regard, and is commingled with so many important national interests, that an accurate and minute acquaintance with the general topic is essential to every American citizen.

Several exploring tours of the western portion of our continent, within the geographical boundaries of the wilds now commonly known by the title, OREGON, have taken place during the present century. President Jefferson, in 1804, directed the first scrutiny in that country under the superintendence of Messrs. Lewis and Clarke, who devoted the larger part of three years to the examination of those trackless forests, and who were the pioneers of the movements which are now extending the limits of civilization, where Indians, or deer, bears, or buffaloes only roamed. The second expedition by Major Pike to survey the West, forty years ago, was restricted to the eastern side of the Rocky Mountains, and consequently communicated little direct intelligence concerning the lands, the possession of which is now the subject of controversy between the United States and Britain.

The other subsequent travellers in the western territory confined their researches within the country through which the Upper Mississippi and Missouri flow; and therefore imparted no information of any importance concerning the Oregon lands, rivers, and other topics of public interest.

During several years, however, from 1833 to 1838, Mr. Nicollet, a scientific tourist, explored a very extensive portion of the western country beyond the northern branches of the Mississippi. At the close of his amateur travels, the government of the United States engaged him to repeat his journey in another region; and Captain Fremont was united with him to assist his efforts. After an absence of two seasons, they returned and exhibited the

result of their discoveries and astronomical observations and topographical admeasurements to the government at Washington.

It being desirable for the Federal authorities to become fully acquainted with the state of the territory between the southern geographical boundary of the United States and the Rocky Mountains, around the head-waters of the Missouri, Captain Fremont was appointed to superintend that exploring tour. That enterprising and scientific traveller is now absent on his *third* expedition to enlarge our acquaintance with the western uninhabited districts.

The ensuing narratives include the *REPORTS* of the two tours which have already been made by Captain Fremont, as they were presented to the Congress of the United States, and originally published by their command; excluding only the portions which are altogether astronomical, scientific, and philosophical, and therefore not adapted for general utility. Captain Fremont states that the whole of the delineations both "in the narrative and in the maps," which constitute the official publication, are "the result of positive observation." From a survey of the researches thus presented, it appears, that the entire map of Oregon has been amply drawn out, so far as at present is requisite for all the purposes of geographical inquiry and national arrangement. With these claims on public attention, and the deep interest which the subject itself now offers, this authentic edition of Captain Fremont's extensive and protracted researches in the western dominions of the United States, is confidently recommended to the perusal of our fellow-citizens.

NEW YORK, November 11, 1845.

A REPORT

ON

AN EXPLORATION OF THE COUNTRY

LIVING BETWEEN THE

MISSOURI RIVER AND THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS,

ON THE LINE OF

THE KANSAS AND GREAT PLATTE RIVERS.

WASHINGTON, March 1, 1843.

To Colonel J. J. ABERT,

Chief of the Corps of Top. Eng.:

SIR: Agreeably to your orders to explore and report upon the country between the frontiers of Missouri and the South Pass in the Rocky mountains, and on the line of the Kansas and Great Platte rivers, I set out from Washington city on the 2d day of May, 1842, and arrived at St. Louis, by way of New York, the 22d of May, where the necessary preparations were completed, and the expedition commenced. I proceeded in a steamboat to Chouteau's landing, about four hundred miles by water from St. Louis, and near the mouth of the Kansas river, whence we proceeded twelve miles to Mr. Cyprian Chouteau's trading house, where we completed our final arrangements for the expedition.

Bad weather, which interfered with astronomical observations, delayed us several days in the early part of June at this post, which is on the right bank of the Kansas river, about ten miles above the mouth, and six beyond the western boundary of Missouri. The sky cleared off at length, and we were enabled to determine our position, in longitude $94^{\circ} 25' 46''$, and latitude $38^{\circ} 5' 57''$. The elevation above the sea is about 700 feet. Our camp, in the meantime, presented an animated and bustling scene. All were busily occupied in completing the necessary arrangements for our campaign in the wilderness, and profiting by this short delay on the verge of civilisation, to provide ourselves with all the little essentials to comfort in the nomadic life we were to lead for the ensuing summer months. Gradually, however, everything—the *matériel* of the camp, men, horses, and even mules—settled into its place, and by the 10th we were ready to de-

part; but, before we mount our horses, I will give a short description of the party with which I performed this service.

I had collected in the neighborhood of St. Louis twenty-one men, principally Creole and Canadian *voyageurs*, who had become familiar with prairie life in the service of the fur companies in the Indian country. Mr. Charles Prauss, a native of Germany, was my assistant in the topographical part of the survey. L. Maxwell, of Kagkaekia, had been engaged as hunter, and Christopher Carson (more familiarly known, for his exploits in the mountains, as Kit Carson) was our guide. The persons engaged in St. Louis were:

Clément Lambert, J. B. L'Esperance, J. B. Lefèvre, Benjamin Potra, Louis Gouin, J. B. Dumas, Basil Lajeunesse, François Tessier, Benjamin Cadotte, Joseph Clément, Daniel Simonds, Leonard Benoit, Michel Morly, Baptiste Bernier, Honoré Ayot, François Latulippe, François Badeau, Louis Ménard, Joseph Ruelle, Moïse Chardonnais, Auguste Janisse, Raphaël Proue.

In addition to these, Henry Brant, son of Col. J. B. Brant, of St. Louis, a young man of nineteen years of age, and Randolph, a lively boy of twelve, son of the Hon. Thomas H. Benton, accompanied me, for the development of mind and body which such an expedition would give. We were all well armed and mounted, with the exception of eight men, who conducted as many carts, in which were packed our stores, with the baggage and instruments, and which were each drawn by two mules. A few loose horses, and four oxen, which had been added to our stock of provisions, completed the train. We set out on the morning of the 10th, which happened to be Friday—a circumstance which our men did not fail to remember and recall during

the hardships and vexations of the ensuing journey. Mr. Cyprian Chouteau, to whose kindness, during our stay at his house, we were much indebted, accompanied us several miles on our way, until we met an Indian, whom he had engaged to conduct us on the first thirty or forty miles, where he was to consign us to the ocean of prairie, which, we were told, stretched without interruption almost to the base of the Rocky mountains.

From the belt of wood which borders the Kansas, in which we had passed several good-looking Indian farms, we suddenly emerged on the prairies, which received us at the outset with some of their striking characteristics; for here and there rode an Indian, and but a few miles distant heavy clouds of smoke were rolling before the fire. In about ten miles we reached the Santa Fé road, along which we continued for a short time, and encamped early on a small stream; having travelled about eleven miles. During our journey, it was the customary practice to encamp an hour or two before sunset, when the carts were disposed so as to form a sort of barricade around a circle some eighty yards in diameter. The tents were pitched, and the horses hobbled and turned loose to graze; and but a few minutes elapsed before the cooks of the messes, of which there were four, were busily engaged in preparing the evening meal. At night-fall, the horses, mules, and oxen, were driven in and picketed—that is, secured by a halter, of which one end was tied to a small steel-shod picket, and driven into the ground; the halter being twenty or thirty feet long, which enabled them to obtain a little food during the night. When we had reached a part of the country where such a precaution became necessary, the carts being regularly arranged for defending the camp, guard was mounted at eight o'clock, consisting of three men, who were relieved every two hours; the morning watch being horse guard for the day. At daybreak, the camp was roused, the animals turned loose to graze, and breakfast generally over between six and seven o'clock, when we resumed our march, making regularly a halt at noon for one or two hours. Such was usually the order of the day, except when accident of country forced a variation; which, however, happened but rarely. We travelled the next day along the Santa Fé road, which we left in the afternoon, and encamped late in the evening on a small creek, called by the Indians Mishmagwi. Just as we arrived at camp, one of the horses set off at full speed on his return, and was followed by others. Several men were sent in pursuit, and returned with the fugitives about midnight, with the exception of one man, who did not make his appearance until morning. He had lost his way in the dark-

ness of the night, and slept on the prairie. Shortly after midnight it began to rain heavily, and, as our tents were of light and thin cloth, they offered but little obstruction to rain; we were all well soaked, and glad when morning came. We had a rainy march on the 12th, but the weather grew fine as the day advanced. We encamped in a remarkably beautiful situation on the Kansas bluffs, which commanded a fine view of the river valley, here from three to four miles wide. The central portion was occupied by a broad belt of heavy timber, and nearer the hills the prairies were of the richest verdure. One of the oxen was killed here for food.

We reached the ford of the Kansas late in the afternoon of the 14th, where the river was two hundred and thirty yards wide, and commenced immediately preparations for crossing. I had expected to find the river fordable; but it had been swollen by the late rains, and was sweeping by with an angry current, yellow and turbid as the Missouri. Up to this point, the road we had travelled was a remarkably fine one, well beaten, and level—the usual road of a prairie country. By our route, the ford was one hundred miles from the mouth of the Kansas river. Several mounted men led the way into the stream, to swim across. The animals were driven in after them, and in a few minutes all had reached the opposite bank in safety, with the exception of the oxen, which swam some distance down the river, and, returning to the right bank, were not got over until the next morning. In the meantime, the carts had been unloaded and dismantled, and an India-rubber boat, which I had brought with me for the survey of the Platte river, placed in the water. The boat was twenty feet long and five broad, and on it were placed the body and wheels of a cart, with the load belonging to it, and three men with paddles.

The velocity of the current, and the inconvenient freight, rendering it difficult to be managed, Basil Lajeunesse, one of our best swimmers, took in his teeth a line attached to the boat, and swam ahead in order to reach a footing as soon as possible, and assist in drawing her over. In this manner, six passages had been successfully made, and as many carts with their contents, and a greater portion of the party, deposited on the left bank; but night was drawing near, and, in our anxiety to have all over before the darkness closed in, I put upon the boat the remaining two carts, with their accompanying load. The man at the helm was timid on water, and, in his alarm, capsized the boat. Carts, barrels, boxes, and bales, were in a moment floating down the current; but all the men who were on the shore jumped into the water, without stopping to

think if they could swim, and almost everything—even heavy articles, such as guns and lead—was recovered.

Two of the men, who could not swim, came nigh being drowned, and all the sugar belonging to one of the messes wasted its sweets on the muddy waters; but our heaviest loss was a bag of coffee, which contained nearly all our provision. It was a loss which none but a traveller in a strange and inhospitable country can appreciate; and often afterward, when excessive toil and long marching had overcome us with fatigue and weariness, we remembered and mourned over our loss in the Kansas. Carson and Maxwell had been much in the water yesterday, and both, in consequence, were taken ill. The former continuing so, I remained in camp. A number of Kansas Indians visited us to-day. Going up to one of the groups who were scattered among the trees, I found one sitting on the ground, among some of the men, gravely and fluently speaking French, with as much facility and as little embarrassment as any of my own party, who were nearly all of French origin.

On all sides was heard the strange language of his own people; wild, and harmonizing well with their appearance. I listened to him for some time with feelings of strange curiosity and interest. He was now apparently thirty-five years of age; and, on inquiry, I learned that he had been at St. Louis when a boy, and there had learned the French language. From one of the Indian women I obtained a fine cow and calf in exchange for a yoke of oxen. Several of them brought us vegetables, pumpkins, onions, beans, and lettuce. One of them brought butter, and from a half-breed near the river I had the good fortune to obtain some twenty or thirty pounds of coffee. The dense timber in which we had encamped interfered with astronomical observations, and our wet and damaged stores required exposure to the sun. Accordingly, the tents were struck early the next morning, and, leaving camp at six o'clock, we moved about seven miles up the river, to a handsome, open prairie, some twenty feet above the water, where the fine grass afforded a luxurious repast to our horses.

During the day we occupied ourselves in making astronomical observations, in order to lay down the country to this place; it being our custom to keep up our map regularly in the field, which we found attended with many advantages. The men were kept busy in drying the provisions, painting the cart covers, and otherwise completing our equipage, until the afternoon, when powder was distributed to them, and they spent some hours in firing at a mark. We were now fairly in the Indian country, and it be-

gan to be time to prepare for the chances of the wilderness.

Friday, June 17.—The weather yesterday had not permitted us to make the observations I was desirous to obtain here, and I therefore did not move to-day. The people continued their target firing. In the steep bank of the river here, were nests of innumerable swallows, into one of which a large prairie snake had got about half his body, and was occupied in eating the young birds. The old ones were flying about in great distress, darting at him, and vainly endeavoring to drive him off. A shot wounded him, and, being killed, he was cut open, and eighteen young swallows were found in his body. A sudden storm, that burst upon us in the afternoon, cleared away in a brilliant sunset, followed by a clear night, which enabled us to determine our position in longitude $95^{\circ} 38' 05''$, and in latitude $29^{\circ} 06' 40''$.

A party of emigrants to the Columbia river, under the charge of Dr. White, an agent of the Government in Oregon Territory, were about three weeks in advance of us. They consisted of men, women, and children. There were sixty-four men, and sixteen or seventeen families. They had a considerable number of cattle, and were transporting their household furniture in large heavy wagons. I understood that there had been much sickness among them, and that they had lost several children. One of the party who had lost his child, and whose wife was very ill, had left them about one hundred miles hence on the prairies; and as a hunter, who had accompanied them, visited our camp this evening, we availed ourselves of his return to the States to write to our friends.

The morning of the 18th was very unpleasant. A fine rain was falling, with cold wind from the north, and mists made the river hills look dark and gloomy. We left our camp at seven, journeying along the foot of the hills which border the Kansas valley, generally about three miles wide, and extremely rich. We halted for dinner, after a march of about thirteen miles, on the banks of one of the many little tributaries to the Kansas, which look like trenches in the prairie, and are usually well timbered. After crossing this stream, I rode off some miles to the left, attracted by the appearance of a cluster of huts near the mouth of the Vermillion. It was a large but deserted Kansas village, scattered in an open wood, along the margin of the stream, on a spot chosen with the customary Indian fondness for beauty of scenery. The Pawnees had attacked it in the early spring. Some of the houses were burnt, and others blackened with smoke, and weeds were already getting possession of the cleared places. Riding up