

AFTER PIKE'S EXPEDITION AND BEFORE THE SANTA FE TRAIL:

EXPEDITIONS OF ROCKY MOUNTAIN TRADERS AND TRAPPERS.

I. EZEKIEL WILLIAMS: 1809

II. JAMES BAIRD: 1812. Baird, Mc Knight and Chambers Expedition.

III. PHILLEBERT COMPANY: 1814

IV. CHOUTEAU-DE MUNN: 1815-1816

Personnel of the two Parties. Philibert, Chouteau-De Munn

V. DAVID MERIWETHER: 1818-1820.

VI. GLENN-FOWLER: 1822.

A number of expeditions—mostly French—from the Mississippi Valley and the Canadian Lakes region, crossed the Plains in the eighteenth century, and some of these may have hunted beaver incidentally; but there is little or no record of such circumstance. Generally speaking, the far-west travellers of that century were traders, who obtained furs—and sometimes Indian slaves—by bartering with the Indians; or, in the later decades and less commonly, traded for silver with the Spaniards. And the few who may then have wandered far west in hunting and trapping, were not of a class likely to leave us records of their experiences and observations.

In the nineteenth century the case was different. Companies were formed to obtain fur—especially beaver—not only through the Indian trade but also, and often chiefly, through the organized activities of white trappers, both hired and free.

Beaver were trapped systematically by white men on the Yellowstone and Bighorn rivers in 1807, and in the Three Forks country of the upper Missouri and near the source of Henry's Fork of Snake River in 1810; but in the Pike's Peak region, beaver trapping seems to have begun in 1811. The first beaver trappers here, so far as is known, were those of a party that came that year from the upper Missouri River, and of which Ezekiel Williams, generally known as "Captain Williams," and Jean Baptiste Champjain, an ^{experienced} French fur trader, were the central figures.

The Williamses are said to have been well represented on the frontier of Missouri, especially in Howard and Cooper counties. Some of them are said to have come from North Carolina by way of Kentucky; others from or by way of Virginia. According to the American Pioneer, published by John S. Williams, Esq., ⁱⁿ Cincinnati in 1842 and '43, Ezekiel was a brother of Isaac Williams, the famous Virginia frontiersman, (born in Chester County, Pennsylvania,) who trapped beaver on tributaries of the Missouri as early as 1770, and whose biography is given in Volume I of that magazine. But this, I think, is less probable than that he was some other relative of Isaac; for we shall see that in 1816, Ezekiel Williams himself wrote, "I refer my fellow citizens to all men of my acquaintance in Kentucky, where I was raised, for my character and conduct from the cradle until I came to this country." From this it would seem that Captain Williams had been born in Kentucky, and had

dwell there until he emigrated to Missouri. He went from St. Louis to the upper Missouri in 1809, and thence to the Pike's Peak region in 1811; returning by way of the Arkansas River to the Boone's Lick region of the lower Missouri in the fall of 1813, and wintering in Cooper's Fort, one of the several strongholds in which the people of that region dwelt during the War of 1812. He made a second journey to the Pike's Peak region in 1814 by way of the Arkansas, returning the same year; and after this second return, lived again for a while in Fort Cooper, near which, in what is now Boone's Lick Township, Howard County, Missouri, he soon settled on a farm upon which he seems to have been living August 7, 1816, and certainly ^{was} at least so late as 1821. The former date was a few months prior to ^{the} founding of (old) Franklin.

The county seat of the older and greater Howard County was then at Hannah Cole's Fort in present Cooper County, where, July 8th, 1816, was convened the first circuit court, Ezekiel Williams being a member of the first grand jury. It was at ^{on the Missouri opposite Arrow Rock} Ezekiel Williams' home, that William Becknell's party, bound west to trade for horses and mules and to catch "wild animals of every description," rendezvoused August 4th, 1821, leaving Arrow Rock September 1st,* and going ultimately so far

^{"Chittenden, Am. Fur Trade of the Far West, p. 501.}

as Santa Fe; and there is good reason for believing that Williams himself was a member of this party and in the course of its travels had some interesting experience in catching wild horses. The success of this expedition led to Becknell's opening with wagons a Cimarron "desert" route to Santa Fe in the following year.

The following extracts from matter published in Volume II of The American Pioneer, afford a few further data concerning Williams:

"MR. RENICK'S LETTER.

"Indian Creek Farm, near Chillicothe, O., Jan. 23, 1843.

"J. S. Williams, Esq.

"Dear Sir—Your favor of the 5th inst. has been received. I shall....inclose a letter recently received from judge Weight, of

Missouri, which will show you a part of what I have been trying to effect, but am sorry to say with poor success; they all sing about the same tune the judge does, though I hope he may yet be able to do something. I have written to him again, and requested him to write to "Old Zeke," as he calls him, and as he was commonly called twenty-three or twenty-four years ago, when I first became acquainted with him. He was then one of the most advanced settlers of the far west. We stopped with him several days to recruit ourselves and horses, after passing over the grand prairie between the Mississippi and the Missouri, where we and our horses suffered much from flies, and to get some provisions to serve on our intended journey still farther west. He was then living very comfortably on a good farm of his own, well improved in good frontier style; plenty of negroes to do his farm work; a wife, (a fine old lady to all appearance, who, we understand, had been a widow when he married her.) He was a man for whom nature had done a good part, both in mind and body. While there we were treated, both by himself and wife, with true pioneer hospitality, and, best of all, [I] was entertained with a full detail of all his previous and early adventures in the far west, which was not only a great treat, but truly astonishing. Who would think that a man could, or would if he could, content himself to live six or seven years, ^[Spring of 1809 to fall of 1843] as he did on his first adventure, at least one thousand miles from the face of a white man, in the gorges and defiles of the Rocky mountains, and the adjacent plains; surrounded, as he must have been, by the numerous tribes of Crows, Black ~~skew~~ Feet, Camanches, and other savage, hostile, roving, marauding creatures, who are always on the prowl, seeking to plunder all that come in their way or their keen eye can discover? I again say, is it not wonderful that he could so long escape the vigilance of these hawk-eyed marauders? No other proof is wanting to show his sagacity, prudence, and vigilance. We could hardly have given credit to his story, had it not been corroborated by colonel Cooper, his neighbor at that time; a man of wealth and good standing, with whom we then formed some acquaintance, and who[m] I have frequently seen since in my late trips to Missouri.

Previous to receiving judge Weight's letter, it was my impression that I had heard that our old friend 2. "Zeke" was dead; but I now find that he has followed the modern example of the pioneer, by pulling up stakes as soon as they get a little too much crowded by neighbors." ~~He has now removed to the state of Missouri.~~

After giving a few reminiscences concerning Judge Weight, and mentioning his marriage to a lady from Virginia, he adds: "She was a daughter [Elizabeth] of colonel Vincent Williams of the S. B. of Potomac, with

Referring to Judge Weight as having removed from Chillicothe, O., to 3, Missouri, and as having purchased land near Boonville, on which he was still living, ~~he~~ ^{Mr. Williams} further vouches for his reliability, and adds: "I have requested him to get the outlines of 'Old Zeke's' (or captain Williams, as we called him,) stories, and write them out; as I do not suppose the old captain could now do it as well as it should be done, and I know judge Weight could do it better than I can. I have, however, written out the captain's last adventure after wild horses, but have been waiting for some particulars of the first adventure, as that should appear first; but I hope Mr. Weight will relieve me from writing either."

The letter from which the above extracts are taken, is signed "Felix Renick"; and upon it Mr. John S. Williams comments editorially, in part, as follows: "We still hope to receive from Mr. Renick, the valuable documents he promises. 'Old Zeke' is a brother ^[sic] of Isaac Williams, of whom we gave a biography in our first volume, from the pen of Dr. Hildreth. In old Zeke's lonesome trapping expedition, mentioned by Mr. Renick, he made a fortune, which he now enjoys." ^{He} ~~about~~ the far western trapping adventures of ~~the~~ ^{of} Ezekiel

mentioned by Mr. Renick, he made a fortune, which he now enjoys."

~~about~~ the far western trapping adventures of ~~the~~ Ezekiel Williams

~~the~~ Whatever may have been written ~~the~~ later than 1843 by either Judge Weight or Mr. Renick failed of publication in The American Pioneer, because of the pitiable lack of financial support

and the consequent discontinuance of that ~~the~~ valuable periodical. ^{Now can the true history of them be learned from Cognac's "The Lost Trappers," published in Cincinnati in 1847; although} But fortunately an account of them, from the hand of "Old Zeke" himself, has been preserved to us by publication elsewhere. A fuller understanding of his story may be had by going back several years prior to 1811.

When, in 1806, Lewis and Clark were returning from their expedition to the Pacific Ocean, they induced Big White, the principal chief of the Lower Mandan Village, below Knife River on the Missouri, to accompany them to St. Louis—~~and~~ thence ^{to} visit President Jefferson. As it was against the wish of his people, who believed he could ^{not} get back to them alive through the hostile Sioux territory, he was pledged, in the name of the United States Government, safe conduct for the return journey. Big White remained in the East for a year, and returned to St. Louis. His English name was a translation of the French, Le Gros Blanc; but his Indian name, meaning "Coyote," was Shahaka. ^{The} ~~whether~~ ~~whether~~ two attempts to restore him to his people—one futile and well nigh fatal to the chief, the other successful—have been summarized by

^{Bradbury in his "Travels," spells the name "She-he-ka." He visited this chief in the Mandan village in 1811. Bradbury, at that time, spells the chief's name the same way, but with the accent.}

F. W. Hodge in the Handbook of American Indians, as follows:

"Shahaka left St. Louis for his home in May, 1807, the party consisting of himself and his squaw-man interpreter, Jessaume, with their wives and one child each, escorted by 2 noncommissioned officers and 11 privates under the command of Ensign Nathaniel Pryor, who, as sergeant, had accompanied the expedition of Lewis and Clark. There ascended the Missouri at the same time a deputation of 24 Sioux, including 26 children, who were provided with a separate escort; and also 2 trading parties, one of which, consisting of 32 men under Pierre Chouteau, was destined to traffic with the Mandan. The expedition proceeded slowly up the Missouri, reaching the lower Arikara village on Sept. 9, where it was learned that the Mandan and the Arikara were at war. The demand of the chief of the upper Arikara village that Shahaka go ashore with him being refused, the Indians became insolent and aggressive, and afterward opened fire on the boats, which was returned. Pryor then ordered a retreat downstream, but the Indians followed along shore, killing one of the Sioux, mortally wounding one of Chouteau's men, and wounding several others, including Jessaume. Pryor now proposed to Shahaka that they attempt to cover the rest of the distance—about 3 days' journey—by land, but this the Mandan refused to do on account of the incumbrance of the women and children and the wounded condition of the interpreter, whereupon the party returned to St. Louis.* By an agreement entered into with the Missouri Fur Co. in the spring of 1808 for the safe conduct of the Indians to their home, another expedition, consisting of about 150 men having Shahaka and his companions in charge, started from St. Louis about the middle of May 1809, and although the Sioux at first showed a disposition to be troublesome the Arikara were found to be friendly and the party reached its destination Sept. 24, laden with presents."

The contract made, after the failure of Pryor's expedition, between Governor Merriweather Lewis (on the part of the United States) and the Missouri Fur Company, for the restoration of Big White to his home, stipulated that the Company should engage for that purpose 125 men, of whom 40 were to be "Americans and expert riflemen," constituting a body of militia of the Territory of Missouri until the chief had been conveyed to his village, after which they were to be given their discharge.

Chittenden remarks, "It would be extremely interesting to know the names of those forty 'Americans and expert riflemen' who escorted the Mandan chief back to his nation in the summer of 1809." Some of those names have been handed down to us. Others, we shall ^{perhaps} never know. It is certain, however, that among them was that of Ezekiel Williams.

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{ By an agreement with the Missouri Fur Company who were to provide an escort in May 1809 another expedition set out up the Missouri River to get Big White safely to his people which was accomplished on September 24, 1809. It is interesting that the contract between the United States Government and Manuel Lisa's Missouri Fur Company for the restoration of Big White to his home stipulated that the Company should engage for that purpose 125 men of whom forty were to be "Americans and expert riflemen". It is certain that Ezekiel Williams was one of these "expert riflemen", which explains his presence on the Upper Missouri in that year. }

(Now we come to the strange story which though full of inconsistencies and pure fiction was taken somewhat seriously in those days. So aroused was Zeke Williams by the letter accusing him of murder that he all unaccustomed to the pen, replied by a complete account of his expedition to the Rocky Mountains. This is priceless as history and refutes completely the silly charges brought against him. The first item is this;)

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* "STRANGE, BUT TRUE

"In the year 1818 [1816], Joseph Stephens, who died in 1836, Major Stephen Cole and William Ross, the hatter, started west on a hunting and exploring tour, and travelled as far as the present site of Knob Noster. At that time all the country west of the present boundary line of Cooper county, was a wilderness, no person living in it. About six miles southeast of the present site of Sedalia, in Pettis county, on the farm now owned by a man by the name of Warren, near Flat creek, they discovered what appeared to be a large, high and peculiarly shaped Indian mound. They examined it pretty closely, and found on one side that the wolves had scratched an opening into it. After enlarging it so as to admit them, they beheld a remarkable sight. They found themselves in what resembled a room, about eight feet square, with a ceiling of logs, just high enough to permit a tall man to stand erect. On the side opposite where they had entered, sat an officer dressed in full military uniform, with gold epaulettes upon his shoulders, gold lace fringing every seam of his coat, cocked military hat, knee breeches, lace stockings and morocco slippers. As he sat erect upon a seat hewed out of a log, nothing but the ghastly hue and leathery appearance of his skin would have suggested but that he was alive. By his side stood a heavy gold-headed cane. His features were complete, and his flesh free from decay, though dried to the consistency of leather. The place in which the body was found was very peculiar.

A place about eight feet square and two feet deep had been dug in the earth. The sides had been walled up with sod until it was high enough for the purpose, reaching several feet above the surface of the ground. The top was then covered with poles, which ran up to a point in the centre like the roof of a house.