

MARCY'S ROCKY MOUNTAIN EXPEDITION OF 1857-'58.

During the "Mormon War", while the United States troops under General Albert Sidney Johnston were encamped at Fort Bridger*, the supply

*Their encampment there was the Headquarters of the Army of Utah, and was officially called "Camp Scott". It was about two miles south of Fort Bridger, which latter old trading post, since November, 1853, and until just before the arrival of the first United States troops, had been occupied by the Mormons, who claimed to have bought it from Bridger, and who called it "Fort Supply". (See H. H. Bancroft's Works, XXV, 696, 697.)

trains of General Johnston's army having been destroyed by the Mormons, Captain Randolph B. Marcy, with a detachment of 65 men, was ordered to proceed across the mountains, at the advent of what proved to be an unusually severe winter, to procure supplies.

N.B. Concerning this march, the Secretary of War, John B. Floyd, in his Annual Report for 1858, says,

"The destruction of our trains by the Mormons, ~~the Indians~~, and the disasters which necessarily flowed from it, drove General Johnston to the necessity of sending a detachment of men to New Mexico for supplies essential to preserve the whole command from the greatest extremity, and to enable him to prosecute his march with all practicable dispatch.

"This expedition was intrusted to Captain R. B. Marcy, of the 5th infantry; and, without intending to make an invidious comparison between the services of officers where all are meritorious, it is but just to bring the conduct of this officer and his command to your especial notice. It may be safely affirmed that, in the whole catalogue of hazardous expeditions scattered so thickly through the history of our border warfare, filled as many of them are with appalling tales of privation, hardship, and suffering, not one surpasses this; and in some particulars it has been hardly equalled by any.

"Captain Marcy left Fort Bridger on the 24th day of November, 1857, with a command of forty enlisted men and twenty-five mountain men, herders, packers, and guides. Their course lay through an almost trackless wilderness, over lofty and rugged mountains, without a pathway or a human habitation to guide or direct, in the very depth of winter, through snows for many miles together reaching to the depth of five feet. Their beasts of burden very rapidly perished until very few were left; their supplies gave out; their luggage was abandoned; they were driven to subsist upon the carcasses of their dead horses and mules; all the men became greatly emaciated; some were frost-bitten; yet not one murmur of discontent escaped the lips of a single man.

Their mission was one of extreme importance to the movements of the army, and great disaster might befall the command if these devoted men failed to bring succor to the camp. They had one and all volunteered for this service, and, although they might freeze or die, yet they would not complain.

"After a march of fifty-one days they emerged from the forests, and found themselves at Fort Massachusetts, in New Mexico. During their whole march Captain Marcy shared all the privations of the common soldier — marching, sleeping, and eating as they did. After a short delay at this post, for the purpose of recruiting his party and procuring all necessary supplies for his return, he set out for the army at Fort Bridger."

~~Marcy's narrative~~
~~and his return to~~
~~Fort Bridger.~~
Besides these strong words of approval from the Secretary of War, Captain Marcy also had the honor of receiving, after his return to Fort Bridger, a highly commendatory letter from the general-in-chief.

The narrative here given is fuller than any ~~single~~ statement of it ever before ~~had~~ written, being based on a number of separate accounts. That of the eastward journey, is based on one unofficial and two official narratives and one itinerary by Captain Marcy himself; and that of the return journey on one unofficial and three official narratives and itineraries by Marcy, and an official itinerary-report by Colonel W.W. Loring. In so far as practicable, the story will be told in the first person, using the words of the original narrators; but matter will be used from the various sources indiscriminately, and interpolations will be made ~~in the third person~~ by the present writer whenever necessary to connect such matter into readable form, or to elucidate or condense. Matter in quotation marks, except as otherwise stated, will be understood to ^{be} ~~the~~ the words of Captain Marcy.

"On the 24th November, 1857, I received an order from Colonel A.S. Johnston commanding the army of Utah, to proceed by the most direct route to New Mexico for the purpose of procuring supplies and especially animals to replace those that ~~had~~ had "perished upon the march from the Missouri river to Camp Scott."

"An official statement from the senior quartermaster with the army, showed that one half the horses of the batteries and two-thirds of those of the dragoons and a very large percentage of the mules had died; and there was good reason to believe, from the famished condition of the remaining animals, that the greater part of these might not survive a severe winter.

"I left Camp Scott on the 27th of November, ~~having~~ an escort of forty soldiers from the 5th and 10th regiments of infantry, with twenty-four

* Instead of the "Camp Scott" of official communications, Captain Marcy ~~had~~ the ^{contingent} and letter from "Fort Bridger" in his unofficial narration.

* Thirty Years of Army Life on the Border. * 1853
 + Capt. Marcy. Letter to Major Porter June 12, 1859, Camp Scott U.T. Executive Sec.
 citizens as guides, packers, and herders.

P. 226 + "When we left Fort Bridger there was only six inches of snow on the ground, ^{of whom Jim Baker was the principal one,} and my guides, as well as other mountain men, were of opinion that we should not, at that early season, find over two feet of snow upon the summit of the mountains. They also believed that we could ~~not~~ make the trip to Fort Massachusetts, New Mexico, in twenty-five days; but to make sure of having enough provisions, I deemed it wise to take thirty days' supply, which, with our luggage, was packed upon ~~sixty-six~~ ^{meules}.

"Our route, which crosses the Uinty and Rocky mountains chains in a very direct course for New Mexico, had been travelled by trappers and hunters in the summer season, but I cannot learn that it had ever ^{before} been traversed in the winter. The Indians, and indeed the veteran mountaineer Bridger [who did not accompany Marcy's expedition], pronounced the transit impracticable at that season. ^{at} the junction at a point where it was one hundred yards wide and three feet deep, with a rapid current flowing over a gravelly bed."

There is good grass throughout the valley of Henry's Fork; timber, spruce-pine, cottonwood and willow; good camps at any point on the creek.

From their first crossing of Green river the route which they followed passes "nearly east along the northern slope of the mountains bordering Green river for six miles, when the trail turns down a very precipitous and rocky bluff, crossing Green river again at a good ford with only eighteen inches depth of water upon a rocky bed.

"From thence in a southeast direction to the summit of a very elevated plateau", of the "Uinty" [Uintah] range, "enclosed on both sides by lofty mountains. Our trail traverses the entire length of this plateau, and at the southern extremity makes an abrupt descent of probably a thousand feet into the valley of Box Elder creek; thence down that stream for eight miles below its junction with Birch [Brush] creek, when we turned south over a very rough country and in nine miles struck Ashley's Fork, which is a clear rapid stream about twenty yards wide and twelve inches deep, issuing from the southern slope of Uinta mountains. In the highlands bordering this stream there is a great abundance of excellent grass, and we found the temperature here still mild and pleasant.

"From thence we struck south to Green river, which we followed in its tortuous meanderings for twenty-three miles. In many places it is enclosed by high bluffs of white and red sandstone rising almost perpendicularly from the water and rendering it necessary for us to follow the Indian trail passing directly over them.

+ P. 28 "The river bottom is generally very narrow, but in places spreads out from one-fourth to half a mile in width, and is here covered with a luxuriant growth of grass. Cottonwood, willow and birch skirt the banks, which during seasons of high water are overflowed.

→ "The general course of the river from the point where we struck it to our last crossing, ~~which is about~~ ^{off it} by a "good ford" ~~is~~ ^{is} above the mouth of White river, is south 2° west.

"Our trail on leaving Green river crosses White river three miles above its mouth at the first point where the highlands on the north approach the stream. White river runs west 20° south, is thirty feet wide with a deep and rapid current flowing over a soft alluvial bed between high clay banks, and is a difficult stream to ford with safety.

"From thence we travelled eight miles in a course south 5° west, which took us to another tributary of Green river called Box Elder creek. This we found about ten feet wide with abrupt clay banks, and its ~~minimum~~ valley narrow and bounded by high bluffs of light grey sandstone. Our track follows a small Indian trail along the north bank of the creek for nineteen miles. We found grass in detached spots along the sides of the bluffs, but generally there is very little grass in this locality. (Water brackish; no wood except sage and greasewood.)

* P. 227 The Indian trail above mentioned had now "led us to the foot of the mountain dividing Green from Grand river. Here we found three lodges of Digger Utes, and engaged one of them to act as guide over the mountain."

+ P. 228 "On leaving the creek we struck into a narrow and tortuous cañon", which, in "our first day's march led us, by a very regular grade, to the summit of an elevated plateau dividing the waters of Green and Grand rivers. We encamped at ^[that is the] the head of the cañon, and, after supper, our Indian guide came to me and expressed some doubt as to whether we were in possession of the articles he had been promised for his services, and Jim Baker, the interpreter, advised that they should be shown to him. Accordingly, the knife, powder, lead, and paint were spread out before him; and, although I rather disapproved the proceeding, Baker allowed him to take possession of them.

"Before I lay down for the night I posted sentinels around the camp, and directed the guard to keep careful watch upon the Indian. About midnight I was awakened by the sergeant of the guard, who reported that he believed our Indian guide intended deserting, as he had placed his rifle and all his other effects in such a position that he could seize them instantly, and he appeared to be watching for an opportunity to break away. I repeated to the sergeant the order to guard him

* P. 187 closely, and directed him, if he made any attempt at deserting us, to seize and tie him.

"In the course of an hour the sergeant returned with the intelligence that, in spite of all vigilance, the fellow had broken away from the guard and escaped. I regretted this, because we wanted his services to pilot us across the summit of the mountain on the following day. We were obliged, however, to set out without him, and, shortly after

* P. 188 emerging from the canon, found ourselves upon a level plateau about + P. 188 ten miles wide. After travelling fifteen miles across this [the statements "ten miles" and "fifteen miles", are from two narratives ^{ESCAPEMENT OF ROCK} ~~mission~~, we found it terminated in a towering ~~mass~~ and almost perpendicular cliff or bluff of rock, overlooking the valley of Grand

* P. 188 river and its two principal tributaries, the Bunkaree and Compadre, and

* The "Bunkard" and the "Uncompadre" (for Uncompahgre), as Marcy elsewhere calls these two main branches of Grand river, are of course, respectively the North Fork of Grand, (now usually called "Grand river",) and the Gunnison. It would seem, therefore, that the Indian name, Uncompahgre, formerly applied not only to the river now so called, but also to that part of the Gunnison between Delta and Grand Junction, Colorado. That part of the Gunnison river which is above Delta, from the head of Tomichi creek down to the junction of the Uncompahgre and the Gunnison, was, I believe, primitively called the Tomichi. - F. W. Cragin.

+ P. 188 some two thousand feet above it." Upon the summit of this table-land the snow was two feet deep, making it very difficult travelling, and covering up the trail in such a manner that we were obliged to search for several hours before we succeeded in finding the place where it passed down the face of the bluffs.

* P. 188 "On reaching this lofty escarpment, it did not seem possible that our mules could descend it, and, indeed, I had been previously told that ~~there~~ there was but one place for fifty miles along this cliff where the declivity was practicable for animals, and this was at a point where the Indians had cut out a narrow path along the face of the bluff, winding around over rocks and along the brink of deep chasms."

"We bivouacked in the snow directly upon the verge of this precipice, where we had a magnificent view of the valley of Grand river and the Rocky Mountains beyond. Immediately after we halted I sent out Baker to search for the trail leading into the valley, and it was not until late at night that he discovered it. In the morning we entered the

+ P. 188 tortuous defile and commenced the descent. The trail led us down the

* P. 188 ^{which we found exceedingly precipitous + slippery} side of the escarpment for probably eighteen hundred feet, before we reached the valley below, and was "exceedingly precipitous and slippery." Our pack mules had great difficulty in keeping their footing. Occasionally one of them would fall, and, with his pack, roll over and over for thirty or forty

*1.224 feet, until he was brought up by a tree or projecting crag. //

* P. 221 "On arriving at the base of the mountain we found ourselves in a deep cañon, and to our surprise found the grass green, and not a particle of snow upon the ground, while, as I have said before, directly over our heads, upon the summit of the plateau, it lay two feet deep." //

"We discovered at this place a naturally inclosed pasture, containing about two hundred acres, surrounded by an almost perpendicular trap wall some two hundred feet in height, and with but one opening of not more than a hundred yards wide. Our animals were all turned into this natural corral, and a herdsman stationed at the opening secured them as perfectly as if they had been shut up in a stable."

"We picked up a horse here that had become very fat upon the rich bunch grass. He had probably been lost or abandoned by the Indians. We appropriated the animal, and subsequently used him for food in the mountains.

+P.182 "The trail led us down the windings of this cañon with a general bearing of southeast for sixteen miles, running along the banks of a small stream called Paint Rock creek, which rises in the cañon and empties into Grand river. The trail then leaves the creek and turns to the east, skirting the mountains bordering Grand river valley for thirteen miles, when it bears to the south and in seventeen miles intersects Gunnison's wagon trace [of 1853] from New Mexico through the Kutch-e-tope Pass. This road could be distinguished in places, but for the most part the grass had grown over and obliterated all traces of it."

+ P. 189 " Our trace is along [up] the valley of Grand river to [above] the
junction of its two principal branches, the Bunkara* and Uncompahre,

*Lieut. Gunnison renders this name "Nah-un-kah-reah"; and Heap gives it "Avonkaria".

* 229 both of which we forded the former ^{little above the confluence} near the present city of Grand Junction, ~~about~~ ^{then} about December 18th*, the latter about two days

*Not "on the 8th of December", as erroneously printed in one narrative. On the 8th of December, the expedition was on "Box Elder creek".

later, at Robidoux's old ford, a short distance below Delta], but with much difficulty, as the water was deep and rapid and filled with floating ice, and encamped at the base of the 'Elk Mountain' [Grand Mesa], near the remains of an old trading ~~post~~ establishment [Fort Uncampahgre] which had formerly been occupied by a man named Robidoux.

[Antoine Robidoux], of St. Louis, who wandered out into this remote wilderness many years ago, but was subsequently driven away and his buildings burned by the Indians. "We found no snow in these valleys, and the atmosphere was mild, with much of the grass green.