

INCIDENTS OF WESTERN HISTORY.

VIII.

The First Ascent of Pike's Peak.

After the matters treated of in the last papers, followed some years barren of striking episodes in the west. There were no Indian wars, no government expeditions, no literary travelers. The fur trade was at its height. Up the Missouri, out the Platte and the Arkansas, over the mountains, French and American adventurers swarmed; finding out the parks and passes, fraternizing or fighting with the Indians, learning the characteristics of the country and of its inhabitants, and keeping an eye out for gold. The Santa Fe trade by caravan from the Missouri took its beginning: Pike was killed and Fremont was born; Astor relinquished his Pacific coast designs and Astoria was occupied by the British; steamboats appeared on the Mississippi and pushed as far up the Missouri as Independence; and in 1818 the government set an enterprise in motion from which great things were hoped for. This was a military and scientific expedition, under Col. Henry Atkinson and Major Stephen H. Long; its object was to explore the upper country, locate some point on the British boundary, terrify and impress the Indian tribes and acquire knowledge generally. It was, however, a failure from start to finish. It set out with unheard-of preparations and expenditure, having among other accessories five steamboats; but by cold weather in 1819 it had only gotten a few miles above Omaha, and there it encamped, at the place called "Engineer Cantonments." Major Long went back east to report progress and was sourly received; congress withdrew all support from his expedition, and, to be brief, the summer of 1820 saw him, with seventeen men, starting across country for the Rockies, authorized to find the mysterious headwaters of Red River and follow that stream down to the Mississippi. The party's outfit was so niggardly that they furnished all but six of their animals themselves.

They marched up the Platte, going along the left bank and crossing both forks above the junction, and came in sight of the noble peak which bears the name of their leader on the 30th of June.

They advanced towards the range, and were surprised, as many travelers have been, to see that they apparently came no nearer. Dr. Edwin James, the historian of the expedition, and who died in Iowa a few years ago, tells of their further adventures as follows:

"July 3d. Breakfast was despatched and we had mounted our horses before five o'clock. We were enabled to have our breakfast thus early, as the sentinel on duty during the night was directed

to put the kettles over the fire at three o'clock, all the processes preparatory to boiling having been finished on the preceding evening.

"Throughout the day we were approaching the mountains obliquely, and from our encampment at evening, we supposed them to be about twenty miles distant. Clouds were hanging about all the highest parts of the mountains, which were sometimes observed to collect together, and descend in showers, circumscribed to a limited district. This state of the weather obstructed the clearness, but added greatly to the imposing grandeur of some of the views which the mountain presented.

"4th. We had hoped to celebrate our great national festival on the Rocky Mountains; but the day had arrived, and they were still at a distance. Being extremely impatient of any unnecessary delay, which prevented us from entering upon the examination of the mountains, we did not devote the day to rest, as had been our intention. We did not, however, forget to celebrate the anniversary of our national independence, according to our circumstances. An extra pint of maize was issued to each mess, and a small portion of whisky distributed.

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"6th. The district occupied by the inclined sandstone, at the base of the mountains, we found much wider, and the rocky summits incomparably more elevated, than from a remote view we had supposed.

"From our camp, we had expected to be able to ascend the most distant summits then in sight, and return the same evening; but night overtook us, and we found ourselves scarcely arrived at the base of the mountain.

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"12th. The small stream on which we encamped had some timber along its valley. In this four deer had been killed; so that we now had provisions in great plenty.

"From this camp we had a distinct view of the part of the mountains called by Captain Pike the highest peak. It appeared about twenty miles distant, towards the northwest. Our view was cut off from the base by an intervening spur of less elevation; but all the upper part of the peak was visible, with patches of snow extending down to the commencement of the woody region.

"At about one o'clock p. m., a dense black cloud was seen to collect in the southwest; and advancing towards the peak, it remained nearly stationary over that part of the mountains, pouring down torrents of rain. The thunder was loud and frequent; and though little rain fell near our camp, the creek soon began to swell; and before sunset it had risen about six feet, and again subsided nearly to its former level.

When the stream began to rise, it was soon covered with such a quantity of bison's dung, suddenly washed in from the declivities of the mountains and the plains at its base, that the water could scarcely be seen. About this time our cook filled his kettle, and put into it the meat intended for supper; but when the soup was brought to our tent, the flavor of the cow-yard was found so prevalent, and the meat so filled with sand, that very little could be eaten.

"As one of the objects of our excursion was to ascertain the elevation of the peak, it was determined to remain in our present camp for three days, which would afford an opportunity for some of the party to ascend the mountain.

"At an early hour on the morning of the 13th, Lieutenant Smith, [an evident misprint. The officer meant was Lieutenant W. H. Swift of the Artillery, who was assistant Topographer and Commander of the Guard to the Expedition], accompanied by the guide, Joseph Bijou, [Bijou creek was perhaps named for him, although his right name was Bessonnet,] was despatched from camp, to measure a base near the peak, and to make there a part of the observations requisite for calculating its elevation. Dr. James, [Dr. Edwin James, who wrote the published account of the expedition,] being furnished with four men, two to be left at the foot of the mountain to take care of the horses, and two to accompany him in the proposed ascent to the summit of the peak, set off at the same time.

"This detachment left the camp before sunrise, and taking the most direct route across the plains, arrived at eleven o'clock at the base of the mountain. Here Lieutenant Swift found a place suited for his purpose; where, also, was a convenient spot for those who were to ascend the mountain, to leave their horses.

"After establishing their horse-camp, the detachment moved up the valley on foot, arriving about noon at the boiling springs, [Manitou Springs] where they dined on a saddle of venison, and some bison ribs they had brought ready cooked from camp.

"After we had dined, and hung up some provisions in a large red-cedar tree near the spring, intending it for a supply on our return, we took leave of Lieutenant Swift, and began to ascend the mountain. We carried with us each a small blanket, ten or twelve pounds of bison meat, three gills of parched corn meal, and a small kettle.

"The ascending party found the surface in many places covered with such quantities of loose and crumbling granite, rolling from under their feet, as rendered the ascent extremely difficult. We now began to credit the assertions of the guide, who had conducted us to the foot of the peak, and there left us,