

# Morton's History of Nebraska

Authentic—1400 to 1906—Complete

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## CHAPTER II CONTINUED (4)

"Camp Missouri has been sickly, from the commencement of the winter, but its situation is at this time truly deplorable. More than three hundred are or have been sick, and nearly one hundred have died. This fatality is occasioned by the scurvy (scurbutus). Individuals who are seized rarely recover, as they can not be furnished with the proper ailments; they have no vegetables, fresh meat, nor antiscorbutics, so that the patients grow daily worse, and entering the hospital is considered by them a certain passport to the grave."

The scientific and exploring division of the party, under Major Long, left St. Louis on the 9th of June, 1819, on the steamboat Western Engineer, which is said to have been the first stern-wheel steamboat ever built. This vessel appears to have been well adapted to its purpose and, proceeding by easy stages, reached the mouth of the Platte river on the 15th of September, Ft. Lisa on the 17th, and on the 19th anchored at the winter camp, half a mile above Ft. Lisa and five miles below Council Bluff, and which they called Engineer Cantonment. According to one writer the vessels which attempted to transfer Atkinson's soldiers in the early winter of 1818 were the first steamboats to enter the Missouri river; but the statement that two of them went as far as Cow Island, above the mouth of the Kansas, is contrary to an account of the arrival of the Independence at Franklin, contained in the Franklin Intelligencer of May 28, 1819: "With no ordinary sensation of pride and pleasure we announce the arrival this morning of the elegant steamboat Independence, Captain Nelson, in seven sailing days (but thirteen from the time of her departure) from St. Louis, with passengers and a cargo of flour, whisky, iron castings, etc., being the first steamboat that ever attempted ascending the Missouri. The grand desideratum, the important fact is now acknowledged that steamboats can successfully navigate the Missouri."

Major Long started to Washington after a sojourn of two weeks at Engineer Cantonment and returned in the spring by land from St. Louis. On account of mismanagement of the expedition and the scandals arising from it the necessary appropriations were stopped and Major Long was authorized to lead an exploring party "to the source of the river Platte and thence by way of the Arkansas and Red rivers to the Mississippi." The party consisted of S. H. Long, major U. S. topographical engineers, six regular soldiers, and eleven other men, most of them such specialists as were needed in a scientific exploration. They started from Engineer Cantonment on the 6th of June, following the Pawnee path southwest to the Platte valley, then, proceeding along the north side of the river, crossed the forks a short distance above their junction, and followed the south bank of the South Platte. By the end of June they came in sight of the mountains and discovered the great peak which they named after Major Long.

In May, 1832, Capt. Nathaniel J. Wyeth, with a party of eighteen, intent on Astor's original plan of establishing trade on the Columbia river, passed through Nebraska on the Oregon trail. He traveled in company with William L. Sublette's expedition to the mountains. On his return by way of the Missouri river he passed Council Bluff on the 21st of September, 1833. In 1834, Wyeth, with a party of seventy men, traveled over the same route again—from Independence to the Columbia.

Captain Bonneville was a diligent wanderer rather than an explorer, and he owes his fame largely to the fact that the fascinating Irving was his historian. He took a party of about one hundred men over the Oregon trail in the spring of 1832, and traveled over the whole northwest mountain region, including the Columbia river country, until the spring of 1835. In the year last named Col. Henry Dodge, who afterwards became the first governor of Wisconsin, led an expedition from Ft. Leavenworth up the Platte and along its south fork to the mountains, thence south to the Santa Fe trail, returning by that route.

The federal government had indirectly encouraged the expeditions set on foot by Astor and others and had directly sent the Long expedition, but the most important explorations of the Northwest, under the auspices of the government, were those of Fremont. The first party passed through Nebraska by the Oregon trail in the summer of 1842. This expedition, composed of twenty-seven men, mostly Creole Canadian frontiersmen, included the famous Kit Carson as its guide and a son of Thomas H. Benton, a boy of twelve years, whose sister Lieutenant Fremont, the leader of the expedition, had recently married. This expedition started from Cyprian Chouteau's trading post, on the Missouri river, a little over twelve miles above the mouth of the Kansas, on the 10th of June, 1842. Fremont's orders were, "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." This was accomplished by the middle of August, and the party returned by the same route, reaching the junction of the north and south forks on the 12th of September. Here Fremont also was tempted to undertake the navigation of the river. His own account of the remainder of the journey through Nebraska is a pertinent and interesting story:

"At this place I had determined to make another attempt to descend the Platte by water, and accordingly spent two days in the construction of a bull boat. Men were sent out on the evening of our arrival, the necessary number of bulls killed, and their skins brought to camp. Four of the best of them were strongly sewed together with buffalo sinew, and stretched over a basket frame of willow. The seams were then covered with ashes and tallow, and the boat left exposed to the sun the greater part of one day, which was sufficient to dry and contract the skin and make the whole work solid and strong. It had a rounded bow, was eight feet long and five broad, and drew with four men about four inches of water. On the morning of the 15th we embarked in our hide boat, Mr. Preuss and myself with two men. We dragged her over the sands for three or four miles, and then left her on the bar, and abandoned entirely all further attempts to navigate this river. The names given by the Indians are always remarkably appropriate; and certainly none was ever more so than that which they have given to this stream—the Nebraska, or Shallow River." Walking steadily the remainder of the day, a little before dark we overtook our people at their evening camp, about twenty-one miles below the junction. The next morning we crossed the Platte, and continued our way down the river bottom on the left bank, where we found an excellent plainly beaten road.

"On the 18th we reached Grand Island, which is fifty-two miles long, with an average breadth of one mile and three-quarters. It has on it some small eminences, and is sufficiently elevated to be secure from the annual floods of the river. As has already been remarked, it is well timbered, with an excellent soil, and recommends itself to notice as the best point for a military position on the Lower Platte.

"On the 22d we arrived at the village of the Grand Pawnees, on the right bank of the river, about thirty miles above the mouth of the Loup fork. They were gathering in their corn, and we obtained from them a very welcome supply of vegetables.

"The morning of the 24th we reached the Loup fork of the Platte. At the place where we forded it this stream was four hundred and thirty yards broad, with a swift current of clear water; in this respect differing from the Platte, which has a muddy yellow color, derived from the limestone and marl formation of which we have previously spoken. The ford was difficult, as the water was so deep that it came into the body of the carts, and we reached the opposite bank after repeated attempts, ascending and descending the bed of the river in order to avail ourselves of the bars. We encamped on the left bank of the fork, in the point of land at its junction with the Platte. During the two days that we remained here for astronomical observations, the bad weather permitted us to obtain but one good observation for the latitude—a meridian altitude of the sun, which gave for the latitude of the mouth of the Loup fork 41° 22' 11".

"Five or six days previously, I had sent forward C. Lambert, with two men, to Bellevue, with directions to ask from Mr. P. Sarpy, the gentleman in charge of the American Company's establishment at that place, the aid of his carpenters in constructing a boat, in which I proposed to descend the Missouri. On the afternoon of the 27th we met one of the men who had been despatched by Mr. Sarpy with a welcome supply of provisions and a very kind note which gave us the very gratifying intelligence that our boat was in rapid progress. On the evening of the 30th we encamped in an almost impenetrable undergrowth on the left bank of the Platte, in the point of land at its confluence with the Missouri—three hundred and fifteen miles, according to our reckoning, from the junction of the forks, and five hundred and twenty miles from Fort Laramie.

"From the junction we had found the bed of the Platte occupied with numerous islands, many of them very large, and all well timbered; possessing, as well as the bottom lands of the river, a very excellent soil. With the exception of some scattered groves on the banks, the bottoms are generally without timber. A portion of these consist of low grounds, covered with a profusion of fine grasses, and are probably inundated in the spring; the remaining part is high river prairie, entirely beyond the influence of the floods. The breadth of the river is usually three-quarters of a mile, except where it is enlarged by islands. That portion of its course which is occupied by Grand Island has an average breadth from shore to shore of two and a half miles. The breadth of the valley, with the various accidents of ground—springs, timber, and whatever I have thought interesting

to travelers and settlers—you will find indicated on the larger map which accompanies this report.

"October 1.—I rose this morning long before daylight, and heard with a feeling of pleasure the tinkling of cow bells at the settlements on the opposite side of the Missouri. Early in the day we reached Mr. Sarpy's residence, and in the security and comfort of his hospitable mansion felt the pleasure of again being within the pale of civilization. We found our boat on the stocks; a few days sufficed to complete her; and in the afternoon of the 4th we embarked on the Missouri. All our equipage—horses, carts, and the material of the camp—had been sold at public auction at Bellevue. The strength of my party enabled me to man the boat with ten oars, relieved every hour; and we descended rapidly."

On his second expedition, the following year, Fremont passed up the Kansas river to the mouth of the Republican. He then proceeded northwardly, leaving the Republican valley on his right or to the north. Soon after crossing and naming the Prairie Dog river he again entered the Republican valley. He crossed the present Nebraska line not far from the western boundary of Hitchcock county, and, crossing Dundy county diagonally to the northwest, entered the valley of the South Platte, which he followed to the mountains. Fremont complains on this trip of the difficulty of traveling on account of heavy rains, which is another indication of the fallacy of the popular notion that rainfall has increased in this portion of the plains since its occupation and cultivation by white men.

It is probable that there was a trading post called Ft. Charles, about six miles below Omadi, kept by one McKay as early as 1795. In 1802 Cruzatte's post, also a trading establishment, was situated two miles above old Council Bluff. In 1807 Crooks and McLellan established a post not far above the mouth of the Papillion; but they abandoned it in 1810 when they formed the Pacific Fur Company. This was probably the first settlement on the site, or in the immediate neighborhood of Bellevue. The tradition that Manuel Lisa made a settlement at Bellevue in 1805 is probably groundless. He established his post, known as Fort Lisa, at a point between five and six miles below the original Council Bluff—where Lewis and Clark had a council with the Missouri and Otoe Indians, August 3, 1804, and now the site of the town of Ft. Calhoun—as early as 1812. Manuel Lisa was doubtless the most remarkable man among the early explorers and traders of the Missouri river. "In boldness of enterprise, persistency of purpose and in restless energy, he was a fair representative of the Spaniard of the days of Cortez. He was a man of great ability, a masterly judge of men, thoroughly experienced in the Indian trade and native customs, intensely active in his work, yet withal a perfect enigma of character which his contemporaries were never able to solve." He was selected to command in the field nearly every expedition sent out by the St. Louis companies of which he was a member. Lisa was born of Spanish parents, in Cuba, in 1772. The return of Lewis and Clark excited his ambition to establish trade on the upper Missouri, and in 1807 he led an expedition as far as the mouth of the Bighorn where he established a post called Fort Lisa. The Missouri Fur Company of St. Louis, in which he was a partner, was organized in 1808-1809. In the spring of 1809 he went up to the Bighorn post with a party of one hundred and fifty men, but returned to St. Louis for the winter. Every year, from 1807 to 1819, inclusive, possibly with one exception, he made the up-Missouri trip—twice to the Bighorn, a distance of two thousand miles, several times to Fort Mandan, fifteen hundred miles, the rest of the journeys being to Ft. Lisa at Council Bluff, six hundred and seventy miles. After the establishment of this post he spent most, probably all of the winters there, returning to St. Louis in the spring each year. His last sojourn in his Nebraska home was in 1819, and this time his wife, whom he had recently married in St. Louis, was with him. He had kept at least one woman of the Omahas as wife or mistress, and there is a tragic story of his final separation from her before his last trip back to St. Louis, and of her giving up their two children to him because she thought it would be best for them. As is often the case with original and adventurous spirits, in a commercial sense, Lisa sowed that others might reap, and he died at St. Louis, in August, 1820, leaving little of the material gain for which he had striven with wonderful energy and at such great risks. While McKay and Cruzatte, and perhaps others of the white race may have had lodgment in Nebraska before Lisa, yet it seems fair to call him the first real white settler. Thomas Biddle, the journalist of the Yellowstone expedition, in a report to Atkinson, commandant at Camp Missouri, dated October 29, 1819, says that Lisa's party went to the mouth of the Bighorn in 1809 and that they wintered there that year, and on the waters of the Columbia in 1810-1811; but Lisa, himself, returned to St. Louis in the fall of 1809. By Biddle's showing the Mis-

souri river fur trade was on the whole unprofitable, and the various companies or partnerships were short-lived, and according to his statement, the Missouri Fur Company expired in 1814 or 1815; by other accounts it dissolved between 1828-1830, Joshua Pilcher remaining its president after Lisa's death. Biddle tells us also that after the dissolution of the Missouri company Lisa, Pilcher, and others bought a new company for \$10,000, and they added goods to the amount of \$7,000. As Lisa died in 1820, he could not have joined Pilcher in this last enterprise after the expiration of the Missouri company, if it had lived until 1828 or 1830. The confusion must be accounted for by the fact that another company of the same name was organized after the dissolution of the first, and it is to that doubtless that some writers refer. Long notes that Major Pilcher and Lucien Fontenelle were in the employ of the Missouri Fur Company at the beginning of the year 1820. Not long after Lisa's death the company, now in charge of Pilcher, moved its post from Ft. Lisa down to the site of Bellevue. Chittenden states that Lucien Fontenelle and Andrew Drips bought the post soon after this time and retained it many years, though in another place this author says that they built a post at Bellevue. It is probable that this Fontenelle was connected with one of the numerous French royal families, and it is stated that he committed suicide at Ft. Laramie; but reliable local accounts say that he left his mountain trading post in 1839 and came to Bellevue where he lived with his family until he died, from intemperate habits, in 1840. He married a woman of the Omaha tribe and they had five children. One of them, Logan Fontenelle, became chief of the Omahas and a man of much note among the Indians and the earliest white settlers. Henry Fontenelle, brother of this Omaha chief, has given the following account of his death:

"In June, 1855, Logan went with the tribe as usual on their summer buffalo hunt, and as usual their enemies, the Sioux, laid in wait for the Omahas in vicinities of large herds of buffalo. The first surround they made on the buffalo the Sioux made a descent upon them in overwhelming numbers and turned the chase into battle. Four Omahas were killed and several wounded. In every attempt at getting buffaloes the Sioux charged upon them. The Omahas concluded it was useless to try to get any buffalo, and retreated toward home. They traveled three days, and, thinking they were out of danger, Logan, one morning, in company with Louis Sausoci and another Indian, started on ahead of the moving village, and were about three miles away when they espied a herd of elk in the distance. Logan proposed chase, they started, that was the last seen of him alive. The same moment the village was surrounded by the Sioux. About ten o'clock in the morning a battle ensued and lasted until three o'clock, when they found out Logan was killed. His body was found and brought into Bellevue and buried by the side of his father. He had the advantage of a limited education and saw the advantage of it. He made it a study to promote the welfare of his people and to bring them out of their wretchedness, poverty, and ignorance. His first step to that end was to organize a parole of picked men and punish all that came home intoxicated with bad whisky. His effort to stop whisky drinking was successful. It was his intention as soon as the Omahas were settled in their new home to ask the government to establish ample schools among them, to educate the children of the tribe by force if they would not send the children by reasonable persuasion. His calculations for the benefit of the tribe were many, but, like many other human calculations, his life suddenly ended in the prime, and just as he was ready to benefit his people and sacrifice a life's labor for helpless humanity. After Logan was killed the Omahas went to Bellevue instead of coming back to the reservation whence they started, and wintered along the Missouri river between Calhoun and the reservation, some of them at Bellevue. In the spring of 1856 they again went back to their reservation, where they have been since."

Between the years 1822 and 1826 J. P. Cabanne established a post for the American Fur Company at a point nine or ten miles above the later site of the Union Pacific bridge at Omaha. It is probable that Joshua Pilcher succeeded Cabanne in the management of the post in 1833, and between that year and 1840 it was moved down to Bellevue and placed under the management of Peter A. Sarpy. Pilcher succeeded General Clark, of the Lewis and Clark expedition, as superintendent of Indian affairs at St. Louis in 1838. Rev. Samuel Allis, a missionary to the Pawnee Indians and who was frequently at Bellevue, as early as 1834 and thereafter, states that in the year named his party camped at the fur company's fort, and that Major Pilcher was in charge of the post; also that soon after Peter A. Sarpy came into that part of the country he was clerk for Cabanne. Chittenden says that "Fontenelle and Drips apparently bought Pilcher's post and established it in their own name which it retained for many years." Thus both the Missouri Fur Company's post

and the American Fur Company's post appear to have been transferred to Bellevue, the one from Fort Lisa and the other from Cabanne's. Rev. Moses Merrill, a Baptist missionary to the Otoe Indians, who came to Bellevue on his mission in the fall of 1833, speaks in his diary of visiting Cabanne's post as late as April 1, 1839, so that it could not have been removed to Bellevue before that time; and Mr. Merrill, whose diary comes down to August 18, 1839, makes no mention of the removal. In this diary Mr. Merrill frequently speaks of riding from Bellevue to "the trading post," eighteen miles, which was in charge of Major Pilcher, and evidently the old Cabanne post. On the 7th of March, 1834, Merrill makes the following entry in his diary: "Sublette and Campbell have established a trading post here in opposition to the American Company." On the 10th of May, 1834, he records that he set out from the trading post eighteen miles above Bellevue, which must have been Cabanne's, to the Otoe village, which he says was twenty-five miles distant. After Mr. Merrill had established himself at the Otoe mission house on the south side of the Platte he records, May 30, 1836, that he rode to Cabanne's post, thirty miles. Mr. Merrill repeatedly states that he and the women who assisted him in his mission work went backwards and forwards daily between the mission house and the Otoe village, so that they could have been only a short distance apart. The permanent Otoe villages were on the west side of the Platte river about forty miles from its mouth, not far from the present village of Yutan. The Merrill mission establishment was about eight miles above the mouth of the Platte where a chimney still marks its site. Merrill's diary tells us in a vague way that the Otoe villages were moved down the Platte from the site in question during the summer of 1835. Merrill gives the distances from the trading post to the villages and to the mission as the same, showing that they were very near together; and his diary gives other ample evidence of that fact. Allis says that Merrill's establishment was on the Platte, six miles from Bellevue.

In a paper by Rev. S. P. Merrill, the missionary's son, the following statement is made: "A few miles above Bellevue, just below Boyer's creek, was the trading post of Cabanne. This post was sold about this time to a fur company, and in 1834 was occupied by Major Pilcher." This agrees with another statement that Pilcher succeeded Cabanne as manager of the post in 1833. Mr. Merrill states also that at Bellevue was a government agency for the Otoes, Pawnees, Omahas, and Missouris. "Bellevue," he says, "was at first a trading post of the Missouri Fur Company. They had sold out to M. Fontenelle, and he had disposed of a part of his holdings to the government. Here Maj. John Dougherty was government agent and Major Beauchamp was assistant. There were here now but few men. During the summer before, the cholera had carried off seven out of ten men in twenty-four hours. On the bank of the river were the poorer huts, while higher up were the agency buildings. A quarter of a mile below were the buildings of Fontenelle." Mr. Merrill says that under Major Dougherty were "his brother, Hannibal, assistant, a teacher, an assistant teacher, two blacksmiths to care for the farming tools, and one or two farmers to teach the Indians how to make their crops." The missionary, Rev. Moses Merrill, unfortunately for the cause of accurate history, was an almost morbid religious devotee, and his diary is so largely given up to recording his devotions and varying religious moods as to leave too little room for intelligible historical data.

P. A. Sarpy, born 1804, was a son of Gregoire Berald and Pelagie (Labadie) Sarpy. His father is said to have been the first man to attempt the navigation of the Missouri river in a keel boat. But little is known of his early life except that he was of French extraction and was educated in St. Louis where his relatives, the Chouteaus and others, occupied high social position. His elder brother, John B. Sarpy, was an important factor in the fur trade and the general commercial life of St. Louis. He was born in that city, January 12, 1798, and was first employed as a clerk for Berthold and Chouteau, with whom he was associated in business for the balance of his life. His first wife was the eldest daughter of John P. Cabanne, whom he married September 14, 1820. She died March 24, 1832, leaving one daughter. Mr. Sarpy was again married April 14, 1835, to Martha Russell. She died in 1845, in New Orleans, leaving a son and daughter.