

## INCIDENTS OF WESTERN HISTORY.

## VI.

## The Eastbound Astorians.

The Overland Astorians, or the party sent across the continent by John Jacob Astor to his proposed colony on the Pacific, after becoming scattered in the mountains of Idaho and Oregon, reached Astoria, their goal, in the early spring of 1812. They spent the rest of the unfavorable season in resting, fishing and making the acquaintance of the natives. As soon as the advance of spring rendered traveling practicable, an attempt was made to send a report back to Mr. Astor by the same route over which they had come. Four men were charged with this undertaking, and they set off upon it on the 22nd of March. They were plundered by the river Indians, however, near the Falls of the Columbia, and the leader of the party, whose name was Reed, nearly lost his life. They therefore returned to Astoria.

The necessity of acquainting Mr. Astor with the doings of the expedition still remained, and a second party accordingly set out on June 29th. The command of this was intrusted to a young Scotchman named Robert Stuart, although he knew nothing of the country, having been one of those who went out by the sea route. The wisdom of the choice was confirmed by the successful outcome of the expedition. Young Stuart piloted his men across in safety, although it took them nearly a year to reach St. Louis. Little is known of his life, but he was afterwards Astor's agent at Mackinaw for a number of years.

His party consisted of six men beside himself, among whom was Ramsay Crooks, later a conspicuous figure in the fur trade. All the others seem to have been members of the first overland party. Two of them were Canadians and two Kentucky hunters. They soon lost one of the latter, however—John Day, whose name is borne by a river of Oregon. He went mad and was sent back downstream under guard of some friendly Indians.

The others went on, made the cut-off from the Columbia to the Snake, followed the latter river up as far as they could and crossed to Bear River; picking up four white men on the road, three of whom were Kentucky trappers. This continual meeting of trappers in that remote wilderness and at that early day, is really a singular thing.

On Bear River they had an Indian fright. To avoid the savages they turned and went 150 miles out of their course to the north. Here, however, they were surprised by a Crow party and robbed of their horses. This catastrophe naturally changed all their plans. It was now October, and they could not hope to pass the mountains in either direction before winter. They

wandered about as if bewildered for some days, making a complete circuit of the Tetons, according to Captain Chittenden, who has traced out their route with extreme patience and skill. After coming down into the valley of Green River, they suffered for lack of food, and the dire expedient of casting lots was proposed by one of the Canadians. Young Stuart, however, as Irving tells us, "shuddered, and snatching up his rifle, threatened to shoot the wretch on the spot;" so they went hungry a while longer. And presently they fell in with a camp of the Snakes, who fed them.

Now let the appreciative Irving tell the story:

"By sunrise on the following morning (October 19th), the travellers had loaded their old horse with buffalo meat, sufficient for five days' provisions, and, taking leave of their new allies, the poor but hospitable Snakes, set forth in somewhat better spirits, though the increasing cold of the weather, and the sight of the snowy mountains which they had yet to traverse, were enough to chill their very hearts. The country along this branch of the Spanish [Green] River, as far as they could see, was perfectly level, bounded by ranges of lofty mountains, both to the east and west. They proceeded about three miles to the south, where they came again upon the large trail of Crow Indians, which they had crossed four days previously. The trail kept on to the southeast, and was so well beaten by horse and foot that they supposed at least a hundred lodges had passed along it. As it formed, therefore, a convenient highway, and ran in a proper direction, they turned into it, and determined to keep along it as far as safety would permit, as the Crow encampment must be some distance off, and it was not likely those savages would return upon their steps. They travelled forward, therefore, all that day, in the track of their dangerous predecessors, which led them across mountain streams and along ridges and through narrow valleys, all tending generally towards the southeast. The wind blew coldly from the northeast, with occasional flurries of snow, which made them encamp early, on the sheltered banks of a brook. The two Canadians, Vallee and Le Clerc, killed a young buffalo bull in the evening, which was in good condition, and afforded them a plentiful supply of fresh beef. They loaded their spits, therefore, and crammed their camp kettle with meat, and while the wind whistled and the snow whirled around them, huddled round a rousing fire, basked in its warmth, and comforted both soul and body with a hearty and invigorating meal. No enjoyments have greater zest than these, snatched in the very midst of difficulty and danger; and it is probable the poor way-

worn and weather-beaten travellers relished these creature comforts the more highly from the surrounding desolation, and the dangerous proximity of the Crows.

"The snow which had fallen in the night made it late in the morning before the party loaded their solitary pack-horse and resumed their march. They had not gone far before the Crow trace which they were following changed its direction, and bore to the north of east. They had already begun to feel themselves on dangerous ground in keeping along it, as they might be descried by some scouts and spies of that race of Ishmaelites, whose predatory life required them to be constantly on the alert. On seeing the trace turn so much to the north, therefore, they abandoned it, and kept on their course to the southeast for eighteen miles, through a beautifully undulating country, having the main chain of mountains on the left, and a considerably elevated ridge on the right."

This unfortunate move, Captain Chittenden says, deprived Stuart of the honor of "discovering" the South Pass. This later famous crossing place of the mountains was undoubtedly a prehistoric highway of the Indians, and this Crow trail would have led them down to the Sweetwater by the road afterward traveled by so many thousands of emigrants.

"This evening they encamped on the banks of a small stream, in the open prairie. The northeast wind was keen and cutting; they had nothing wherewith to make a fire, but a scanty growth of sage, or wormwood, and were fain to wrap themselves up in their blankets and huddle themselves in their 'nests' at an early hour. In the course of the evening, Mr. M'Lellan, who had now regained his strength, killed a buffalo, but it was some distance from the camp, and they postponed supplying themselves from the carcass until the following morning.

"The next day (October 21st) the cold continued, accompanied by snow. They set forward on their bleak and toilsome way, keeping to the east-northeast towards the lofty summit of a mountain, which it was necessary for them to cross. Before they reached its base they passed another large trail, steering a little to the right of the point of the mountain. This they presumed to have been made by another band of Crows, who had probably been hunting lower down on the Spanish River.

"The severity of the weather compelled them to encamp at the end of fifteen miles, on the skirts of the mountain, where they found sufficient dry aspen trees to supply them with fire, but they sought in vain about the neighborhood for a spring or rill of water.

"At daybreak they were up and on the march, scrambling up the mountain