

Exploring Narrative

*A Report On An Exploration of The Country
Lying Between The Missouri River And The Rocky Mountains,
On The Line of The
Kansas and Great Platte Rivers.*

Brevet Capt. J. C. Fremont

1848

WASHINGTON, March 1, 1843.

To Colonel J. J. Abert, *Chief of the Corps of Top. Eng.*:

SIR : Agreeably to your orders 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, I set out from Washington city on the 2d day of May, 1842, and arrived at St. Louis by way of New York, the 22d of May, where the necessary preparations were completed, and the expedition commenced. I proceeded in a steamboat to Chouteau's landing, about four hundred miles by water from St. Louis, and near the mouth of the Kansas river, whence we proceeded twelve miles to Mr. Cyprian Chouteau's trading-house, where we completed our final arrangements for the expedition.

Bad weather, which interfered with astronomical observations, delayed us several days in the early part of June at this post, which is on the right bank of the Kansas river, about ten miles above the mouth, and six beyond the western boundary of Missouri. The sky cleared off at length, and we were enabled to determine our position, in longitude $90^{\circ} 25' 46''$, and latitude $39^{\circ} 5' 57''$. The elevation above the sea is about 700 feet. Our camp, in the mean time, presented an animated and bustling scene. All were busily engaged in completing the necessary arrangements for our campaign in the wilderness, and profiting by this short stay on the verge of civilization, to provide ourselves with all the little essentials to comfort in the nomadic life we were to lead for the ensuing summer months. Gradually, however, every thing—the *materiel* of the camp—men, horses, and even mules—settled into its place ; and by the 10th we were ready to depart ; but, before we mount our horses, I will give a short description of the party with which I performed the service,

I had collected in the neighborhood of St. Louis twenty-one men, principally Creole and Canadian *voyageurs*, who had become familiar with prairie life in the service of the fur companies in the Indian country. Mr. Charles Preuss, a native of Germany, was my assistant in the topographical part of the survey ; L. Maxwell, of Kaskaskia, had been engaged as hunter, and Christopher Carson (more familiarly known, for his exploits in the mountains, as Kit Carson) was our guide. The persons engaged in St. Louis were :

Clement Lambert, J. B. L'Esperance, J. B. Lefevre, Benjamin Potra, Louis Gouin, J. B. Dumes, Basil Lajeunesse, François Tessier, Benjamin Cadotte, Joseph Clement, Daniel Simonds, Leonard Benoit, Michel Morly, Baptiste Bernier, Honore Ayot, Francois La Tulipe, Francis Badeau, Louis Menard, Joseph Ruelle, Moise Chardonnois, Auguste Janisse, Raphael Proue.

In addition to these, Henry Brant, son of Col. J. B. Brant, of St. Louis, a young man of nineteen years of age, and Randolph, a lively boy of twelve, son of the Hon. Thomas H. Benton, accompanied me, for the development of mind and body such an expedition would give. We were well armed and mounted, with the exception of eight men, who conducted as

many carts, in which were packed our stores, with the baggage and instruments, and which were drawn by two mules. A few loose horses, and four oxen, which had been added to our stock of provisions, completed the train. We set out on the morning of the 10th, which happened to be Friday, a circumstance which our men did not fail to remember and recall during the hardships and vexations of the ensuing journey. Mr. Cyprian Chouteau, to whose kindness, during our stay at his house, we were much indebted, accompanied us several miles on our way, until we met an Indian, whom he had engaged to conduct us on the first thirty or forty miles, where he was to consign us to the ocean of prairie, which, we were told, stretched without interruption almost to the base of the Rocky Mountains.

From the belt of wood which borders the Kansas, in which we had passed several good-looking Indian farms, we suddenly emerged on the prairies, which received us at the outset with some of their striking characteristics ; for here and there rode an Indian, and but a few miles distant heavy clouds of smoke were rolling before the fire. In about ten miles we reached the Santa Fé road, along which we continued for a short time, and encamped early on a small stream—having traveled about eleven miles. During our journey, it was the customary practice to encamp an hour or two before sunset, when the carts were disposed so as to form a sort of barricade around a circle some eighty yards in diameter. The tents were pitched, and the horses hobbled and turned loose to graze ; and but a few minutes elapsed before the cooks of the messes, of which there were four, were busily engaged in preparing the evening meal. At nightfall, the horses, mules, and oxen were driven in and picketed,—that is, secured by a halter, of which one end was tied to a small steel-shod picket, and driven into the ground ; the halter being twenty or thirty feet long, which enabled them to obtain a little food during the night. When we had reached a part of the country where such a precaution became necessary, the carts being regularly arranged for defending the camp, guard was mounted at eight o'clock, consisting of three men, who were relieved every two hours—the morning-watch being horse-guard for the day. At daybreak the camp was roused, the animals turned loose to graze, and breakfast generally over between six and seven o'clock, when we resumed our march, making regularly a halt at noon for one or two hours. Such was usually the order of the day, except when accident of country forced a variation ; which, however, happened but rarely. We traveled the next day along the Santa Fé road, which we left in the afternoon, and encamped late in the evening on a small creek, called by the Indians, Mishmagwi. Just as we arrived at camp, one of the horses set off at full speed on his return, and was followed by others. Several men were sent in pursuit, and returned with the fugitives about midnight, with the exception of one man, who did not make his appearance until morning. He had lost his way in the darkness of the night, and slept on the prairie. Shortly after midnight it began to rain heavily, and, as our tents were of light and thin cloth, they offered but little obstruction to the rain : we were all well soaked, and glad when morning came. We had a rainy march on the 12th, but the weather grew fine as the day advanced. We encamped in a remarkably beautiful situation on the Kansas bluffs, which commanded a fine view of the river valley, here from four to five miles wide. The central portion was occupied by a broad belt of heavy timber, and nearer the hills the prairies were of the richest verdure. One of the oxen was killed here for food.

We reached the ford of the Kansas late in the afternoon of the 14th, where the river was two hundred and thirty yards wide, and commenced, immediately, preparations for crossing. I had expected to find the river fordable ; but it had swollen by the late rains, and was sweeping by with an angry current, yellow and turbid as the Missouri. Up to this point the road we had traveled was a remarkably fine one, well beaten, and level—the usual road of a prairie country. By our route, the ford was one hundred miles from the mouth of the Kansas river. Several mounted men led the way into the stream to swim across. The animals were driven in after them, and in a few minutes all had reached the opposite bank in safety, with the exception of the oxen, which swam some distance down the river, and, returning to the right bank,

were not got over till the next morning. In the mean time, the carts had been unloaded and dismantled, and an India-rubber boat, which I had brought with me for the survey of the Platte river, placed in the water. The boat was twenty feet long and five broad, and on it were placed the body and wheels of a cart, with the load belonging to it, and three men with paddles.

The velocity of the current, and the inconvenient freight, rendering it difficult to be managed, Basil Lajeunesse, one of our best swimmers, took in his teeth a line attached to the boat, and swam ahead in order to reach a footing as soon as possible, and assist in drawing her over. In this manner six passages had been successfully made, and as many carts with their contents, and a greater portion of the party, deposited on the left bank ; but night was drawing near, and, in our anxiety to have all over before the darkness closed in, I put upon the boat the remaining two carts, with their accompanying load. The man at the helm was timid on water, and in his alarm capsized the boat. Carts, barrels, boxes, and bales, were in a moment floating down the current ; but all the men who were on the shore jumped into the water, without stopping to think if they could swim, and almost every thing—even heavy articles, such as guns and lead—was recovered.

Two of the men who could not swim came nigh being drowned, and all the sugar belonging to one of the messes wasted its sweets on the muddy waters ; but our heaviest loss was a large bag of coffee, which contained nearly all our provision. It was a loss which none but a traveler in a strange and inhospitable country can appreciate ; and often afterward, when excessive toil and long marching had overcome us with fatigue and weariness, we remembered and mourned over our loss in the Kansas. Carson and Maxwell had been much in the water yesterday, and both, in consequence, were taken ill. The former continuing so, I remained in camp. A number of Kansas Indians visited us to-day. Going up to one of the groups who were scattered among the trees, I found one sitting on the ground, among some of the men, gravely and fluently speaking French, with as much facility and as little embarrassment as any of my own party, who were nearly all of French origin.

On all sides was heard the strange language of his own people, wild, and harmonizing well with their appearance. I listened to him for some time with feelings of strange curiosity and interest. He was now apparently thirty-five years of age ; and, on inquiry, I learned that he had been at St. Louis when a boy, and there had learned the French language. From one of the Indian women I obtained a fine cow and calf in exchange for a yoke of oxen. Several of them brought us vegetables, pumpkins, onions, beans, and lettuce. One of them brought butter, and from a half-breed near the river, I had the good fortune to obtain some twenty or thirty pounds of coffee. The dense timber in which we had encamped interfered with astronomical observations, and our wet and damaged stores required exposure to the sun. Accordingly, the tents were struck early the next morning, and, leaving camp at six o'clock, we moved about seven miles up the river, to a handsome, open prairie, some twenty feet above the water, where the fine grass afforded a luxurious repast to our horses.

During the day we occupied ourselves in making astronomical observations, in order to lay down the country to this place ; it being our custom to keep up our map regularly in the field, which we found attended with many advantages. The men were kept busy in drying the provisions, painting the cart covers, and otherwise completing our equipage, until the afternoon, when powder was distributed to them, and they spent some hours in firing at a mark. We were now fairly in the Indian country, and it began to be time to prepare for the chances of the wilderness.

17th.—The weather yesterday had not permitted us to make the observations I was desirous to obtain here, and I therefore did not move to-day. The people continued their target

firing. In the steep bank of the river here, were nests of innumerable swallows, into one of which a large prairie snake had got about half his body, and was occupied in eating the young birds. The old ones were flying about in great distress, darting at him, and vainly endeavoring to drive him off. A shot wounded him, and, being killed, he was cut open, and eighteen young swallows were found in his body. A sudden storm, that burst upon us in the afternoon, cleared away in a brilliant sunset, followed by a clear night, which enabled us to determine our position in longitude $95^{\circ} 38' 05''$, and in latitude $39^{\circ} 06' 40''$.

A party of emigrants to the Columbia river, under the charge of Dr. White, an agent of the government in Oregon Territory, were about three weeks in advance of us. They consisted of men, women, and children. There were sixty-four men, and sixteen or seventeen families. They had a considerable number of cattle, and were transporting their household furniture in large, heavy wagons. I understood that there had been much sickness among them, and that they had lost several children. One of the party who had lost his child, and whose wife was very ill, had left them about one hundred miles hence on the prairies ; and as a hunter, who had accompanied them, visited our camp this evening, we availed ourselves of his return to the States to write to our friends.

The morning of the 18th was very unpleasant. A fine rain was falling, with cold wind from the north, and mists made the river hills look dark and gloomy. We left our camp at seven, journeying along the foot of the hills which border the Kansas valley, generally about three miles wide, and extremely rich. We halted for dinner, after a march of about thirteen miles, on the banks of one of the many little tributaries to the Kansas, which look like trenches in the prairie, and are usually well timbered. After crossing this stream, I rode off some miles to the left, attracted by the appearance of a cluster of huts near the mouth of the Vermilion. It was a large but deserted Kansas village, scattered in an open wood, along the margin of the stream, chosen with the customary Indian fondness for beauty of scenery. The Pawnees had attacked it in the early spring. Some of the houses were burnt, and others blackened with smoke, and weeds were already getting possession of the cleared places. Riding up the Vermilion river, I reached the ford in time to meet the carts, and, crossing, encamped on its western side. The weather continued cold, the thermometer being this evening as low as 49° ; but the night was sufficiently clear for astronomical observations, which placed us in longitude $96^{\circ} 04' 07''$, and latitude $39^{\circ} 15' 19''$. At sunset, the barometer was at 28.845, thermometer 64° .

We breakfasted the next morning at half-past five, and left our encampment early. The morning was cool, the thermometer being at 45° . Quitting the river bottom, the road ran along the uplands, over a rolling country, generally in view of the Kansas from eight to twelve miles distant. Many large boulders, of a very compact sandstone, of various shades of red, some of them of four or five tons in weight, were scattered along the hills ; and many beautiful plants in flower, among which the *amorpha canescens* was a characteristic, enlivened the green of the prairie. At the heads of the ravines I remarked, occasionally, thickets of *saix longifolia*, the most common willow of the country. We traveled nineteen miles and pitched our tents at evening on the head-waters of a small creek, now nearly dry, but having in its bed several fine springs. The barometer indicated a considerable rise in the country—here about fourteen hundred feet above the sea—and the increased elevation appeared already to have some slight influence upon vegetation. The night was cold, with a heavy dew ; the thermometer at 10 p. m. standing at 46° , barometer 28.483. Our position was in longitude $96^{\circ} 14' 49''$, and latitude $39^{\circ} 30' 40''$.

The morning of the 20th was fine, with a southerly breeze and a bright sky ; and at seven o'clock we were on the march. The country to-day was rather more broken, rising still, and covered everywhere with fragments of silicious limestone, particularly on the summits, where they were small, and thickly strewed as pebbles on the shore of the sea. In these exposed

situations grew but few plants ; though, whenever the soil was good and protected from the winds, in the creek bottoms and ravines, and on the slopes, they flourished abundantly ; among them the *amorpha*, still retaining its characteristic place. We crossed, at 10 A. M., the Big Vermilion, which has a rich bottom of about one mile in breadth, one-third of which is occupied by timber. Making our usual halt at noon. after a day's march of twenty-four miles, we reached the Big Blue, and encamped on the uplands of the western side, near a small creek, where was a fine large spring of very cold water. This is a clear and handsome stream, about one hundred and twenty feet wide, running with a rapid current, through a well-timbered valley. To-day antelope were seen running over the hills, and at evening Carson brought us a fine deer. Longitude of the camp $96^{\circ} 32' 35''$, latitude $39^{\circ} 45' 08''$. Thermometer at sunset 75° . A pleasant southerly breeze and fine morning had given place to a gale, with indications of bad weather ; when, after a march of ten miles, we halted to noon on a small creek, where the water stood in deep pools. In the bank of the creek limestone made its appearance in a stratum about one foot thick. In the afternoon, the people seemed to suffer for want of water. The road led along a high dry ridge ; dark lines of timber indicated the heads of streams in the plains below ; but there was no water near, and the day was oppressive, with a hot wind, and the thermometer at 90° . Along our route the *amorpha* has been in very abundant but variable bloom—in some places bending beneath the weight of purple clusters ; in others without a flower. It seemed to love best the sunny slopes, with a dark soil and southern exposure. Everywhere the rose is met with, and reminds us of cultivated gardens and civilization. It is scattered over the prairies in small bouquets, and, when glittering in the dews and waving in the pleasant breeze of the early morning, is the most beautiful of the prairie flowers. The *artemisia*, absinthe, or prairie sage, as it is variously called, is increasing in size, and glittering like silver, as the southern breeze turns up its leaves to the sun. All these plants have their insect inhabitants, variously colored—taking generally the hue of the flower on which they live. The *artemisia* has its small fly accompanying it through every change of elevation and latitude ; and wherever I have seen the *asclepias tuberosa*, I have always remarked, too, on the flower a large butterfly, so nearly resembling it in color as to be distinguishable at a little distance only by the motion of its wings. Traveling on, the fresh traces of the Oregon emigrants relieve a little the loneliness of the road ; and to-night, after a march of twenty-two miles, we halted on a small creek which had been one of their encampments. As we advanced westward, the soil appears to be getting more sandy ; and the surface rock, an erratic deposite of sand and gravel, rests here on a bed of coarse yellow and gray and very friable sandstone. Evening closed over with rain and its usual attendant hordes of mosquitoes, with which we were annoyed for the first time.

22d.—We enjoyed at breakfast this morning a luxury, very unusual in this country, in a cup of excellent coffee, with cream from our cow. Being milked at night, cream was thus had in the morning. Our mid-day halt was at Wyeth's creek, in the bed of which were numerous boulders of dark, ferruginous sandstone, mingled with others of the red sandstone already mentioned. Here a pack of cards, lying loose on the grass, marked an encampment of our Oregon emigrants ; and it was at the close of the day when we made our bivouac in the midst of some well-timbered ravines near the Little Blue, twenty-four miles from our camp of the preceding night. Crossing the next morning a number of handsome creeks, with water clear and sandy beds, we reached, at 10 A.M., a very beautiful wooded stream, about thirty-five feet wide, called Sandy creek, and sometimes, as the Ottoes frequently winter there, the Otto fork. The country has become very sandy, and the plants less varied and abundant, with the exception of the *amorpha*, which rivals the grass in quantity, though not so forward as it has been found to the eastward.

At the Big Trees, where we had intended to noon, no water was to be found. The bed of the little creek was perfectly dry, and, on the adjacent sandy bottom, *cacti*, for the first time,

made their appearance. We made here a short delay in search of water ; and, after a hard day's march of twenty-eight miles, encamped, at 5 o'clock, on the Little Blue, where our arrival made a scene of the Arabian desert. As fast as they arrived, men and horses rushed into the stream, where they bathed and drank together in common enjoyment. We were now in the range of the Pawnees, who were accustomed to infest this part of the country, stealing horses from companies on their way to the mountains ; and, when in sufficient force, openly attacking and plundering them, and subjecting them to various kinds of insult. For the first time, therefore, guard was mounted to-night. Our route the next morning lay up the valley, which, bordered by hills with graceful slopes, looked uncommonly green and beautiful. The stream was about fifty feet wide, and three or four deep, fringed by cotton-wood and willow, with frequent groves of oak, tenanted by flocks of turkeys. Game here, too, made its appearance in greater plenty. Elk were frequently seen on the hills, and now and then an antelope bounded across our path, or a deer broke from the groves. The road in the afternoon was over the upper prairies, several miles from the river, and we encamped at sunset on one of its small tributaries, where an abundance of prele (*equisetum*) afforded fine forage to our tired animals. We had traveled thirty-one miles. A heavy bank of black clouds in the west came on us in a storm between nine and ten, preceded by a violent wind. The rain fell in such torrents that it was difficult to breathe facing the wind ; the thunder rolled incessantly, and the whole sky was tremulous with lightning—now and then illuminated by a blinding flash, succeeded by pitchy darkness. Carson had the watch from ten to midnight, and to him had been assigned our young *compagnons de voyage*, Messrs. Brant and R. Benton. This was their first night on guard, and such an introduction did not augur very auspiciously of the pleasures of the expedition. Many things conspired to render their situation uncomfortable ; stories of desperate and bloody Indian fights were rife in the camp ; our position was badly chosen, surrounded on all sides by timbered hollows, and occupying an area of several hundred feet, so that necessarily the guards were far apart ; and now and then I could hear Randolph, as if relieved by the sound of a voice in the darkness, calling out to the sergeant of the guard, to direct his attention to some imaginary alarm ; but they stood it out, and took their turn regularly afterwards.

The next morning we had a specimen of the false alarms to which all parties in these wild regions are subject. Proceeding up the valley, objects were seen on the opposite hills, which disappeared before a glass could be brought to bear upon them. A man who was a short distance in the rear, came springing up in great haste, shouting “ Indians ! Indians ! ” He had been near enough to see and count them, according to his report, and had made out twenty-seven. I immediately halted ; arms were examined and put in order ; the usual preparations made ; and Kit Carson, springing upon one of the hunting horses, crossed the river, and galloped off into the opposite prairies, to obtain some certain intelligence of their movements.

Mounted on a fine horse, without a saddle, and scouring bare-headed over the prairies, Kit was one of the finest pictures of a horseman I have ever seen. A short time enabled him to discover that the Indian war-party of twenty-seven consisted of six elk, who had been gazing curiously at our caravan as it passed by, and were now scampering off at full speed. This was our first alarm, and its excitement broke agreeably on the monotony of the day. At our noon halt, the men were exercised at a target ; and in the evening we pitched our tents at a Pawnee encampment of last July. They had apparently killed buffalo here, as many bones were lying about, and the frames where the hides had been stretched were yet standing. The road of the day had kept the valley, which is sometimes rich and well timbered, though the country generally is sandy. Mingled with the usual plants, a thistle (*carduus leucographus*) had for the last day or two made its appearance ; and along the river bottom, *tradescantia* (*virginica*) and milk plant (*asclepias syriaca* [1]) in considerable quantities.

Our march to-day had been twenty-one miles, and the astronomical observations gave us a chronometric longitude of 98° 22' 12", and latitude 40° 26' 50" We were moving forward at

seven in the morning, and in about five miles reached a fork of the Blue, where the road leaves that river, and crosses over to the Platte. No water was to be found on the dividing ridge, and the casks were filled, and the animals here allowed a short repose. The road led across a high and level prairie ridge, where were but few plants, and those principally thistle, (*carduus leucographus*,) and a kind of dwarf artemisia. Antelope were seen frequently during the morning, which was very stormy. Squalls of rain, with thunder and lightning, were around us in every direction ; and while we were enveloped in one of them, a flash, which seemed to scorch our eyes as it passed, struck in the prairie within a few hundred feet, sending up a column of dust.

Crossing on the way several Pawnee roads to the Arkansas, we reached, in about twenty-one miles from our halt on the Blue, what is called the coast of the Nebraska, or Platte river. This had seemed in the distance a range of high and broken hills ; but on a nearer approach was found to be elevations of forty to sixty feet into which the wind had worked the sand. They were covered with the usual fine grasses of the country, and bordered the eastern side of the ridge on a breadth of about two miles. Change of soil and country appeared here to have produced some change in the vegetation. *Cacti* were numerous, and all the plants of the region appeared to flourish among the warm hills. Among them the *amorpha*, in full bloom, was remarkable for its large and luxuriant purple clusters. From the foot of the coast, a distance of two miles across the level bottom brought us to our encampment on the shore of the river, about twenty miles below the head of Grand Island, which lay extended before us, covered with dense and heavy woods. From the mouth of the Kansas, according to our reckoning, we had traveled three hundred and twenty-eight miles ; and the geological formation of the country we had passed over consisted of lime and sand stone, covered by the same erratic deposit of sand and gravel which forms the surface rock of the prairies between the Missouri and Mississippi rivers. Except in some occasional limestone boulders, I had met with no fossils. The elevation of the Platte valley above the sea is here about two thousand feet. The astronomical observations of the night placed us in longitude $98^{\circ} 45' 49''$, latitude $40^{\circ} 41' 06''$.

27th.—The animals were somewhat fatigued by their march of yesterday, and, after a short journey of eighteen miles along the river bottom, I encamped near the head of Grand Island, in longitude, by observation, $99^{\circ} 05' 24''$, latitude $40^{\circ} 39' 32''$. The soil was here light but rich, though in some places rather sandy ; and, with the exception of scattered fringe along the bank, the timber, consisting principally of poplar, (*populus monilifera*,) elm, and hackberry, (*celtis crassifolia*,) is confined almost entirely to the islands.

28th.—We halted to noon at an open reach of the river, which occupies rather more than a fourth of the valley, here only about four miles broad. The camp had been disposed with the usual precaution, the horses grazing at a little distance, attended by the guard, and we were all sitting quietly at our dinner on the grass, when suddenly we heard the startling cry, “ Du monde !” In an instant, every man’s weapon was in his hand, the horses were driven in, hobbled and picketed, and horsemen were galloping at full speed in the direction of the newcomers, screaming and yelling with the wildest excitement. “ Get ready, my lads !” said the leader of the approaching party to his men, when our wild-looking horsemen were discovered bearing down upon them—“ nous aliens attraper des coups de baguette.” They proved to be a small party of fourteen, under the charge of a man named John Lee, and, with their baggage and provisions strapped to their backs, were making their way on foot to the frontier. A brief account of their fortunes will give some idea of navigation in the Nebraska. Sixty days since, they had left the mouth of Laramie’s fork, some three hundred miles above, in barges laden with the furs of the American Fur Company. They started with the annual flood, and, drawing but nine inches water, hoped to make a speedy and prosperous voyage to St. Louis ; but, after a lapse of forty days, found themselves only one hundred and thirty miles from their point of

departure. They came down rapidly as far as Scott's bluffs, where their difficulties began. Sometimes they came upon places where the water was spread over a great extent, and here they toiled from morning until night, endeavoring to drag their boat through the sands, making only two or three miles in as many days. Sometimes they would enter an arm of the river, where there appeared a fine channel, and, after descending prosperously for eight or ten miles, would come suddenly upon dry sands, and be compelled to return, dragging their boat for days against the rapid current ; and at others, they came upon places where the water lay in holes, and, getting out to float off their boat, would fall into water up to their necks, and the next moment tumble over against a sandbar. Discouraged at length, and finding the Platte growing every day more shallow, they discharged the principal part of their cargoes one hundred and thirty miles below Fort Laramie, which they secured as well as possible, and, leaving a few men to guard them, attempted to continue their voyage, laden with some light furs and their personal baggage. After fifteen or twenty days more struggling in the sands, during which they made but one hundred and forty miles, they sunk their barges, made a cache of their remaining furs and property in trees on the bank, and, packing on his back what each man could carry, had commenced, the day before we encountered them, their journey on foot to St. Louis. We laughed then at their forlorn and vagabond appearance, and, in our turn, a month or two afterwards, furnished the same occasion for merriment to others. Even their stock of tobacco, that *sine qua non* of a voyageur, without which the night fire is gloomy, was entirely exhausted. However, we shortened their homeward journey by a small supply from our own provision. They gave us the welcome intelligence that the buffalo were abundant some two days' march in advance, and made us a present of some choice pieces, which were a very acceptable change from our salt pork. In the interchange of news, and the renewal of old acquaintanceships, we found wherewithal to fill a busy hour ; then we mounted our horses and they shouldered their packs, and we shook hands and parted. Among them, I had found an old companion on the northern prairie, a hardened and hardly served veteran of the mountains, who had been as much hacked and scarred as an old moustache of Napoleon's " old guard." He flourished in the sobriquet of La Tulipe, and his real name I never knew. Finding that he was going to the States only because his company was bound in that direction, and that he was rather more willing to return with me, I took him again into my service. We traveled this day but seventeen miles.

At our evening camp, about sunset, three figures were discovered approaching, which our glasses made out to be Indians. They proved to be Cheyennes—two men, and a boy of thirteen. About a month since, they had left their people on the south fork of the river, some three hundred miles to the westward, and a party of only four in number had been to the Pawnee villages on a horse-stealing excursion, from which they were returning unsuccessful. They were miserably mounted on wild horses from the Arkansas plains, and had no other weapons than bows and long spears ; and had they been discovered by the Pawnees, could not, by any possibility, have escaped. They were mortified by their ill-success, and said the Pawnees were cowards, who shut up their horses in their lodges at night. I invited them to supper with me, and Randolph and the young Cheyenne, who had been eyeing each other suspiciously and curiously, soon became intimate friends. After supper we sat down on the grass, and I placed a sheet of paper between us, on which they traced, rudely, but with a certain degree of relative truth, the water-courses of the country which lay between us and their villages, and of which I desired to have some information. Their companions, they told us, had taken a nearer route over the hills ; but they had mounted one of the summits to spy out the country, whence they had caught a glimpse of our party, and, confident of good treatment at the hands of the whites, hastened to join company. Latitude of the camp 40° 39' 51".

We made the next morning sixteen miles. I remarked that the ground was covered in many places with an efflorescence of salt, and the plants were not numerous. In the bottoms were frequently seen tradescantia, and on the dry lenches were carduus, cactus, and amorpha. A

high wind during the morning had increased to a violent gale from the northwest, which made our afternoon ride cold and unpleasant. We had the welcome sight of two buffaloes on one of the large islands, and encamped at a clump of timber about seven miles from our noon halt, after a day's march of twenty-two miles.

The air was keen the next morning at sunrise, the thermometer standing at 44°, and it was sufficiently cold to make overcoats very comfortable. A few miles brought us into the midst of the buffalo, swarming in immense numbers over the plains, where they had left scarcely a blade of grass standing. Mr. Preuss, who was sketching at a little distance in the rear, had at first noted them as large groves of timber. In the sight of such a mass of life, the traveler feels a strange emotion of grandeur. We had heard from a distance a dull and confused murmuring, and, when we came in view of their dark masses, there was not one among us who did not feel his heart beat quicker. It was the early part of the day, when the herds are feeding ; and everywhere they were in motion. Here and there a huge old bull was rolling in the grass, and clouds of dust rose in the air from various parts of the bands, each the scene of some obstinate fight. Indians and buffalo make the poetry and life of the prairie, and our camp was full of their exhilaration. In place of the quiet monotony of the march, relieved only by the cracking of the whip, and an " *avance donc ! enfant de garce !*" shouts and songs resounded from every part of the line, and our evening camp was always the commencement of a feast, which terminated only with our departure on the following morning. At any time of the night might be seen pieces of the most delicate and choicest meat, roasting *en appolas*, on sticks around the fire, and the guard were never without company. With pleasant weather and no enemy to fear, an abundance of the most excellent meat, and no scarcity of bread or tobacco, they were enjoying the oasis of a voyageur's life. Three cows were killed to-day. Kit Carson had shot one, and was continuing the chase in the midst of another herd, when his horse fell headlong, but sprang up and joined the flying band. Though considerably hurt, he had the good fortune to break no bones ; and Maxwell, who was mounted on a fleet hunter, captured the runaway after a hard chase. He was on the point of shooting him, to avoid the loss of his bridle, (a handsomely mounted Spanish one,) when he found that his horse was able to come up with him. Animals are frequently lost in this way ; and it is necessary to keep close watch over them, in the vicinity of the buffalo, in the midst of which they scour off to the plains, and are rarely retaken. One of our mules took a sudden freak into his head, and joined a neighboring band to-day. As we were not in a condition to lose horses, I sent several men in pursuit, and remained in camp, in the hope of recovering him ; but lost the afternoon to no purpose, as we did not see him again. Astronomical observations placed us in longitude 100° 05' 47", latitude 40° 49' 55".

JULY. 1st.—Along our road to-day the prairie bottom was more elevated and dry, and the river hills which border the right side of the river higher, and more broken and picturesque in the outline. The country, too, was better timbered. As we were riding quietly along the bank, a grand herd of buffalo, some seven or eight hundred in number, came crowding up from the river, where they had been to drink, and commenced crossing the plain slowly, eating as they went. The wind was favorable ; the coolness of the morning invited to exercise ; the ground was apparently good, and the distance across the prairie (two or three miles) gave us a fine opportunity to charge them before they could get among the river hills. It was too fine a prospect for a chase to be lost ; and, halting for a few moments, the hunters were brought up and saddled, and Kit Carson, Maxwell, and I, started together. They were now somewhat less than half a mile distant, and we rode easily along until within about three hundred yards, when a sudden agitation, a wavering in the band, and a galloping to and fro of some which were scattered along the skirts, gave us the intimation that we were discovered. We started together at a hand gallop, riding steadily abreast of each other ; and here the interest of the chase became so engrossingly intense, that we were sensible to nothing else. We were now closing upon

them rapidly, and the front of the mass was already in rapid motion for the hills, and in a few seconds the movement had communicated itself to the whole herd.

A crowd of bulls, as usual, brought up the rear, and every now and then some of them faced about, and then dashed on after the band a short distance, and turned and looked again, as if more than half inclined to fight. In a few moments, however, during which we had been quickening our pace, the rout was universal, and we were going over the ground like a hurricane. When at about thirty yards, we gave the usual shout, (the hunter's *pas de charge*,) and broke into the herd. We entered on the side, the mass giving way in every direction in their heedless course. Many of the bulls, less active and fleet than the cows, paying no attention to the ground, and occupied solely with the hunter, were precipitated to the earth with great force, rolling over and over with the violence of the shock, and hardly distinguishable in the dust. We separated on entering, each singling out his game.

My horse was a trained hunter, famous in the West under the name of Proveau ; and, with his eyes flashing and the foam flying from his mouth, sprang on after the cow like a tiger. In a few moments he brought me alongside of her, and rising in the stirrups, I fired at the distance of a yard, the ball entering at the termination of the long hair, and passing near the heart. She fell headlong at the report of the gun ; and, checking my horse, I looked around for my companions. At a little distance. Kit was on the ground, engaged in tying his horse to the horns of a cow he was preparing to cut up. Among the scattered bands, at some distance below, I caught a glimpse of Maxwell ; and while I was looking, a light wreath of smoke curled away from his gun, from which I was too far to hear the report. Nearer, and between me and the hills, towards which they were directing their course, was the body of the herd ; and, giving my horse the rein, we dashed after them. A thick cloud of dust hung upon their rear, which filled my mouth and eyes, and nearly smothered me. In the midst of this I could see nothing, and the buffalo were not distinguishable until within thirty feet. They crowded together more densely still as I came upon them, and rushed along in such a compact body, that I could not obtain an entrance—the horse almost leaping upon them. In a few moments the mass divided to the right and left, the horns clattering with a noise heard above every thing else, and my horse darted into the opening. Five or six bulls charged on us as we dashed along the line, but were left far behind ; and, singling out a cow, I gave her my fire, but struck too high. She gave a tremendous leap, and scoured on swifter than before. I reined up my horse, and the band swept on like a torrent, and left the place quiet and clear. Our chase had led us into dangerous ground. A prairie-dog village, so thickly settled that there were three or four holes in every twenty yards square, occupied the whole bottom for nearly two miles in length. Looking around, I saw only one of the hunters, nearly out of sight, and the long, dark line of our caravan crawling along, three or four miles distant. After a march of twenty-four miles, we encamped at nightfall, one mile and a half above the lower end of Brady's Island. The breadth of this arm of the river was eight hundred and eighty yards, and the water nowhere two feet in depth. The island bears the name of a man killed on this spot some years ago. His party had encamped here, three in company, and one of the number went off to hunt, leaving Brady and his companion together. These two had frequently quarreled, and on the hunter's return he found Brady dead, and was told that he had shot himself accidentally. He was buried here on the bank ; but, as usual, the wolves tore him out, and some human bones that were lying on the ground we supposed were his. Troops of wolves that were hanging on the skirts of the buffalo, kept up an uninterrupted howling during the night, venturing almost into camp. In the morning, they were sitting at a short distance, barking, and impatiently waiting our departure, to fall upon the bones.

2d.—The morning was cool and smoky. Our road led closer to the hills, which here increased in elevation, presenting an outline of conical peaks three hundred to five hundred

feet high. Some timber, apparently pine, grows in the ravines, and streaks of clay or sand whiten their slopes. We crossed, during the morning, a number of hollows, timbered principally with box, elder, (*acer negundo*), poplar, and elm. Brady's Island is well wooded, and all the river along which our road led to-day, may, in general, be called tolerably well timbered. We passed near the encampment of the Oregon emigrants, where they appeared to have reposed several days. A variety of household articles were scattered about, and they had probably disburdened themselves here of many things not absolutely necessary. I had left the usual road before the mid-day halt, and in the afternoon, having sent several men in advance to reconnoitre, marched directly for the mouth of the South fork. On our arrival, the horse-men were sent in and scattered about the river to search for the best fording-places, and the carts followed immediately. The stream is here divided by an island into two channels. The southern is four hundred and fifty feet wide, having eighteen or twenty inches water in the deepest places. With the exception of a few dry bars, the bed of the river is generally quick-sands, in which the carts began to sink rapidly so soon as the mules halted, so that it was necessary to keep them constantly in motion.

The northern channel, two thousand two hundred and fifty feet wide, was somewhat deeper, having frequently three feet water in the numerous small channels, with a bed of coarse gravel. The whole breadth of the Nebraska, immediately below the junction, is five thousand three hundred and fifty feet. All our equipage had reached the left bank safely at six o'clock, having to-day made twenty miles. We encamped at the point of land immediately at the junction of the North and South forks. Between the streams is a low rich prairie ; extending from their confluence eighteen miles westwardly to the bordering hills, where it is five and a half miles wide. It is covered with a luxuriant growth of grass, and along the banks is a slight and scattered fringe of cottonwood and willow. In the buffalo-trails and wallows, I remarked saline efflorescences, to which a rapid evaporation in the great heat of the sun probably contributes, as the soil is entirely unprotected by timber. In the vicinity of these places there was a bluish grass, which the cattle refuse to eat, called by the voyageurs " herbe salée," (salt grass.) The latitude of the junction is $41^{\circ} 04' 47''$, and longitude, by chronometer and lunar distances, $100^{\circ} 49' 43''$. The elevation above the sea is about two thousand seven hundred feet. The hunters came in with a fat cow ; and, as we had labored hard, we enjoyed well a supper of roasted ribs and boudins, the chef-d'œuvre of a prairie cook. Mosquitoes thronged about us this evening ; but, by ten o'clock, when the thermometer had fallen to 47° , they had all disappeared.

3d.—As this was to be a point in our homeward journey, I made a cache (a term used in all this country for what is hidden in the ground) of a barrel of pork. It was impossible to conceal such a proceeding from the sharp eyes of our Cheyenne companions, and I therefore told them to go and see what it was they were burying. They would otherwise have not failed to return and destroy our cache in expectation of some rich booty ; but pork they dislike and never eat. We left our camp at nine, continuing up the South fork, the prairie-bottom affording us a fair road ; but in the long grass we roused myriads of mosquitoes and flies, from which our horses suffered severely. The day was smoky, with a pleasant breeze from the south, and the plains on the opposite side were covered with buffalo. Having traveled twenty-five miles, we encamped at six in the evening ; and the men were sent across the river for wood, as there is none here on the left bank. Our fires were partially made of the *bois de vache*, the dry excrement of the buffalo, which, like that of the camel in the Arabian deserts, furnishes to the traveler a very good substitute for wood, burning like turf. Wolves in great numbers surrounded us during the night, crossing and recrossing from the opposite herds to our camp, and howling and trotting about in the river until morning.

4th.—The morning was very smoky, the sun shining dimly and red, as in thick fog. The camp was roused by a salute at daybreak, and from our scanty store a portion of what our

Indian friends called the “red fire-water” served out to the men. While we were at breakfast, a buffalo-calf broke through the camp, followed by a couple of wolves. In its fright, it had probably mistaken us for a band of buffalo. The wolves were obliged to make a circuit round the camp, so that the calf got a little the start, and strained every nerve to reach a large herd at the foot of the hills, about two miles distant ; but first one and then another, and another wolf joined in the chase, until his pursuers amounted to twenty or thirty, and they ran him down before he could reach his friends. There were a few bulls near the place, and one of them attacked the wolves and tried to rescue him ; but was driven off immediately, and the little animal fell an easy prey, half devoured before he was dead. We watched the chase with the interest always felt for the weak ; and had there been a saddled horse at hand, he would have fared better. Leaving camp, our road soon approached the hills, in which strata of a marl like that of the Chimney rock, hereafter described, made their appearance. It is probably of this rock that the hills on the right bank of the Platte, a little below the junction, are composed, and which are worked by the winds and rains into sharp peaks and cones, giving them, in contrast to the surrounding level region, something of a picturesque appearance. We crossed, this morning, numerous beds of the small creeks which, in the time of rains and melting snow, pour down from the ridge, bringing down with them, always, great quantities of sand and gravel, which have gradually raised their beds four to ten feet above the level of the prairie, which they cross, making each one of them a miniature Po. Raised in this way above the surrounding prairie, without any bank, the long yellow and winding line of their beds resembles a causeway from the hills to the river. Many spots on the prairie are yellow with sunflower, (*helianthus*.)

As we were riding slowly along this afternoon, clouds of dust in the ravines, among the hills to the right, suddenly attracted our attention, and in a few minutes column after column of buffalo came galloping down, making directly to the river. By the time the leading herds had reached the water, the prairie was darkened with the dense masses. Immediately before us, when the bands first came down into the valley, stretched an unbroken line, the head of which was lost among the river hills on the opposite side ; and still they poured down from the ridge on our right. From hill to hill, the prairie bottom was certainly not less than two miles wide ; and, allowing the animals to be ten feet apart, and only ten in a line, there were already eleven thousand in view. Some idea may thus be formed of their number when they had occupied the whole plain. In a short time they surrounded us on every side, extending for several miles in the rear, and forward as far as the eye could reach ; leaving around us, as we advanced, an open space of only two or three hundred yards. This movement of the buffalo indicated to us the presence of Indians on the North fork.

I halted earlier than usual, about forty miles from the junction, and all hands were soon busily engaged in preparing a feast to celebrate the day. The kindness of our friends at St. Louis had provided us with a large supply of excellent preserves and rich fruit-cake ; and when these were added to a macaroni soup, and variously prepared dishes of the choicest buffalo-meat, crowned with a cup of coffee, and enjoyed with prairie appetite, we felt, as we sat in barbaric luxury around our smoking supper on the grass, a greater sensation of enjoyment than the Roman epicure at his perfumed feast. But most of all it seemed to please our Indian friends, who, in the unrestrained enjoyment of the moment, demanded to know if our “medicine-days came often.” No restraint was exercised at the hospitable board, and, to the great delight of his elders, our young Indian lad made himself extremely drunk.

Our encampment was within a few miles of the place where the road crosses to the North fork, and various reasons led me to divide my party at this point. The North fork was the principal object of my survey ; but I was desirous to ascend the South branch, with a view of obtaining some astronomical positions, and determining the mouths of its tributaries as far as

St. Vrain's fort, estimated to be some two hundred miles farther up the river, and near to Long's Peak. There I hoped to obtain some mules, which I found would be necessary to relieve my horses. In a military point of view, I was desirous to form some opinion of the country relative to the establishment of posts on a line connecting the settlements with the south pass of the Rocky Mountains, by way of the Arkansas and the South and Laramie forks of the Platte. Crossing the country northwestwardly from St. Vrain's fort, to the American Company's fort at the mouth of the Laramie, would give me some acquaintance with the affluents which head-in the mountain between the two ; I therefore determined to set out the next morning, accompanied by four men—Maxwell, Bernier, Ayot, and Basil Lajeunesse. Our Cheyennes, whose village lay up this river, also decided to accompany us. The party I left in charge of Clement Lambert, with orders to cross to the North fork ; and at some convenient place, near to the *Coulée des Frenes*, make a cache of every thing not absolutely necessary to the further progress of our expedition. From this point, using the most guarded precaution in his march through the country, he was to proceed to the American Company's fort at the mouth of the Laramie's fork, and await my arrival, which would be prior to the 16th, as on that and the following night would occur some occultations which I was desirous to, obtain at that place.

5th.—Before breakfast all was ready. We had one led horse in addition to those we rode, and a pack-mule, destined to carry our instruments, provisions, and baggage ; the last two articles not being of great weight. The instruments consisted of a sextant, artificial horizon, &c., a barometer, spy-glass, and compass. The chronometer I of course kept on my person. I had ordered the cook to put up for us some flour, coffee, and sugar, and our rifles were to furnish the rest. One blanket, in addition to his saddle and saddle blanket, furnished the materials for each man's bed, and every one was provided with a change of linen. All were armed with rifles or double-barrelled guns ; and, in addition to these. Maxwell and myself were furnished with excellent pistols. Thus accoutred, we took a parting breakfast with our friends, and set forth.

[1] This plant is very odoriferous, and in Canada charms the traveler, especially when passing through woods in the evening. The French there eat the tender shoots in the spring, as we do asparagus. The natives make a sugar of the flowers, gathering them in the morning when they are covered with dew, and collect the cotton from their pods to fill their beds. On account of the silkiness of this cotton, Parkinson calls the plant Virginian silk.
—*London's Encyclopædia of Plants*.

The Sioux Indians of the Upper Platte eat the young pods of this plant, boiling them with the meat of the buffalo.

Narrative of the exploring expedition to the Rocky mountains in the year 1842 ; and to Oregon and north California, in the years 1843-44 (1848)

Author : Frémont, John Charles, 1813-1890

Subject : Frémont, John Charles, 1813-1890 ; West (U.S.) — Description and travel ; Pacific States — Description and travel ; Rocky Mountains ; United States — Discovery and exploration

Publisher : Syracuse, L. W. Hall ; New York, Barnes & co.

Language : English

Digitizing sponsor : MSN

Book contributor : New York Public Library

Collection : newyorkpubliclibrary; americana

Source : Internet Archive

<http://archive.org/details/narrativeofexplo00fr>

Edited and uploaded to www.augty.org

November 22 2013