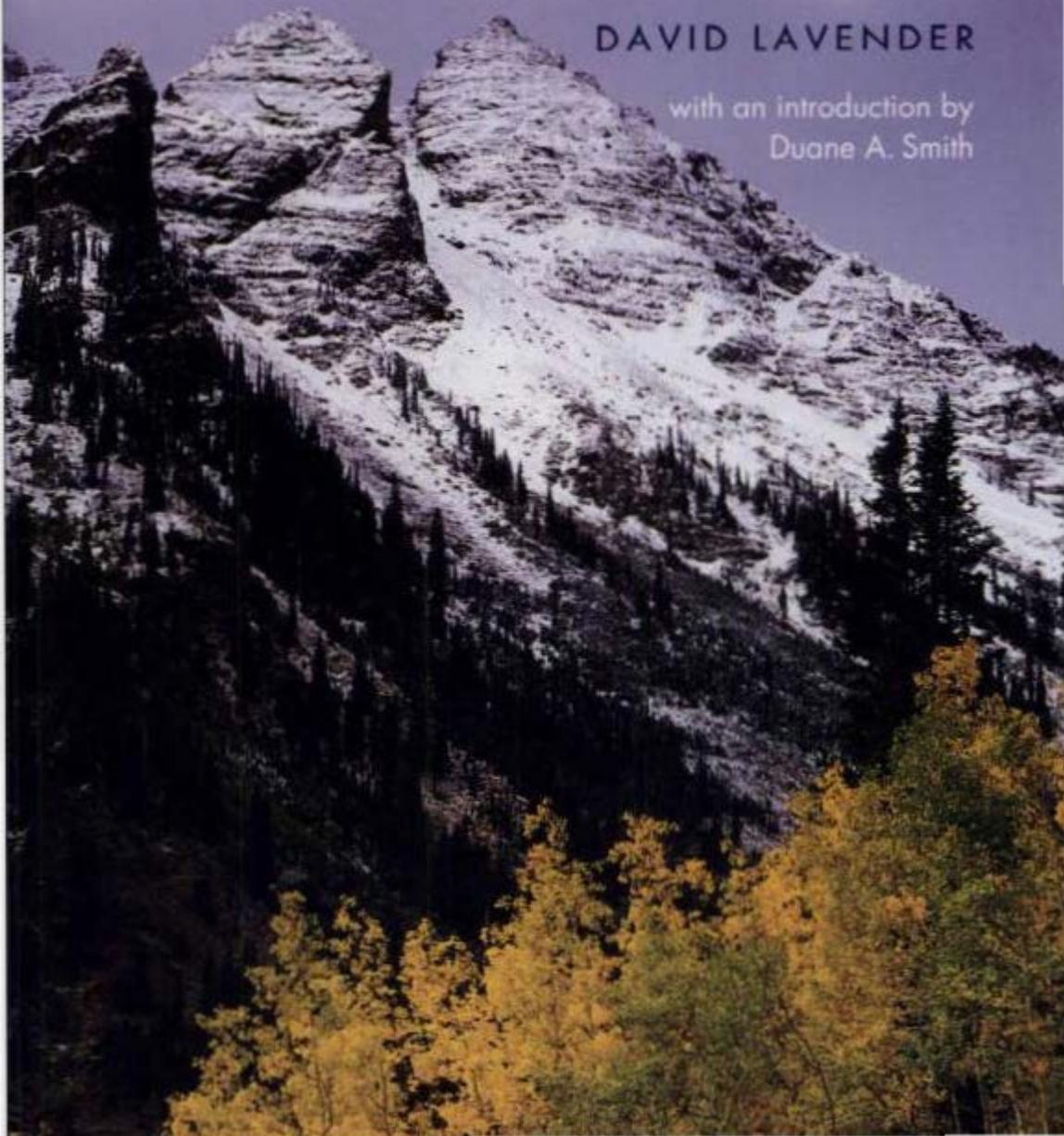


# THE ROCKIES

DAVID LAVENDER

with an introduction by  
Duane A. Smith



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## THE SKIN GAME

WOULD-BE traders and trappers who followed Zebulon Pike's route into the southern Rockies found New Mexico's governing hierarchy less crudely violent but scarcely more hospitable than the Blackfeet. Jacques Clamorgan of St. Louis, a sometime partner of Manuel Lisa, who risked the plains with a few pack horses in 1807; McLanahan's small party of 1809-10; and an 1812 group headed by James Baird, Samuel Chambers, and Robert McKnight were arrested, deprived of merchandise, and jailed for varying terms. In spite of the hostility, however, the magic name Santa Fe continued to ring with a golden sound along the cash-starved frontier.

No one listened more eagerly than Manuel Lisa. He told every hunting party he sent south from the upper Missouri River to stay alert for trails to New Mexico. He was exhilarated therefore when Jean Baptiste Champlain, one of his best brigade leaders, appeared in the summer of 1811 with word that he had penetrated as far as the headwaters of the South Platte within the Colorado Rockies and had encountered Arapahoe Indians who each year were visited by pack trains from Santa Fe. Though Lisa by now realized that New Mexico lay farther away than he at first had supposed, he promptly equipped Champlain with goods designed for the Santa Fe trade and sent him south again.

The experiment was another disaster. While trapping at indeterminate points in the Colorado Rockies, Champlain's group heard through the Indian grapevine that the tribes of the northern plains were growing increasingly hostile toward Americans. Should the trappers risk being cut off from their base by staying away? Eight thought not. Joining a band of Crows, they eventually regained another of Lisa's parties. Four other men decided it would be safer to ride to Taos and throw themselves on the mercy of the Spanish. Champlain and five more stayed in Colorado, drifting forlornly back and forth along the Front Range in hope that Lisa would get a messenger to them with instructions. (Lisa did try—too late.)

Indians picked off three of Champlain's companions. In despair, the starving survivors sought the protection of a village of sullen Arapahoes. In time one of the whites, a free trapper named Ezekiel Williams, decided he'd had enough. Entrusting his furs to Champlain for eventual accounting, he headed alone for his home at Boone's Lick, Missouri—and made it, too, in spite of being held captive for two months by Kansas Indians.

In Missouri, where he made contact with Lisa, Williams learned that the War of 1812 was under way and that Indians inflamed by British traders had driven the Missouri Fur Company off the upper river. Furthermore, Lisa added glumly, he had learned from the messengers whom he had sent in search of Champlain's party, that Champlain and his sole remaining companion had been killed.

What of the furs? A possibility of learning presented itself in the spring of 1814 in the form of one Joseph Philibert, who had decided that, since the northern fur areas were closed by the conflict, he would test the unknown mountains farther south. Williams hired two helpers and went along.

Amazingly, Williams retrieved his cached pelts and after hair-raising difficulties brought them home. Philibert's men were less successful. Intentionally or not, they strayed onto territory claimed by Spain and were jailed in Santa Fe. Philibert had to surrender his trade goods to the officials in New Mexico to pay the expenses of the captivity. On being released in February, 1815, the trappers moved north into Colorado and reaped well enough that they decided to stay one more year. In order to replenish their supplies and obtain horses for transporting their catch Philibert rode to Missouri. He promised the men that he would be back in time for a fall hunt and appointed as a rendezvous the junction of Huerfano Creek with the Arkansas River, 17 miles east of today's Pueblo.

He failed the appointment, for he was delayed in Missouri. When he at last started west on September 10, 1815, it was in company with a well-equipped party commanded by Auguste P. Chouteau and Jules De Mun, members of two of St. Louis's most potent mercantile families.<sup>1</sup> Philibert decided against bucking such a group in the field. As they jogged up the Arkansas, he sold his goods and horses and the contracts of his men to his potential competitors.

No one was waiting at the Huerfano. Indians explained the defection. When Philibert had failed to appear on schedule, his men had bethought themselves of the coming winter and had retreated to Taos, evidently hoping to pay for shelter with whatever furs they had collected. De Mun followed their cold trail up Huerfano Creek to one of the easy passes that

<sup>1</sup> One mildly historic member of the Chouteau-De Mun party was Toussaint Charbonneau, who had gone with Lewis and Clark to the Pacific and whose wife Sacajawea had died three years earlier at Lisa's Fort Manuel, 12 miles up the Missouri River from the Arikara Indian villages.

open from its headwaters through the rugged Sangre de Cristo Range. He then angled across San Luis Valley to the Rio Grande, and followed the stream south toward Taos. Along the way he noticed enticing beaver signs, and when he learned that Philibert's errant men had not been molested in Taos, he was emboldened to ride on to Santa Fe and ask the governor for permission to trap the New Mexican streams.

The governor passed the buck to Chihuahua. A long wait began. During it De Mun returned 800 miles to Missouri for fresh supplies. Chouteau trapped as far, perhaps, as Colorado's high North Park. When the Americans ventured back toward the border to learn the fate of their request a new governor ordered them out of Spanish territory. They did not comply fast enough to suit him. In May, 1817, New Mexican troopers seized about half the party as it was digging up its cached furs on what the victims insisted was American soil. (Actually, the boundary was not established until 1819; but if the line had existed in 1817 Chouteau and De Mun would have been within their rights.) After being imprisoned in Santa Fe under unsavory conditions for forty-four days, the Americans were haled before the governor and his council, violently berated, and turned loose with a single scrawny riding horse each for returning to Missouri. The rest of their property was confiscated, a loss of approximately \$30,000.<sup>2</sup>

Discouraged by such experiences and by the economic depression that gripped the frontier after the war, fur men stayed away from the mountains. The government made only feeble efforts to help. In 1819 the Adams-Onís treaty established the Arkansas River as the border with New Mexico and thus placed the Front Range of the Rockies clearly in American hands—if anyone wished to risk going there. Also in 1819 the War Department started the so-called Yellowstone Expedition up the Missouri to build forts "for . . . the protection of our northwestern frontier," declared Secretary of War Calhoun, "and the greater extension of our fur trade."

Mismanagement and the inability of the expedition's steamboats to breast the river brought the venture to a humiliating collapse near today's Omaha. An outraged Congress denied further appropriations, and the project dwindled to Major Stephen Long's "scientific" scouting trip with a handful of bored riflemen and naturalists up the Platte to the Front Range and then south to the Arkansas.

On July 13, 1820, on the site where Colorado Springs now stands, the explorers paused while Dr. Edwin James, the party's botanist, Lieutenant Swift, and guide Joe Bissonette, formerly of the Chouteau-De Mun party, attempted to climb the Grand Peak that had stopped Pike fourteen years before. After floundering upward through thick evergreens and over slippery granite, the three men bivouacked for the first night on ground so

<sup>2</sup> In 1819 the U.S. government assumed the claims of American citizens against Spain. Eventually the heirs of Chouteau and De Mun recovered the sum and interest—some \$81,000.

steep that "we were under the necessity to secure ourselves from rolling into the brook by means of a pole placed against two trees." The next day they slogged past the weather-runted trees at timberline onto enormous fields of slide rock, crusted here and there by congealing patches of snow. Though a cold wind numbed them, Dr. James was enthralled: "a region of astonishing beauty . . . low but brilliantly flowering alpine plants." At four in the afternoon they climbed, thoroughly winded, onto the summit. After admiring the panorama for an hour, they raced darkness back to the timber and another hungry bivouac. It was the first recorded ascent of a major peak in the Rockies. In honor of the feat Major Long named the vast massif James Peak. Trappers insisted in calling it after Pike, however, and in the 1840's Frémont made the stubborn folk name official: Pikes Peak, the most famous single mountain within the United States.

On the Arkansas River, Long's party divided. Captain John Bell led some of the men eastward down the stream. Long and the others continued south in search of what Pike had failed to find, the headwaters of Red River. The major thought he had succeeded when he stumbled onto the Canadian, which the New Mexicans did call Red. To their discomfiture, the "discoverers" came back to the familiar old Arkansas in what today is the eastern part of Oklahoma.

Not far up the Arkansas from them stood a trading post run by a thirty-two-year-old man whom Bell and Long had reason to know well. He was Hugh Glenn, an energetic storekeeper and one-time banker from Cincinnati. He had helped provision American troops during the War of 1812 and had found the business so profitable that afterwards he had sought contracts for furnishing supplies to some of the new military posts being spotted along the western frontier. His responsibilities also embraced the ill-managed Yellowstone Expedition of which Long's exploring party was a lethargic offshoot. Signer of Glenn's \$45,000 bond and his associate in the supply venture was a man considerably older than he, Jacob Fowler, aged fifty-six. The postwar depression and the failure of the Yellowstone Expedition caught them both. Bankrupt, Glenn sought the West, as desperate men so often did. Salvaging a little merchandise from the wreckage, he moved into the Indian country of eastern Oklahoma and opened a trading post. Competition from the Chouteaus was so intense that he did not fare well.

Learning from either Captain Bell or Major Long of the untouched beaver streams and goods-hungry Indians along the base of the Rockies, Glenn returned to Cincinnati and told his friend Jacob Fowler that opportunity was knocking again. By working feverishly the partners were able to start up the Arkansas next fall with a motley crew of twenty men: American frontier hunters, Negroes, French Creoles, and strayed Spaniards.

Almost at once they were overtaken by another waif of the depression, Thomas James, one-time employee of Manuel Lisa. After forsaking the

Three Forks country in 1810 for fear of Blackfeet, James had tried store-keeping in Illinois. After the war things grew bad both for him and for another storekeeper with whom he was associated, one John McKnight. McKnight's brother Robert had gone to Santa Fe in 1812 and had been arrested. Recently some of Robert's companions had been freed, but Robert himself had not reappeared. John wanted to go west with a trade party to learn why. James offered to join him. After all, Santa Fe just might offer an outlet for the unsold goods that both of them had on their shelves.

On overtaking the Glenn-Fowler group, James and McKnight proposed combining forces. The Cincinnati partners declined, probably because they had no interest in testing the temper of the New Mexicans. As they made their independent way up the river, Fowler kept a journal of their progress, an account so untrammelled in spelling and punctuation that the temptation to quote it has proved irresistible to historians ever since the diary was first published in 1898.

For instance, the entry of "13th novr 1821 tuesday." On that day the party glimpsed the Rockies for the first time and pitched camp in a buoyant mood. "While some Ware Hunting and others Cooking Some Picking grapes a gun Was fyered off and the Cry of a White Bare [that is, a grizzly] Was Raised We Ware all armed in an Instent and Each man Run His own Cors to look for the desperet anemel." The bear sprang on Lewis Dawson. After a wild melee, rescuers slew it, but not in time. Although many of the animal's teeth proved to have been broken off at the gums, Dawson was badly hurt. "It appears that His Head was in the Bares mouth at least twice—and that When the monster give the Crush that Was to mash the mans Head it being too large for the Span of His mouth the Head Sliped out only the teeth Cutting the Skin to the bone . . . Which Wounds Were Sewed up as Well as Cold by don by men In our Situation Having no Surgen or Surgical Instruments." To no avail. Dawson died at "day Brake," November 16.

A little farther up the river the trappers encountered 400 tepees of Arapahoes, Comanches, Kiowas, Cheyennes, and Shoshoni, "with a great nombr of dogs and Horses So that the Hole Cuntry to a great distance was Coverd." Although the Indians were eager to trade, they had nothing to exchange but "Horses and them We do not want." They made the whites stay around, however, for a cold, uncertain month. Then sixty Spaniards arrived to trade corn. After talking with the newcomers Glenn too caught the Santa Fe fever. With four men he rode south to ask permission to trap in New Mexico.

The Americans remaining on the Arkansas with Fowler were sure Glenn would simply attract attention to them and they would be arrested. "We Ware Soon in a Scoffel," Fowler reported dryly. By threatening to call on a friendly Arapahoe chief for help, he restored order. Moving upriver a ways, the waiters built a three-room cabin and horse pen to protect their

animals from thieving Indians. Another month dragged by. On January 29, 1822, Glenn reappeared with astounding information: "the mackeson [Mexican] provence Has de Clared Independence . . . and is desirous of a traid With the people of the united States."

But the Thomas James-John McKnight party and a third group under William Becknell, who chanced to be in the vicinity at the same time, had already heard the news and had rushed for Santa Fe. After so much expectation, it seemed a poor place: small, flat-roofed adobe houses unevenly lining the dusty streets that radiated out from the plaza. Fuzzy little donkeys plodded along under mountainous loads of firewood or corn-husks that were used for fodder. There were no wagons—only two-wheeled carts with wooden axles, their frames built of gnarled branches so that they looked like oversized bird cages. Tame Indians seemed as numerous as the dusky-skinned New Mexicans. About 4,600 people lived in the isolated city.

Becknell, who arrived first, skimmed off most of the available cash. Thomas James, whose cloth was of a drabber color than the New Mexicans liked, did not fare well. (John McKnight eventually found his brother Robert, however.) There is no record of how Glenn made out with his trade goods. He did obtain permission for Fowler and the trappers to push up the Rio Grande into the San Juan Mountains, and although they found many of the creeks frozen too solidly to be worked, they returned with furs that their employer sold in St. Louis for enough to pay their wages and still net a profit, on fur alone, of \$2,624.85.

This was the beginning of the famous Santa Fe trade. Becknell, the first to reach home, promptly returned with three wagons, the first wheeled vehicles to reach the edges of the mountains. Others quickly followed. Many, perhaps most, of the workers in the early caravans had scant interest in peddling dry goods and kitchen utensils. They were trappers—and suddenly they had been presented with a shorter, safer trail to the mountains than the long haul up the Missouri.

Money, organization, and numbers were necessary to force a way up that traditional route, past the sullen Arikaras, into the land of the Blackfeet. Because rewards seemed great, money appeared as the depression relaxed. After Lisa's death in 1820, his two ablest partners, Robert Jones and Michael Immell, joined with Joshua Pilcher, a St. Louis banker, to reorganize the Missouri Fur Company. In the spring of 1822 they moved upstream to reoccupy the site at the mouth of the Big Horn that Lisa had been forced to abandon a dozen years earlier. That same spring Lisa's prewar partner, Andrew Henry, started for the upper river with a heavily laden keelboat financed in conjunction with William Ashley, a brigadier general in the Missouri militia who, for the sake of his political ambitions, was eager to make a fortune in the quickest time possible. Other well-heeled companies—Berthold, Pratte and Chouteau of St. Louis and the

Columbia Fur Company of the upper Mississippi—also were eying the Missouri. The competition that loomed threatened to be as disastrous as the Blackfeet. To men backed by little more than their wits and courage, the southern Rockies looked like a safer bet.

One of the ablest of those who tested the new grounds was Etienne Provost. Very little is known of Provost, partly because he could not sign his name and hence left no records. In 1817 he had been arrested in New Mexico with A. P. Chouteau and Jules De Mun. Presumably he returned to Missouri with that unfortunate party, but what happened to him during the next few years remains a mystery. Apparently he liked New Mexico and sought out the province in 1822, as soon as he knew the border was open. He was about forty years old and fat. But he had talents. The governor of New Mexico recognized them and in the summer of 1823 sent Provost and a boon companion, one Leclerc, first name uncertain, back east to help arrange a peace with the Pawnees, so that the new commerce across the prairies would not be subjected to their interference.

In the course of the errand Provost and Leclerc visited Fort Atkinson near today's Omaha. Also at the fort (early August, 1823) were six or eight remarkable visitors from the British fur posts west of the Montana Rockies. A few of the men were white; the rest were Iroquois Indians. It is not likely that any was educated enough to entertain comprehensive views of the international fur trade. Still, it would have been possible for Provost to piece together from their talk a fair insight into what the British had been doing in the Columbia country since buying Astoria from Astor's men during the War of 1812.

At first the Nor'Westers had neglected the mountain trade along the tributaries of the Columbia. Traditionally the British considered the game in a tribe's territory to belong to that tribe and did no hunting themselves.<sup>3</sup> They obtained the pelts by trade—by building a post in a likely area, stocking the shelves with goods, and inviting the customers to visit them. The system did not work well in the Rockies. The mountain Indians did not understand trapping, and even after some of them had been taught they were halfhearted about the onerous work involved and felt their time was better spent in the never-ending quest for food and clothing. Faced with the indifference, the first Nor'Westers beyond the mountains sat on their hands and complained—until Donald McKenzie reappeared.

McKenzie weighed three hundred pounds and supposedly could shoot a dozen rifle balls in succession through a Spanish dollar at a hundred paces. The tale should be taken as symbolic rather than factual. Except under optimum conditions it would be hard even to see a dollar at such distances;

<sup>3</sup> American hunters did not concede the point but invaded Indian territory and took the game themselves. The point was a basic factor in causing animosity among the tribes of the high plains, most notably the Blackfeet. Although Congress passed laws against trapping on Indian grounds, American hunters ignored the edicts.

what the statement really says is that McKenzie, like Achilles, was a handy man with the tools of his trade. He had left the North West Company to go overland to Astoria with Wilson Price Hunt, and after the sale had been rehired by his former employees to revitalize the trade of the western mountains. He did it by going into the mountains with bands of trained trappers whom he supplied with long strings of pack horses rather than with the traditional canoes and barges.

His base was Fort Nez Percé at the junction of the Walla Walla River with the Columbia in southeastern Washington. Between 1818 and 1821 he worked out a route more or less along the course of the future Oregon Trail into the mountainous area where the present states of Idaho, Wyoming, and Utah converge. He did it with little help from his peers, who were jealous of his swift rise to authority and were reluctant to leave the old ways and small comforts of their fixed posts.

McKenzie's trappers were mostly "freemen." Originally they had been lowly *engagés* bound to the company for a fixed term of years at wretched salaries. Among them were Iroquois, half-breeds, French-Canadians, and a few Americans left over from Astor's collapse. Though their contracts had expired, they wanted to stay in the mountains, either because they had no homes in the East to tug them that way or because they had married Indian women and did not wish to leave their families. They roamed with the tribes, hunting negligently for a living and now and then picking up extra rations by doing odd jobs around the posts. The company bought their furs at picayune rates, sold them supplies at astronomical markups. Enslaved by hopeless debt, they lost ambition. They were explosive and quarrelsome, much more inclined to race horses or gamble with the Indians they met than to attend to their traps. When they traveled with the brigades they insisted on having their families with them. This eased housekeeping—the women pitched the tents, cooked, and helped scrape and stretch the raw pelts—but it added staggering confusion to each day's march.

McKenzie was able to manage the motley crews. He retired in 1821, however, the same year in which the Hudson's Bay Company absorbed its old rival, the North West Company, and the brigade leaders who followed him lacked his knack. Difficulties intensified when the Hudson's Bay Company shifted the mountain trappers' base of operation to Flathead Post, at the site of David Thompson's old Saleesh House beside Clark Fork River in northwestern Montana. This move brought the brigades closer to the heart of good beaver country. Quickly they worked out the great north-south highway of the northern Rockies: from Flathead Post to the site of present Missoula, thence south to the westward-bulging Continental Divide either through Deer Lodge Valley or Bitterroot Valley. On reaching the eastern slope, they ascended the Beaverhead (the upper part of the Jefferson Fork of the Missouri) to its tributaries, recrossed the circling Divide at one of several gentle passes—Lemhi, Bannock, Medicine Lodge,

Monida—and then drifted across the broad Snake Plains to the rich streams of southeastern Idaho and southwestern Wyoming. Easy trails, good hunting—but all of it within reach of the Blackfeet. Parties needed strength to be safe, yet productive trapping necessitated a scattering of forces. Hoping to increase their meager profits, the freemen insisted on roaming the creeks in small groups, and regularly suffered for their temerity.

McKenzie's first successor was one of his chief assistants, Michel Bourdon, who had first come to the northern Rockies with David Thompson. On his first trip in 1822 Michel lost two men killed and two wounded. The next year he went back with redheaded Finan McDonald. In 1810 in Marias Pass the two of them had helped the Flatheads win their first great victory over the Blackfeet, but in 1823 Michel's luck ran out. On the Lemhi River, not far from where Meriwether Lewis first encountered Cameahwait's Shoshoni, he and five men died. In a fury for revenge, Finan rallied the rest, drove the Blackfeet into a thicket, and set the brush afire. Sixty-eight Indians were either roasted to death or shot down as they tried to break free. "We Shoe them what war was," Finan wrote grimly in his report. In spite of the victory, he'd had his fill and vowed never to return until beaver grew "Gould Skins."

Danger and debt heaped together diluted loyalty. In the summer of 1822 fourteen of Michel's freemen deserted and rode across the Wyoming mountains with their furs in search of the American posts on the Missouri River. A few of the fourteen were white, most were Iroquois. Some were bachelors, a few had families. They would have been better off with the brigade. Crow Indians killed six of the men, seized all the furs, and made captives of the women and children. The surviving males somehow reached Fort Atkinson. Those with lost families appealed to the United States Indian agent at the fort for help, and in time a few of the women were returned to their husbands.

Etienne Provost and Leclerc, the Pawnee peacemakers, were at the fort at the time. Evidently they talked to the bachelors. Perhaps Provost felt that with them as guides he could outflank the competition on the Missouri and work from New Mexico into the northern Rockies from behind. Anyway, at least three of the wandering freemen showed up later in his company, edging north, and so it does not seem farfetched to assume that he signed them on for exactly this purpose at Fort Atkinson in August, 1823.

Their first stop was probably Taos. In those days the name referred not to a particular town but to the whole broad valley, flooded with radiant light and clear color, that sloped westward from the Sangre de Cristo Mountains to the deeply canyoned Rio Grande. The valley's most populous village was the one made up of two terraced Indian pueblos. Five miles from the

pueblos was the Spanish town of San Fernandez de Taos, the town now called simply Taos and the one historians mean when referring to the famed trapper haven of New Mexico.

Fernandez de Taos was small (fewer than three thousand inhabitants), poor, dirty, and relaxed. Most families lived crowded into a single room. Several such rooms were built wall to wall, either in a row or around a courtyard and often were entered Indian-style through a trap door in the roof. Protestant interlopers regarded the people as priest-ridden, hypocritical, lazy, and lax in their sexual standards. The newcomers quickly added a vice of their own, stills for turning valley grain into a potent brew known as Taos Lightning, designed primarily for corrupting the mountain Indians rather than for use at home.

Trappers swiftly spread from Taos throughout the Southwest. Provost and Leclerc went north, following in general the trail used by Escalante and after him by shadowy slave buyers and horse traders about whom nothing is known. In the summer of 1824 the partners reached that desolate area of eastern Utah where the Duchesne, White, and Green rivers come together. Leclerc may have returned from there to Taos for fresh supplies. Provost meanwhile moved west up the Duchesne and Strawberry rivers and crossed a spur of the Wasatch Mountains to a sparkling stream that now bears his name, though spelled phonetically, Provo River. He threaded the Provo's somber canyon to fresh-water Utah Lake at the western foot of the steeply soaring mountains. (Today's city of Provo stands on the lake's east shore.) Turning north to a stream later named Jordan, he started toward Great Salt Lake.

He may not have glimpsed that amazing inland sea. Pretending peace, a war party of Shoshoni rode into his camp beside the Jordan and massacred seven men, including Patrick O'Connor, one of the deserters from Bourdon's Hudson's Bay brigade of 1822. The survivors fled back toward Green River. Reinforced and re-equipped somehow, they went west again in the spring of 1825, but stayed clear of the Provo and turned north instead to what became the Weber. Near the Weber's mouth on May 22, 1825, the other two deserters with Provost came full circle: they met a brigade of Hudson's Bay Company freemen being led that year by stocky, hard-fisted Peter Skene Ogden.

The next day Provost himself rode over to talk with the Briton. Before he had been in the camp very long, several belligerent Americans appeared. From them he learned what had been happening to the Missouri fur men since his visit at Fort Atkinson in 1823.

It was shocking. Early in the spring of 1823 on the upper Yellowstone River, Blackfeet had killed Robert Jones and Michael Immell, the principal partners of the reorganized Missouri Fur Company, and five of their men,

and had seized their fur and equipment. A little later Arikara Indians had killed fourteen or fifteen of William Ashley's men and had wounded ten.<sup>4</sup> Farther upstream still other war parties chipped away at the men Andrew Henry was sending out from his new post at the mouth of the Big Horn.

After a military expedition sent out from Fort Atkinson to chastise the Arikaras had bungled the job, Ashley decided he would have to find some other route to the Rockies. At Fort Kiowa, a fur post in south-central South Dakota, he outfitted Jedediah Smith, William Sublette, Thomas Fitzpatrick, James Clyman, and half a dozen more men. This party he sent due west on horseback across the dry plains. They passed the winter of 1823-24 in the upper Wind River Valley among Crow Indians, along with several more whites who had worked south into the same area from Andrew Henry's post on the Yellowstone.

Jedediah Smith's group got off ahead of the others in February, 1824. Suffering terribly from icy blizzards, thirst, and hunger, they rediscovered South Pass, the soon-to-be famous gateway that Robert Stuart's returning Astorians had first used in 1812. On the Green River they trapped with fabulous results. While four of the men struggled with gruesome hardship to take the pelts and the latest news back to Ashley, Jedediah Smith and six others drifted west into Idaho. Eventually they encountered the Hudson's Bay Company Snake River brigade, led that year by Alexander Ross, and tagged along with it back to Flathead Post to spy out how the British managed things. When Peter Ogden replaced Ross as brigade leader and started south for the spring hunt (1825), Smith's party clung to him, too. Fresh tracks in southeastern Idaho showed that by that time Henry's men from the Yellowstone had also found their way through South Pass into the richest beaver preserve of the Rockies. Smith swung his group away from Ogden to rejoin his countrymen.

Hoping to avoid the Americans, Ogden moved south into the Wasatch Mountains and camped not far up the Weber River from the site of the city that now bears his name. Trapping was splendid but he had no chance to monopolize it. First Provost's unexpected group appeared from the south, and after it some of the Americans whose tracks he had seen earlier.

There were about twenty-five of the latter. They were accompanied by fourteen of Ogden's freemen whom the Americans had picked up at their work along the nearby streams. They rode in a marshaled column, grimly militaristic. One of the men in the lead carried an American flag, a somewhat unlikely object to have been in a trapper's possible sack. But there it was, and the moment its staff was thrust defiantly into the ground it became not so much a symbol of patriotism as of a dark, insecure, vigilante way of thinking.

The ground where the colors rippled so boldly lay 55 or so miles south of the 42nd parallel and hence was Mexican territory as defined by the

<sup>4</sup> Much of this Provost had already learned during his stay at Fort Atkinson.

Adams-Onís treaty of 1819. Neither the British nor the Americans had any way of knowing where the parallel ran, of course. If they considered the matter—and there is no evidence that even Provost, just arrived from Taos, did so—they probably assumed that they were north of the line, in what was called Oregon country. By a Convention of 1818, citizens of both the United States and Great Britain had equal rights to trade or settle anywhere in Oregon.

This was not the way the American fur hunters under the leadership (at that moment) of one Johnson Gardner wanted things to be. They were free trappers. In order to reduce overhead, Ashley and Henry did not pay them salaries, but instead grubstaked them with guns, powder, traps, and other essentials. In return the trappers agreed to deliver half their furs to the company. The other half was theirs to dispose of as best they could. (As time passed, different arrangements came into being, until some trappers achieved full commercial independence.) Private ownership made each hunter an embryo capitalist, eager to increase his wealth. Under licenses issued to Ashley by the United States government for trading (but not for trapping, which was illegal on Indian lands) they had made a perilous trip across the Continental Divide, expecting to reach untouched grounds. Instead, they found their traditional enemies, the British, ahead of them, reaping as many as eighty skins a day.

Although the continental stirrings of the United States had not yet been labeled Manifest Destiny, its thrusts were already at work in the American people. One of its wellsprings was insecurity. There was a new nation ringed by older countries bent on containing its growth. The natural reaction was belligerence. (Witness Israel today.) When Gardner's crew encountered Ogden's freemen in the Wasatch Mountains, the vanguard of America's westering once again collided with forces that might be representative of national frustration. The Hudson's Bay Company was a century and a half old, barnacled with Old World traditionalism. Its scarlet flag was almost a duplicate of the Union Jack, with only the addition of the initials HBC in the lower right-hand corner. Upstarts unexpectedly meeting so much established power must have felt uncertain.

Their reaction was typical of all vigilantism. The accustomed bulwarks having crumbled, it was up to them to throw out their collective chests, declare their own rules, and show the enemy what was what. This Gardner proceeded to do. First he raised a supporting scaffold of patriotism. Pointing to the American flag, he told Ogden's gaping men that they were in the land of the free and were entitled to remove whatever beaver they had caught to the American camp, where they would receive higher prices for it than the Hudson's Bay Company paid. He then assured Ogden that American forces would soon occupy all Oregon.

Ogden retorted that the matter of sovereignty was up to their governments. The remark had no effect. That night and the next day twenty-nine

of his debt-oppressed freemen gathered up their furs and left him. Although the exodus was taut, no one pulled the trigger that would have precipitated real disaster.

A point to notice is this. Neither Johnson Gardner nor any other man in his column acquired pelts from the episode. The freemen kept their furs until selling them later on to William Ashley at standard mountain rates. Johnson's gain lay in discomfiting the Hudson's Bay Company. He also hoped, of course, to disrupt Ogden's organization enough so that the Briton would retire, leaving the field to the Americans. But mostly Johnson's vigilantes could warm away the chill of insecurity with the thought that they had asserted the right as they saw the right, that their ways would prevail. Though aggressive self-righteousness of that sort—the Minuteman on the march—was by no means limited to the Rocky Mountains during the subsequent century, it did produce some of its most violent manifestations there. And most of it occurred, so this text will indicate, because men had outrun the familiar and, as they saw matters, had nothing but their own raised hackles to guard against the jaws of unexpected frustration.

The clash between Ogden and Gardner finished, Provost rode back east along the Strawberry River toward the Green. Along the way he had another surprise meeting, this one with William Ashley himself.

Ashley had just completed a remarkable adventure. Late the previous fall he had learned through messages from Fitzpatrick and Clyman that there were furs on the Green (his trappers called the river Seeds-kee-dee until Provost told them the Spanish name was *Verde*, after the brush that shone so brilliantly along its banks in that gray-red, blasted country) and that the men needed supplies. Ashley had to have those pelts. Discouraged afresh by the Blackfeet, Andrew Henry had once again quit the mountains, and the burden of saving their company was entirely on Ashley's shoulders. Promptly he started a caravan west into the teeth of winter. Fumbling still for the best route, he followed the South Platte onto the Colorado plains, sat out the worst of the blizzards, and then crossed the Front Range into North Park. From there he skirted Wyoming's Medicine Bow Mountains and slanted through waterless Great Divide Basin. In the spring, after losing seventeen of his horses to Crow thieves, he came down through endless sagebrush to the "Shetskedee," as he spelled it. He followed the river south toward the glittering peaks of the Uinta Mountains. Along the way he divided his men to hunt and make contact with whatever other whites they could find. Curious about the Seeds-kee-dee, he built two boats out of buffalo hide, loaded in some trade goods, and floated into the mountains to see where the river went.

They bobbed like tormented corks under the towering red precipices of Flaming Gorge, rested briefly in the future outlaw hideaway of Brown's Hole, portaged around the roaring rapids of Lodore Canyon, and plowed

through Split Mountain in today's Dinosaur National Monument. In the deserts beyond they encountered two of Provost and Leclerc's hunters. The men assured Ashley that he would find neither beaver nor game farther south and added that Provost was somewhere off to the west. Unable to return to his rendezvous through the howling canyons, Ashley buried his merchandise, bought a few riding horses from the trappers and from some poverty-stricken Utes, and set out to ride around the mountain. En route he met Provost.

Provost and at least four of his hunters accompanied Ashley to the rendezvous. About 120 men were waiting there. As they flocked to the temporary booths to swap pelts for cloth, tobacco, fishhooks, knives, powder, coffee, and sugar for themselves and thread, beads, and other trinkets for the women that a few of them had already acquired, Ashley realized that if men were willing to stay isolated in the mountains year after year, big profits might lie not so much in the furs a freight caravan handled for them but in the supplies it brought each summer to a great high country trading fair. Generous markups would cover the exorbitant costs and risks. Compact goods would be best, especially alcohol. He had made a mistake in leaving it out of this year's essentials. Whiskey was what the men had really clamored for as soon as their barest needs had been filled. Next year he'd bring plenty.

As a field manager to replace Andrew Henry he selected Jedediah Smith. They prepared a list of desirable items, appointed Cache Valley on the Utah-Idaho border as the next year's gathering place, and hurried east. Eager to join the spring hunt, Jedediah tried to go straight back in winter, as Ashley had done. This was a harsher season, however. Snow bogged him down hungrily in Kansas, and he had to send an urgent appeal to Ashley for help and horses. Ashley responded with twenty-five men and in the spring of 1826 the combined parties went west together.

The trappers meantime had been working the same general area that they had merely touched the spring before—southwestern Wyoming, northeastern Utah, southern Idaho. In April a group of them had run into Ogden again. This time the Hudson's Bay Company man had been ready, and there was no Johnson Gardner along to stiffen the Americans' bluff. Ogden's freemen stayed put; in fact, a few of last year's deserters even promised to return to him. Obviously, then, the stubborn British would have to be taken into consideration in the future. So, too, would the Blackfeet, who had attacked some of the hunters.

In spite of those threats, prospects looked good to Jedediah Smith and his friends William Sublette and David Jackson as they surveyed the riotous rendezvous. The trappers had garnered 123 packs of fur—perhaps five tons—and were feeling expansive as they threw their money away on alcohol and foofarraw. By trial and error a pattern for handling the trade had been established. The best season and route for bringing in

the annual freight caravan had been worked out—in springtime up the North Platte and its tributary, Sweetwater Creek, and over South Pass. They knew how to live off the country during the rest of the year and had thoroughly mastered the not-very-complex craft of the trap. Indians, weather, and shattering accidents would always be dangerous, but at least the mountain men were beginning to learn what pitfalls they had best beware of.

Even without knowing the fine details of those things Ashley had managed, as an entrepreneur, to make his fortune. Now he was willing to sell out and turn to politics. Why not take the chance of doing even better than he had? Smith, Jackson, and Sublette plunged—Ashley agreed, for a stiff price, to bring in supplies to their new company the next year—and then busily they laid plans for the coming season. For two decades the mountains and the Indians had frustrated efforts like theirs, but now the skirmishing was over. The necessary forces had coalesced, and for the first time the Rockies were about to yield a major resource to a highly organized, totally ruthless campaign of exploitation.