

25022 Pennsylvania, Lomita, California.

June 17, 1950.

Miss Laura Gilpin,

Santa Fe, New Mexico.

My dear Miss Gilpin: Your letter was a surprise, since mine to Duell, Sloan and Pearce has never been acknowledged, and I did not know that they had written to you. I presume that you are burdened with correspondence, as most people are who have published an outstanding piece of work. For that reason, I want to say at the outset that nothing in this letter is urgent. In fact, I do not want you to feel under obligation to reply at all if my answers to the questions you asked are sufficient. Your fine book will outlive any of us who may question it on minor points. For eleven years I have feared that the upper Rio Grande would never receive more attention than was given it in the National Geographic Magazine then. I appreciate fully the difficulty of your task, since I have been as far as the wheel tracks go where the ranger trail begins, with the sign "Stony Pass-13 mi." My interest is due to the fact that before he became the first sheriff of the Stony Pass region, my father, J. W. Wallace (See Hall, Frank History of the State of Colorado, Vol. 4, P. 166), made some weary journeys up the river as a trespasser in 1872 and 1873. I have no wish to criticize a fine piece of work. My interest is in the leaving of a record of those times which will not show too many conflicts to confuse those who come later.

In the October, 1939, issue of the National Geographic Magazine, the statement that many of John C. Fremont's party froze to death in 1848 near the source of the Rio Grande, seeking a pass over the Divide, is on Page 419 beneath the map showing the course of the river. Acquaintances of mine who have wanted to contribute to National Geographic have told me that the magazine exercises the strictest censorship over every statement purporting to be fact. For that reason I feel sure the sentence would never have been published if it were not the considered judgment of the editorial staff.

Another judgment passed upon the matter, resulted from the publication in 1932 of a photograph taken by the United States Geological Survey, showing the whole of the summit of the La Garita Hills in the region where Embargo Creek and La Garita Creek rise within half a mile of each other near Mesa ~~Nueces~~. You will find it reproduced in Professional Paper 166 of the Geological Survey, on Plate 9. The summit does not fit the Fremont story in any way. Underneath the photograph is the comment that this summit is in marked contrast to others in the San Juan Mountains. All of the stories I have seen about the Fourth Expedition, and the published diary of Micajah McGehee, who was one of the party, speak of a great treeless summit, with timberline far below. In looking at the summit near the head of Embargo Creek you will see that there is no continuous ridge and no true timberline. There are also no "monadnocks", such as are shown in your picture of the summit at the head of the Rio Grande, and the similar one, taken from a different position, and in the wintertime, published in National Geographic. I cannot remember now what newspaper announced in California this photographing of the Embargo Creek summit, with the comment that the Embargo Creek story could now be decently interred. It quoted some geographic authorities on the subject. I presume for that reason Geographic Magazine considered the matter settled.

I know that, as you say, the matter has been controversial. For a hundred years in Colorado it has been kept alive because of the stark emotion aroused by the tragedy. In California I have never been able to find but one person who realized that Fremont led a fourth and a fifth expedition. That one had worked in

the research library at the state university of California where they jealously guard Frémont's own handwritten copy of his second volume of *Memoirs*, containing the stories of the fourth and fifth expeditions, which was never published.

Another judgment was passed by the men who bore the financial loss of the fourth expedition. Mr. Ray Cooper, whose relatives suffered one half of the loss, is positive that the Frémont party reached the continental divide and made the last camp in what is now San Juan County, Colorado. You will remember that Frémont hurried down the Rio Grande on the ice, because he was due in California. After California had been admitted to statehood he went back to the Missouri and in 1853 led his successful fifth expedition through Cochetopa Pass, and along the Gunnison River. In 1853, I am informed, he took the opportunity to make sure where he had gone five years before. He lived for 42 years after the tragedy and had plenty of time to think it over. He naturally didn't talk for publication about it, since the Democrats, in 1856, used the stories of the fourth expedition as campaign ammunition against him. You will remember Senator Benton said Frémont went straight to the spot there the guide had gone astray. (To me, personally, it makes no difference. I raised the point merely because Mr. Cooper has written a careful and exhaustive history of San Juan County, and his statement that Frémont reached San Juan County (as now known) will stand west of the divide. I asked him three years ago to write for some magazine his intimate knowledge of the backers of the expedition, since the century elapsing since the fourth expedition was about to close. He takes a dim view of the possibility of getting truth published in competition with more sensational semi-fiction.

In regard to how Frémont knew where the headwaters were and how far away, all I contend is that he had ample chance to find out. There had been no official exploration, but the trappers had gone for beaver along the upper Rio Grande for years. Many experienced trappers at Taos could have furnished the information as to the number of days' tramp it had taken to follow the river to the last worthwhile tributary, and of the course of the river, since its general direction would lead a man going upstream a little to the north of the setting sun. I cannot believe that Bill Williams did not know all of this. In that October, 1939, issue of the *National Geographic*, on page 416 is the statement:

"Beaver trappers, following Pike, prowled all these passes and creeks that swell the head of the Rio Grande."

I think it is an undisputed fact that the upper Rio Grande was a rich beaver center, but I believe the statement above includes a little too much. Pole Creek was the boundary between the new Hinsdale County and the new La Plata County formed in February, 1874. My father was of the opinion that the beaver trappers did not come beyond Pole Creek because he did not know of any blazes on trees made by trappers in La Plata County on the Rio Grande side of the Divide. Assuming that they came as far as Pole Creek, or even only as far as the point where the road now becomes a ranger trail, wouldn't an experienced man, with the view ahead as shown by the enclosed snapshot taken not far from the foot of the ranger trail, assume that there would be an easy pass ahead, even though there was snow on the ground? Bill Williams had probably not gone as far as the pass.

It seems to me the basis of the tragedy lay in the fact that the trappers had not crossed the summit at Stony Pass and could not report that the pass did not lead to a plain or to a shallow valley, but down, far more steeply than on the Rio Grande side, into a deep upper valley of the Las Animas Perdidas (now called Animas, merely); and that the Las Animas Perdidas was flanked by mountains higher than those along the Rio Grande. The United States Geological and Geographical Survey of the Territories called these mountains, "the most rugged in the territory, if not in the whole Rocky Mountain chain." Looking west it would be impossible to detect a sign of Red Mountain Pass. Mono Pass, which Frémont knew, was waiting as an outlet on the 38th parallel in California. The way was clear along the 38th in Utah and Nevada, but there was nobody to tell Frémont that the "River of Lost Souls" barred the way west of the divide. He could not guess that Stony Gulch runs down from the summit into a high-walled valley with no way out visible from the summit or the foot of the trail, either.

I will try to be brief about the trail up the Rio Grande in 1871. ^{Beyond the 107th meridian} It is out of the question because the treaty of 1868 (See United States Statutes at Large, Vol. 15, P. 619) gave the Ute Indians "absolute and undisturbed use and occupancy" of a tract bounded on the east by the 107th meridian, as far north as a line 15 miles north of the 40th parallel of north latitude. It further states, "No persons except those herein authorized to do so, and except officers, agents and employees of the government shall be permitted to pass over, settle or reside thereon". There was at that time a statute in force (See Vol. 1, Page 743, of U S Stat L (cited above) which provided that trespassers on Indian land without passport were subject to \$50 fine or 3 mos. imprisonment and that one half of each fine should go to the informant who sighted the trespasser. There was also a statute in force (See Vol. 2, P. 80, U S Stat. L cited above) which provided for a \$1000 fine for a person who re-entered Indian land after being once removed.

The Summitville region of the San Juans lies east of the 107th meridian and was not Indian land. There was great activity there in 1871. It was legal to follow the Rio Grande through Wagonwheel Gap and around the bend of the river beyond (that is, past Antlers Park where Wasson is now located). It was illegal to go into the broader valley beyond. Fort Garland exercised supervision so far as was possible. In the vicinity of the present Lake City, where Henson Creek flows into the Lake Fork of the Gunnison, there was prospecting in 1871 because the area was too far from any fort to be protected. Prospectors from Arizona and New Mexico followed up the Las Animas Perdidas into the Silverton region, because there were no soldiers west of the divide.

As daring as Dempsey Reese was, he didn't dare to leave a sign of a campfire when he went up the Rio Grande in 1871. He lived in Silverton from 1874 to the time of his death in 1890. His story is well established west of the divide. My father trespassed with him in 1872 and 1873. There was no trail established, until 1874.

As to Otto Mears, his own autobiography, as told to Arthur Ridgeway, stated that in 1871, when Enos Hotchkiss made a rich discovery, which he called the Golden Fleece, in the region of the present Lake City, Mears was homesteading near Saguache. He and Hotchkiss, in 1871 began work on a toll road from Saguache, through Cochetopa Pass, and down the Gebolla Valley, with a view of taking supplies into the Henson Creek region. This was a 96 mile route and, according to Mears, they worked on it through 1871 and 1872, and when prospecting became legal west of the 107th in September, 1873, they pushed on the present site of Lake City with their trail. Mears then began work on a difficult road, to become a toll road, up Henson Creek to the headwaters of the Las Animas Perdidas. It was July, 1877, before the first stage came over this toll road, from Saguache, via Lake City. Mears was not the sort to gamble on a succession of fines from violation of a treaty when he had a safe and legal thing which would benefit the Saguache region. He made plenty of enemies who would have enjoyed splitting the fine.

The statement that he made a trail which was actually ^{in 1874} to be credited to Tom Pollock is not important, except that Pollock had so many friends, and the children of those friends are still living and all of us will resent a slight to Pollock.

Lastly, as to the exploration of the San Juans in 1860, by Baker and four others, and in 1861 by Baker's backers and a large party who tested every stream in the present counties of San Juan, La Plata, Dolores and San Miguel, that would not be important if it were not the very backbone of the established local history of the region, the background that gives local color to all the narratives. Even the tourists know that Cunningham Gulch, which produced so much gold ^{in 1861}, was named for Andrew Cunningham, who rode in with Baker, and that Howardsville was named for Lieutenant George Howard who explored every stream tributary to the Animas. There is a placard near the log bridge left by the Baker party (so-called) with the names of men who came in 1861. La Plata County is catering to tourists as energetically as California ever did. My county needs that early history for background. It has been so carefully compiled by Major E. J. Cooper that it cannot be annihilated by a statement of Bancroft's.

Best wishes for the success of a book which was essential in preserving the drama of the hundred mile supply route from Del Norte to Silverton before statehood.

Sincerely,

May Wallace Ror