

## JOHN COLTER—THE MAN WHO TURNED BACK

The presentation, in August, 1934, of the "Colter Stone" to the museum at Grand Teton National Park brings to mind that extraordinary frontiersman, fur trader, and trapper, John Colter. The stone in question was found a few years ago in Idaho, near the site of Henry's old fort, in the neighborhood of St. Anthony. It is a rough slab of lava rock, some three inches thick, and of uneven shape. On one side, so badly weathered as to be nearly illegible, the date 1808 has been carved. On the other side, still quite plain, are the words, "John Colter." This homely exhibit becomes all the more priceless when it is realized that this is almost the only "document" now extant dealing with this man. Just when, in his journeys around the Yellowstone region, Colter did the above carving will never be known, as he apparently did not mention the incident in later years. Mr. F. W. Fryzell, ranger-naturalist of Grand Teton National Park, thinks that while camping Colter may have done this bit of carving either as a pastime, or as a deliberate method of preserving his name and memory should he be killed by the Indians. But the first view seems to be the most likely as it was in the headwaters of the Jefferson River that Colter had his famous encounter with the Indians. This is a considerable distance from where the rock was found.

Colter makes his first appearance when he enlisted as a private in the Lewis and Clark Expedition, on October 15, 1803. This is one of the few dates relative to his entire career about which there is any certainty. The place, as well as the date of his birth are uncertain. One writer<sup>1</sup> holds that he was born in Pennsylvania, and that he was sixteen at the time of his enlistment, which would make the date of his birth 1787. Another,<sup>2</sup> on the other hand, claims that he was born in Virginia, and places the date between the years 1775 and 1780. The former, in substantiating his claim that Colter was but a youth at the time of the great Expedition, points out that, while in winter quarters at Fort Clatsop, the other men of the party allowed their beards to grow and that Colter received some good natured "joshing" because he was only able to muster an optimistic fuzz. But, mere youth though he may have been, he is often spoken of in the Journals in favorable terms because of his reliability, straightforwardness of manner, and ability with his rifle. Largely

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Morrow Wilson, *Meriwether Lewis*.  
<sup>2</sup> Stallo Vinton, *John Colter*.

on account of the latter quality he was promoted to the post of hunter, and, along with the Fields and Potts, contributed no little to the food supply. As definite evidence of the regard that was held for Colter one recalls Colter's River which flows into the Clearwater just a short distance above the present Lewiston, Idaho, at what is now Arrow Junction.

On the trip east the party divided into two groups. One group, under Clark, travelled straight east from Three Forks and, striking the Yellowstone, followed it to a junction with the Missouri. Colter was with the other party, which, under Lewis, explored the headwaters of the Marias River. Just before the reunion of the two parties was effected, two trappers, Dixon and Hancock, were met. They told Lewis that Captain Clark had passed their camp only the day before, and then decided to accompany Lewis on down to where the other party would be waiting. During the time that these two men were in the company of the members of the Expedition much talk was made of their recent experiences among the Tetons, and their plans in regard to trapping and trading with the Indians of the upper Missouri were discussed. Colter caught the fever! He accordingly asked for, and was given, his discharge, pay to date, and the land warrant that had been promised to members of the Expedition. That was on August 17, 1806. With these papers, and a small amount of ordnance, Colter turned back—back to the wilderness; away from home, friends, civilization, and honor. And why? Perhaps here is an example of the pioneer spirit incarnate. Perhaps he had seen enough of the poverty and squalor of the cities of the east, and would have no more of them. Does Colter not assist us, in answering this question when he admits that, back in St. Louis, "he would be lonesome"?

The first winter (1806-7) was spent much as had been planned, but by spring Colter seems to have tired of his bargain, or at least to have been dissatisfied with the profits. He once more started down the Missouri to St. Louis in a canoe. This time he was as far as the mouth of the Platte River, just south of the site of the present city of Omaha, when he met a party of traders and hunters under the leadership of that very interesting character, Manuel Lisa. This man had been engaged as a fur trader in St. Louis, and when the Lewis and Clark reports of the extent of fur-bearing animals in the west came in, he determined to lead an expedition into the country so lately covered by them. Colter was just the man he needed, and with a little persuasion Colter again turned his back on civiliza-

tion. The Lisa party retraced much of the route that Clark had earlier followed; that is, up the Missouri to the mouth of the Yellowstone, then up that stream to the mouth of the Big Horn. Here Lisa built a fort about midway between the present cities of Billings and Miles City.

Considerable delay had made the date of their arrival at this point (November 21, 1807) much too late for the autumn trapping season, so Lisa immediately dispatched Colter to contact the various tribes in the area hoping that they would come to his post to trade. It is on this trip that Colter made the discoveries that give him an eternal place in our history.

Traveling up the Big Horn he came to the Shoshone (then called the Stinking Water on account of the sulphur fumes coming from various hot springs in the region) which he followed to nearly the present east boundary of the Park. He then turned south and discovered Jackson Lake, and the famous Jackson Hole country, later a rendezvous for the trapping fraternity. Passing west into what is now Idaho through Teton Pass he explored the headwaters of the Snake River. It is likely that at this time the stone mentioned at the beginning of this study was carved. He retraced his steps into what is now within the Yellowstone area and left another "document," which, unfortunately, has been lost. In 1889 an exploring party headed by Tazewell Woody (Theodore Roosevelt's hunting guide) came upon a tree which was blazed with an "X" and the initials "J. C." Woody immediately realized the possibility that it had been made by Colter, and refused to cut it down. By the growth of the tree fibre around the blaze Woody estimated the blaze to be eighty years old, which date coincides with the time of Colter's visit to that region. Later the tree was cut down with the idea of putting the blazed section in a museum, but it was lost in transit.

Continuing north from the point where this blaze was left (practically on the south boundary of Yellowstone) Colter discovered Yellowstone Lake, probably at "The Thumb." He then evidently passed along the ridge that lies between the River and Norris Basin for he does not mention the geysers at all. It has been suggested that he may have seen them, and told some people (including Clark) about them, but as it was he was greeted with much derision and the entire area for considerable time enjoyed no other name than "Colter's Hell." He mentions a "Hot Spring Brimstone" which can be no other than Mammoth Hot Spring, but he mentions none of the Falls. This can be explained, in view of the location of Mammoth

Hot Spring in relation to the Falls, by assuming that he came into the Canyon at its lower end, and thus missed the Falls altogether. One more word about the geysers and the name "Colter's Hell." In 1829, Joseph L. Meek discovered, to the best present knowledge, the geyser basins. Forty years later a Mrs. Victor, writing on Meek's discoveries, hints at an overstatement on his part, and retains for the area the name given to it in 1808 by the Lisa party: "Colter's Hell." Colter's return to the fort was uneventful, following, largely, the same route as that he had followed on entering the Yellowstone area. He had accomplished his immediate purpose: to discover and explore in the region of the headwaters of the Yellowstone. But he had done more; he had been the first white man to set foot on that part of the earth where nature in her most sublime mood plays wonders with colors, fire, and boiling water.

Colter's relations with Lisa for the next two years are not very clear. He retained his connections, however, for he was sent on other "contact" expeditions, and yet he seems to have been in a sense a free lance trader. On one of these trips Colter experienced his famous race for his life with the Blackfeet. He and a companion were captured; his companion was shot, and Colter was turned loose with the understanding that he was to run for his life. He ran! And with a speed that made the tale a classic among woodsmen and trappers for years. This was on the Jefferson River. It was three hundred miles to the fort. But the fact that he covered this distance, naked, and without weapons or food save roots only adds to our opinion of Colter's ability as a woodsman.

Continued outrages on members of the Lisa expedition whenever they strayed too far from camp, plus an inability to take enough furs to pay for the risks, convinced Colter that the Lisa expedition was a failure. He therefore determined to again start for St. Louis. Once started he lost no time on the way. He covered with his canoe loaded with furs and personal belongings, the three thousand miles in the unbelievably short time of thirty days, arriving, after an absence of six years, in May, 1810.

Clark, who in the meantime had been appointed Indian Agent for the Louisiana Territory, was in the east conferring with Nicholas Biddle relative to the publication of the Journals. Colter called on him immediately upon his return and gave him a careful report of all that had happened including his visit to the upper reaches of the Yellowstone. Clark made a map of Colter's trip and forwarded it to Biddle who had it engraved into the map of the Expedition

that appeared in the Edition of 1814. This explains why "Colter's Route" appears in Biddle's map.

Not long after this interview with Clark, Colter was married and spent his remaining years on a farm at Charette, a village in Franklin County, Missouri, near the present town of Dundee. Only once more does his name find its way into the pages of history, for he died of jaundice in November of 1813. When the land contingent of the Astor Expedition, under the able leadership of Wilson Price Hunt, passed up the Missouri, two cabins of note were passed. One was that of Daniel Boone, now grown old in a hopeless race to keep ahead of the settler, and the other was Colter's. Irving, in his *Astoria*, tells of Colter's visit to the camp, and of his interest in the expedition. He travelled, it seems, for several miles with Hunt, and only the circumstance of his having been recently married kept him from going along. But eventually the bride won over the wilderness and so, Irving says, after a march of several miles, "he took reluctant leave of the travellers and turned his face homeward."

Here, indeed, is a remarkable character. He possessed, and in liberal measure, all of the qualities of the frontiersman and scout. Self-reliant, an expert rifleman, his greatest asset was his extraordinarily quick coordination of thought and action. But he was more than merely a scout and explorer. He was something of an economist and prophet. He was the first to point out the possibility of taking wagons across the Rocky Mountains, although it was not until 1836 that Whitman reached Boise with the first of this long caravan, and it was four years later before Newell and Meek reached the Columbia. But like most men of his time he wrote little or nothing of his experiences, and present information is limited to Clark's map, a series of second hand accounts from the pens of Brackenridge, Bradbury, James, and Irving, and an enormous amount of tradition and legend.

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