

THE GREAT BASIN BEFORE 1850

Long before the coming of the Mormons, fur traders and trappers had penetrated the Great Basin. In search of furs and adventure, these hardy pioneers followed the Indian trails into the canyons of the Rocky Mountains and blazed new ones for the Covered Wagon, which later brought the permanent settlers. This advance into the Far West was an invasion of alien territory, for the country beyond the Louisiana Line belonged to Spain until after the Spanish American Revolution of 1810-1821 and to Mexico for more than a quarter of a century later. In fact, it remained the territory of Mexico for almost a year after the initial settlement of the Mormons within its eastern bounds in the valley of the Great Salt Lake.

The Spanish explorers preceded the American into the Great Basin by half a century. In 1776, a company was organized at Santa Fe under the leadership of two Franciscan friars, Francisco Dominguez and Silvestro Velez de Escalante, for the purpose of opening a trail to Monterey by way of the Great Basin, and of becoming acquainted with the Indians to the north and northwest with a view to establishing missions among them. The two fathers, with their company of additional members, left Santa Fe, July 29, and travelled northwest, passing through western Colorado, across the headwaters of the San Juan River, and thence due north to the Grand and White Rivers. Turning west, the party reached the banks of Green River near the mouth of Bush Creek, a little above the present site of Jenson, Utah.¹ From this point the explorers pushed on to the Uintah, thence up the Duchesne, and following a trail along the foothills of the Wasatch, reached the top of the divide which separates the waters of the Colorado River from those of the Great Basin. Descending the Diamond Creek and the Spanish Fork River, the party reached the settlements of the Timpanogos, on the eastern shores of Utah Lake, on September 23, 1776.² They explored the country about Hobbie Creek and Provo River but did not visit the Great Salt Lake, which was about forty miles to the north. After spending three days visiting the tribes on the eastern shore of the lake as far north as Provo River, the party resumed its

¹ Hill, Joseph J., *The Old Spanish Trail*, 453.

² Hill has identified the Spanish Fork Canyon as the one through which Escalante passed into Utah Valley. Bancroft has them coming down the Provo River through Timpanogos Canyon. *Ibid.*

journey to Monterey.³ They pursued a southerly source, passing through the valley where Spanish Fork, Nephi and Juab are now located until they came to the present site of Mills City,⁴ where they crossed the Sevier, thence taking a southwestern course through Beaver Valley, probably along the route now followed by the Los Angeles and Salt Lake Railroad. Lack of provisions and the fear of impending hardships from a severe winter that had already set in, made the party decide on October 8, to return to Santa Fe instead of trying to reach Monterey. Continuing their journey, they passed on through Cedar Valley, down the Virgin River. After twenty-three days of wandering, they reached the Colorado, November 7, at a point about thirty miles below the mouth of the San Juan, just north of the Utah-Arizona line.⁵ They reached the Moqui villages on November 24, and finally arrived at Santa Fe, January 2, 1777. Although the Dominguez-Escalante expedition failed to open a route to California by way of the Great Basin, it was the first known exploration by white men of that part of the Great Basin included within the present limits of the State of Utah. It also paved the way for a lucrative trade with the Indians of that region.

There is evidence that a continual intercourse was carried on between the Spaniards and Mexicans of New Mexico and the Yutas and the Timpanogos of the Great Basin.⁶ Seven men under command of Mauricio Arze and Lagos Garcia visited the Timpanogos in 1813.⁷ Again during the fall and winter of 1829-30, a company of sixty Mexican traders under the command of Antonio Armijo succeeded in opening a road from New Mexico to California by a route north of the Grand Canyon of the Colorado.⁸ At about the same time, an American party under Ewing Young of Tennessee, traversed the trail from Taos by way of Utah to Monterey.⁹ This route later became known as the "Old Spanish Trail."¹⁰ It really was an extension of the Old Santa Fe Trail from the Missouri River.

In general the route extended northwest from Santa Fe to

3 Hill, *The Old Spanish Trail*, 454.

4 Hill, *The Old Spanish Trail*, 455.

5 Hill, *The Old Spanish Trail*, 456.

6 Hill, *The Old Spanish Trail*, 457-461.

7 Hill, *The Old Spanish Trail*, 461-464.

8 Hill, *The Old Spanish Trail*, 464-466.

9 Hill, *The Old Spanish Trail*, 466-469.

10 Says Hill: "The Old Spanish Trail, properly so-called, extended only to the Indians of the Great Basin and not to California. The confusion of names seems to have arisen from the fact that expeditions from New Mexico to California in the second quarter of the Nineteenth Century usually travelled to the vicinity of the Colorado along the trail that had been used by the Spaniards since the time of Rivera (1765) in their trade with the Yutas in the Great Basin, and which had thus become known as the Old Spanish Trail. But the Old Spanish Trail, properly so-called, extended only to the Indians of the Great Basin and not to California." Hill, *Old Spanish Trail*, 467-468.

the Colorado State line, thence northwest along the Dolores to a point near the Utah State line where it struck overland to the Grand and Green Rivers, crossing the former at Moab and the latter at Green River Crossing. By way of the Price River, the trail struck the headwaters of the Sevier and thence followed along that stream to the Great Basin. From here is followed a southwest course through southern Nevada by way of the Mohave Desert into California.¹¹

For the next twenty years Santa Fe became an important base of supply for the Rocky Mountain trade. The records of Utah mention Mexican caravans from the New Mexican capital in Salt Lake City in 1848.¹² American traders, on the other hand, traversed the trail to Santa Fe and there disposed of their furs for outfitting supplies. There is also evidence that a lucrative Mexican slave trade was carried on with the Indians of the Great Basin as late as 1853.¹³

Almost simultaneous with the development of the Santa Fe trade and its extension into the Great Basin by way of the Old Spanish Trail, American fur traders were penetrating the Rocky Mountains from the east and discovering passes to the north of the Spanish route. The most important gateway into the Great Basin was the famous South Pass, discovered probably in 1824, by a detachment of Ashley men, who in the interests of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, organized by William Ashley in 1822, had been sent to trap in the Green River Basin.¹⁴ "This Pass," says Turner, "commanded the routes to the great interior Basin and to the Pacific Ocean. What Cumberland Gap was in the advance of settlement across the Alleghenies, South Pass was in the movement across the Rocky Mountains; through it passed the later Oregon and California trails to the Pacific Coast."¹⁵

James ("Jim") Bridger was considered perhaps the ablest hunter, mountaineer and guide in the west. Probably no other man was so well acquainted with the Great Basin. He was one

11 Young, Levi Edgar, *The Founding of Utah*, 53.

12 Parley P. Pratt, in a letter to his brother Orson, then on a mission in England, refers to Mexican Caravans in the Salt Lake Valley. The letter was written under date of September 5, 1848. *Early Utah Records*, 34-35.

13 Governor Young issued a proclamation in April, 1853, directing the arrest of a party of Mexican slave traders at Provo. They were illegally exchanging guns and ammunition for Indian children. See his message to the Territorial Legislature, December, 1853, in "History of Brigham Young," Ms., 149-152.

14 Snow has investigated in some detail the conflicting claims of the discovery of South Pass. He concludes that Ashley's men, among whom were Bridger and Provost, discovered the Pass in 1824. See Snow, William J., "Explorations and Development of the Great Basin before the Coming of the Mormons," Master's Thesis, 42-58.

Chittenden places the probable date of discovery late in the fall of 1823. Chittenden, Hiram M., *History of the American Fur Trade of the Far West*, I, 271.

15 Turner, Frederick J., *Rise of the New West*, 119.

of the Ashley men who discovered South Pass and opened up the trade of the Salt Lake and Green River Valleys and was perhaps the first white man to see the Great Salt Lake, which he visited in the winter of 1824-25.¹⁶ In 1830, he became a partner of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, which Ashley had sold in 1826 to Smith, Jackson and Sublette, under whose management it continued to operate until 1834.¹⁷ Upon its dissolution, Bridger entered the services of the American Fur Company. In 1843, he founded Fort Bridger on Black's Fork of Green River, and it became one of the most famous posts of the West. Ashley, himself, in the autumn of 1824 camped upon the Green River¹⁸ and in the following spring made his way with Etienne Provost, a French Canadian, across the Wasatch Mountains to Salt Lake Valley. Ashley explored south of the Salt Lake Valley as far as Sevier Lake, afterwards known as Ashley Lake. Before returning to the rendezvous in the Green River Basin, he explored the Cache Valley, sixty miles to the north of Salt Lake.

Another famous trapper was Peter Skene Ogden. Into the country southwest of the Columbia, he went on four successive trips for the Hudson Bay Company. During the winter of 1825-26, he explored the Snake River Valley, penetrating south into the Great Basin as far as Cache Valley, where he met the Ashley men. In 1826-27, Ogden explored parts of California, northern Nevada and the territory of Utah north of the Great Salt Lake. The city of Ogden, Utah, the site of which was once a rendezvous for fur traders of the Great Basin, was named in honor of this doughty trapper.

Perhaps the most famous of all explorers of the Great Basin was Jedediah Smith. As early as 1825, he was trapping west of the Wasatch Mountains in the interests of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. When he became a partner with Jackson and Sublette in 1826, it was planned that he should explore south and west of the Great Basin to the Pacific Coast, while his partner and most of the men would trap the Wasatch and Green River Countries. Accordingly, Smith left August 22, 1826, with a party of fifteen men to explore the unknown regions of the

¹⁶ Both Jedediah Smith and Etienne Provost are known to have visited the Great Salt Lake during the winter of 1824-1825. Relative to the discovery of Great Salt Lake, Chittenden says: "The situation may be concisely stated by saying that while Bridger is the first white man we positively know to have seen the Salt Lake, we do not positively know he was the first to see it." Chittenden, *History of the American Fur Trade of the Far West*, II, 796.

See also Snow, "Exploration and Development of the Great Basin before the Coming of the Mormons," 64-88.

¹⁷ Chittenden, *History of the American Fur Trade of the Far West*, I, 304.

¹⁸ Fort Crockett on the Green River, built by Ashley's men in the fall of 1824, was the first settlement of white men in Utah.

southwest. He took the trail leading south passing by the Little Salt Lake, and thence southwest to the Rio Virgin. From here he crossed the Colorado into the territory of the Mohave Indians, where he remained a few days before pursuing his journey to San Diego. From this place he continued northward, and keeping on a line approximately one hundred miles from the shore, travelled nearly three hundred miles over new country to the valley of the Stanislaus. Here he left the main party, and with only two companions, struck boldly across the Sierras, then covered with snow from four to eight feet deep, and thence across the Desert to Salt Lake.¹⁹

On July 13, 1827, Smith started on his second trip to California, accompanied by eighteen men. Traversing the same route to Monterey which he had followed the previous year, he turned northward from that post and proceeded upon the Sacramento River to American Fork, where he wintered. On April 13, 1828, he resumed his journey northward but met with disaster at a point on the Umpqua River, fifteen of his party being killed by Indians, and he with the two remaining survivors barely escaping to Fort Vancouver. Here he was most hospitably received by Dr. John McLoughlin, Chief Factor of the Hudson Bay Company at that post. In March 1829, Smith started east again. Ascending the Columbia to the Hudson Bay post among the Flatheads, he proceeded thence southward to the Snake, which he followed to the "Tetons" on Henry Fork and from thence southward into the Great Basin.

Commenting on these remarkable explorations, Goodwin says: "The explorations which Smith had made were notable in the annals of western history. He had been the first of whom we have any knowledge to travel southwest from the Great Salt Lake to California, the first to cross the Sierra Nevada Mountains and the deserts of Utah and Nevada and the first to travel up the Pacific by land from San Francisco to the Columbia."²⁰

The route travelled in 1826 from the Stanislaus to the Great Salt Lake Basin marks, in general, the path followed by the Union Pacific Railroad; Ashley having previously marked the path to Ogden, Utah, and Smith now completing it to the coast.²¹ In 1830, Smith sold his interests to Jackson, Milton and Sublette. In the following year while accompanying a caravan of

19 Snow, "Explorations and Development of the Great Basin before the Coming of the Mormons," 98.

20 Goodwin, Cardinal Leonidas, *The Trans-Mississippi West*, 432-433.

21 Snow, "Explorations and Development of the Great Basin before the Coming of the Mormons," 99.

merchandise to Santa Fe, he was killed by Comanche Indians on the Cimarron Desert of Kansas.²²

The first official reconnoissance in the Great Basin before the coming of the Mormons in 1847, was the exploration of Captain Bonneville. While he was not in the employ of the government, yet he was on furlough from the United States Army and was expressly instructed to obtain information concerning the Indian tribes of the Rocky Mountains and to examine the quality of the soil, the products, minerals, climate, geography, topography and geology.²³ He left Fort Osage, May 1, 1832, with a train of wagons and in the following year visited the northern shore of the Great Salt Lake. Bonneville intrusted Walker with a party of forty men to explore the Great Salt Lake. Accordingly, he left the camp on Green River, July 24, 1833, but instead of confining himself to exploration in the immediate vicinity of this Lake, he struck across the Great Salt Lake Desert to the Sierras, which he crossed into the Sacramento Valley and thence proceeded to Monterey. Walker was perhaps the first white explorer to cross the Sierras from east to west. Aside from the publication of maps, much of the information for which was obtained from Rocky Mountain fur traders, and which contained many inaccuracies later corrected by Fremont, the explorations of Bonneville were of little value.²⁴

The most important official explorations of the Great Basin before 1850 were those of Fremont. In May, 1843, he left Kansas City with a company of twenty-seven men, among whom was the famous guide Kit Carson, and in September of that year was in the Great Salt Lake Valley. On September 9, he set sail upon the Great Salt Lake, exploring one of its islands since known as Fremont but then named Disappointment because of its desert aspect. The following winter Fremont skirted the northwest border of the Basin to Johnson's Pass, from whence he crossed over into the Sacramento Valley. Returning east in the spring he skirted the Great Basin from the south, travelling

²² Says Dale: "Smith's contribution to cartography, together with his own journals and diaries, and sketches, although the last have unfortunately perished, entitled him to rank with Lewis and Clark in the group of foremost American explorers. They discovered the first overland route to the Pacific; he discovered the second." Dale, Harrison, "*The Ashley-Smith Explorations and the Discovery of a Central Route to the Pacific*, 307.

²³ Young, *The Founding of Utah*, 77.

²⁴ Bonneville is wrong in declaring "on all the maps of those days the Great Salt Lake had two great outlets to the Pacific Ocean; one of these being the Buenaventura River." (Bonneville to Lieut. C. K. Warren, from Gila River, New Mexico, Aug. 24, 1857.) Simpson says, "On Findley's map of North America (Philadelphia 1826), which purports to include all the recent geographical discoveries up to the date stated, the Buenaventura is represented not as one of the outlets of the Great Salt Lake into the Pacific, but as the outlet of Lake Salado, doubtless the Lake Sevier of our present maps." Simpson, Capt. J. H., *Explorations Across the Great Basin of Utah in 1859*, 19-20, including footnote, p. 20.

over the Salt Lake Route. He made accurate and careful observations as far north as Utah Lake, where he turned east, crossing the divide to Green River, and thence east to the Missouri. On his third expedition²⁵ (the second in the Great Basin), Fremont entered the Valley of Utah Lake by way of Timpanogos Canyon. He followed the Jordan River to Great Salt Lake, where his party divided, one division going west over the Humboldt and the other southwest towards Walker River.²⁶ Fremont has given a very valuable description of the Great Basin which he explored thoroughly. His maps and reports, scientifically and accurately drawn, furnish valuable data for the whole region west of the Rocky Mountains.

To sum up briefly, the fur traders and early explorers of the Great Basin revealed the sources of the Platte, the Green, the Yellowstone and the Snake Rivers and the general characteristics of the Great Salt Lake region; pioneered their way through South Pass, discovered the trails and indicated practical wagon routes through the Rockies; crossed and recrossed the Great American Desert to California and became intimately acquainted with the geography of the country. In short, they blazed the trails for the Covered Wagon and future settlement. The Mormon colonists who came in 1847 eagerly sought the reports of these early explorers.²⁷ Their route of travel and location for settlement was largely determined by the preliminary work of these early pathfinders of the western wilderness.

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²⁵ Fremont, in his first expedition, followed the Platte, thence went through South Pass, and reconnoitered the country in the vicinity of the Wind River Mountains in Wyoming. On Aug. 15, 1842, he ascended Fremont peak in that range of mountains. His fourth expedition in 1848 was unofficial. At his own expense he crossed the plains to seek a practicable route to the Pacific through the valley of the Rio Grande. From Santa Fe he obtained fresh recruits and pushed his way from thence to the Sacramento Valley in California. Thus, only the second and third expeditions of Fremont penetrated the Great Basin to the west of the Wasatch Mountains.

On Feb. 24, 1854, Fremont and a party of nine white men and twelve Delawares arrived at Parowan, Iron Co., Utah, after having traversed the Old Spanish Trail from the Southwest. They had experienced terrible hardships on their journey and all were in a fearful state of starvation. While Colonel Fremont was considered an enemy to the Saints, being without money, he was kindly treated and supplied with provisions for himself and men while at Parowan and fitted out with animals and provisions to pursue his journey. "History of Brigham Young," Ms., entry of February 20, 1854.

²⁶ Snow, "Explorations and Development of the Great Basin before the Coming of the Mormons," 137.

²⁷ Snow, "Explorations and Development of the Great Basin before the Coming of the Mormons," 140-151.