

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## REFERENCE SERIES

### EXPLORATION OF CITY OF ROCKS AND GRANITE PASS

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An expedition of Pacific Fur Company beaver hunters explored Snake River past Raft River in 1811, but that party was headed for a new Pacific Coast trading post at Astoria. Under Wilson Price Hunt's and Donald Mackenzie's supervision, that crew hurried west over a difficult route that discouraged extensive examination of side streams for several years. Ramsay Crooks and Robert Stuart brought a return party back up Snake River in 1812, but again they saw Cache Peak only from a considerable distance.<sup>1</sup>

Donald Mackenzie, however, was firmly convinced that a large scale Snake country fur trade would pay off, and in 1816 he returned as a North West Company partner to realize his ambition to start a large new trappers' empire.

By 1818, Mackenzie returned with a fairly large brigade of French Canadian and Iroquois trappers that included a variety of other people as well. His North West Company contingent moved over a broad area, enabling him to explore from Bear Lake and Upper Bear River on to Green River farther into Wyoming. He also checked Upper Snake River. Concluding his Snake country operations in 1820, he had established a system of mobile trapping and summer trading rendezvous that expanded trapping activities to Upper Raft River near City of Rocks.<sup>2</sup>

In 1822 Michel Bourdon brought Mackenzie's brigade of trappers back to places like Cache Valley, where he explored new streams,<sup>3</sup> and by 1824, that expansion extended to Upper Raft River and Tributary Creek in or close to City of Rocks. British trappers knew Cache Peak and its surroundings well enough by 1824 that Alexander Ross (who took over Mackenzie's operation) knew that exploration had gone that far. He was impressed enough by that beaver hunting terminal that when he published his history of Pacific Northwest fur trade in 1855, he explained how he had taken his trappers' brigade to a campsite near City of Rocks, August 24, 1824, from which he returned because further searching for beaver past that point would have had a negative cost ratio.

Although he made careful use of his daily expedition journal in compiling his history, he did not happen to notice that on August 24, 1824, his party actually camped along Payette River near later Emmett.<sup>4</sup> Some members of Alexander Ross' trapping party clearly had to have explored somewhere not far from Cache Peak and City of Rocks to have provided that information. Ross had an exceptional interest in geography and trapping sites, but he had

not heard of--or at least did not report--City of Rocks, although he did mention an unusual stone bridge that he had not seen near King Hill. That was a feature that a few of his trappers came across. In any event, Ross never got anywhere near City of Rocks, although he explored a lot of difficult Idaho mountain country in 1824.

Peter Skene Ogden took charge of Alexander Ross' Snake brigade late in 1824, and energetic competition between his trappers and mountain men supplied from St. Louis induced him to check out Upper Raft River streams that had seemed so unpromising. Coming there in 1826, he moved westward past City of Rocks to discover Granite Pass, June 11. He learned enough about beaver resources there to examine other streams in that area after that.<sup>5</sup> When John Work took over Ogden's Snake brigade assignment, he came back with his Hudson's Bay Company trappers.

He followed Ogden's later route that avoided City of Rocks in 1831, but sent four of his trappers from Junction Valley through Granite Pass, May 12, so that they could check out possibilities along Goose Creek.<sup>6</sup> By that time, Hudson's Bay Company trappers had identified later emigrant routes and other roads near City of Rocks, but had concluded that profitable beaver ventures no longer were viable there. In contrast to long term conservationist policies for Rupert's Land (almost entirely in Canada), Hudson's Bay Company operators in Pacific Northwest trapping zones tried to eradicate all beaver from a broad band of territory in order to insulate and protect their British Columbia streams from St. Louis competition. Idaho's Snake country formed an essential segment in any such barrier.<sup>7</sup>

Mountain men representing St. Louis fur companies worked hard to help British trappers to create a barrier between their beaver colonies and Hudson's Bay Company sources. But they did not have to spend much time around City of Rocks. Joseph R. Walker, who had led an expedition of mountain men to California and back for Captain B. L. E. Bonneville, returned to Snake River by way of Goose Creek, west of City of Rocks.<sup>8</sup> That route held a lot more promise for beaver colonies than did a trail over Granite Pass to Raft River and City of Rocks. Walker's investigation of practical Humboldt Valley routes to California proved useful subsequently, but during his beaver hunting days he and other mountain men who dealt with St. Louis fur companies naturally had little or no close connection with City of Rocks. Like Ogden who had checked out that area only to conclude that beaver hunters needed to follow streams in other places, they searched for fur resources rather than spectacular rock formations.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Phillip A. Rollins, *Discovery of the Oregon Trail* (New York: Scribners, 1935), .

<sup>2</sup>Alexander Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, edited by Kenneth A. Spaulding (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), 117-187.

<sup>3</sup>E. E. Rich, ed., *Peter Skene Ogden's Snake Country Journals, 1824-25 and 1825-26* (London: Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1950), 229, 232.

<sup>4</sup>Ross, 275-6; Journal of Alexander Ross, 24 August 1824, Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Winnipeg, Manitoba Provincial Archives Collections.

<sup>5</sup>E. E. Rich, ed., *Peter Skene Ogden's Snake Country Journals, 1824-25 and 1825-26* (London: Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1950), 164.

<sup>6</sup>Francis D. Haines, 1923-1975, ed., *The Snake Country Expedition of 1830-1831: John Work's Field Journal* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 106-12.

<sup>7</sup>Frederick Merk, *History of the Westward Movement* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), 312.

<sup>8</sup>Zenas Leonard, *Narrative of the Adventures of Zenas Leonard* (Clearfield, PA: D. W. Moore, 1839), 70.

(This information has not been edited.)

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