

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY REFERENCE SERIES

PIERRE'S HOLE

Number 241

July 1972

Discovered in 1808 by John Colter (who had come west with Lewis and Clark and who stayed to trap beaver), Pierre's Hole soon became a favorite hunting ground for fur traders. After Andrew Henry established a winter post to the west on Henry's Fork in 1810, some of his men searched for beaver in Pierre's Hole. Wilson Price Hunt and Donald MacKenzie brought an expedition of trappers through Pierre's Hole on their way to Asotria the next year, and in 1818, Donald MacKenzie returned to that part of the country with still another brigade of fur hunters. Pierre's Hole got its name from Pierre Trevantiagon, leader of a group of Iroquois Indians who trapped for MacKenzie and the North West Company of Montreal. After MacKenzie moved to another assignment and the North West Company became part of the British Hudson's Bay Company, Pierre returned to Pierre's Hole with Michel Bourdon in 1822 or with Finnan MacDonald in 1823. In the summer of 1824, Jedediah Smith and six mountain men came on a trapping expedition through Pierre's Hole and, heading southwest toward the Blackfoot, rescued Pierre and his Iroquois trapping band who had been left destitute on the Portneuf by some unfriendly Bannock Indians. After returning to their Hudson's Bay Company base at Flathead House late in 1824, Pierre and his Iroquois finally joined John H. Weber's band of Rocky mountain trappers in 1825. In 1825 and 1826 he showed his new associates the wonders of Pierre's Hole and the Teton range. After touring most of the Rocky Mountain west, one of them--Jim Bridger--upon returning in 1860, pronounced Pierre's Hole "the finest valley in the world." Even though the climate had gotten drier by then, Pierre's Hole still was "covered with vegetation of the greatest luxuriance, and carpeted with innumerable flowers of brilliant hue and the richest variety."

Located north of Gray's Hole (named for one of Pierre's Iroquois associates) and west of Jackson's Hole (named for one of the trappers the Iroquois hunters took to Pierre's Hole), Pierre's Hole soon became a strategic center of the fur trade of the northern Rockies. On his return from California to the Rockies, Jedediah Smith rejoined his fur trade partners--David E. Jackson and William L. Sublette--there, August 5, 1829. Early in 1830, Andrew Drips and Lucien Fontenelle brought an American Fur Company trapping expedition into the region, and Joe Meek trapped in Pierre's Hole with a Rocky Mountain Fur Company brigade the next year. Finally in 1832, the annual trappers' rendezvous for the Rocky Mountain fur trade assembled in Pierre's Hole.

More Indians than trappers turned up at the Pierre's Hole rendezvous from July 8-18, 1832. Altogether more than 200 mountain men (some of them independent, but most associated with

the Rocky Mountain Fur Company or the American Fur Company) joined 120 lodges of Nez Perce Indians and 80 lodges of Flatheads for the summer fair and frolic. New entrants into the fur trade--expeditions of Nathaniel J. Wyeth and B. L. E. Bonneville--also appeared. Washington Irving, chronicler of the Adventures of Captain Bonneville, provided a classic account of that rendezvous:

In this valley was congregated the motley populace connected with the fur trade. Here the two rival companies had their encampments, with their retainers of all kinds: traders, trappers, hunters, and half-breeds, assembled from all quarters, awaiting their yearly supplies, and their orders to start off in new directions. . . . There was, moreover, a band of fifteen free trappers, commanded by a gallant leader from Arkansas, named Sinclair, who held their encampment a little apart from the rest. Such was the wild and heterogeneous assemblage, amounting to several hundred men, civilized and savage, distributed in tents and lodges in the several camps.

The arrival of Captain Sublette with supplies put the Rocky Mountain Fur Company in full activity. The wares and merchandise were quickly opened, and as quickly disposed of to trappers and Indians; the usual excitement and revelry took place, after which all hands began to disperse to their several destinations.

A wild battle with the Gros Ventre Indians, brought on by an Iroquois trapper, marked the end of the meeting. After a sharp fight, the Nez Perce and the trappers managed to drive off the Gros Ventre and head out for their fall hunts.

Trapping continued in Pierre's Hole until the decline of the Rocky Mountain fur trade forced practically all the mountain men to leave. Expeditions came to Pierre's Hole as late as 1838, 1839, and 1840. Trappers in 1840 brought Father Pierre Jean DeSmet through Pierre's Hole when he was on his way to start Jesuit missions among the Flathead and Coeur d'Alene Indians of the Pacific Northwest.

About the only mountain man to settle in Pierre's Hole was an Englishman, Richard Leigh, generally known as Beaver Dick. He was on hand to show F. V. Hayden and his geological survey through the region, and one of Hayden's parties camped ten days in Pierre's Hole in 1872. (From this base, N. P. Langford and James Stevenson climbed Grand Teton that summer.) Eventually settlers began to come to Pierre's Hole, and in 1888 and 1889 a substantial Mormon community was founded there. Pierre and his Iroquois trappers were largely forgotten, and the new settlement was known as Teton Valley, not Pierre's Hole.

Publications--450 N. 4th Street, Boise, ID 83702--208-334-3428