

Frémont's Report

January 25-29, 1844

Frémont: January 25th.

The morning was cold and bright, and as the sun rose the day became beautiful. A party of twelve Indians came down from the mountains to trade pine nuts, of which each one carried a little bag. These seemed now to be the staple of the country; and whenever we met an Indian, his friendly salutation consisted in offering a few nuts to eat and to trade; their only arms were bows and flint-pointed arrows. It appeared that in almost all the valleys the neighboring bands were at war with each other; and we had some difficulty in prevailing on our guides to accompany us on this day's journey, being at war with the people on the other side of a large snowy mountain which lay before us.

The general level of the country appeared to be getting higher, and we were gradually entering the heart of the mountains. Accompanied by all the Indians, we ascended a long ridge, and reached a pure spring at the edge of the timber, where the Indians had waylaid and killed an antelope, and where the greater part of them left us. Our pacific conduct had quieted their alarms; and though at war among each other, yet all confided in us—thanks to the combined effects of power and kindness—for our arms inspired respect, and our little presents and good treatment conciliated their confidence. Here we suddenly entered snow six inches deep, and the ground was a little rocky, with volcanic fragments, the mountain appearing to be composed of such rock. The timber consists principally of nut pines (*pinus monophyllus*), which here are of larger size—12 to 15 inches in diameter; heaps of cones lying on the ground, where the Indians have gathered the seeds.

The snow deepened gradually as we advanced. Our guides wore out their moccasins; and putting one of them on a horse, we enjoyed the unusual sight of an Indian who could not ride. He could not even guide the animal, and appeared to have no knowledge of horses. The snow was three or four feet deep on the summit of the pass; and from this point the guide pointed out our future road, declining to go any further. Below us was a little valley; and beyond this the mountains rose higher still, one ridge above another, presenting a rude and rocky outline. We descended rapidly to the valley; the snow impeded us but little; yet it was dark when we reached the foot of the mountain.

NOTE: Bridgeport Valley.

The day had been so warm that our moccasins were wet with melting snow; but here, as soon as the sun begins to decline, the air gets suddenly cold, and we had great difficulty to keep our feet from freezing—our moccasins being frozen perfectly stiff. After a hard day's march of 27 miles, we reached the river sometime after dark, and found the snow about a foot deep on the bottom—the river being entirely frozen over.

NOTE: East Fork of Walker River at a point about three miles downstream from the present-day town of Bridgeport, Ca. at a site now inundated by Bridgeport reservoir.

We found a comfortable camp, where there were dry willows abundant, and we soon had blazing fires. A little brandy, which I had husbanded with great care, remained, and I do not know any medicine more salutary, or any drink (except coffee) more agreeable, than this in a cold night and after a hard day's march. Mr. Preuss questioned whether the famed nectar ever possessed so exquisite flavor. All felt it to be a reviving cordial.

[26th] The next morning when the sun had not yet risen over the mountains, the thermometer was at 2° below zero; but the sky was bright and pure, and the weather changed rapidly into a pleasant day of summer. I remained encamped in order to explore the country, and allow the animals a day of rest, the grass being good and abundant under the snow.

The river is fifty or eighty feet wide, with a lively current, of very clear water. It forked a little above our camp, one of its branches coming directly from the south.

NOTE: East Fork of the Walker River. The East and West Forks join near Nordyke, Nevada.

At its head appeared to be a handsome pass; and from the neighboring heights we could see, beyond, a comparatively low and open country, which was supposed to form the valley of the Buenaventura.

NOTE: The Buenaventura River--a mythical river at one time thought to flow from the Great Basin to the Pacific. Frémont could not but have doubted its existence; Joseph Rutherford Walker had crossed the Sierras in 1833, and as this expedition was just beginning on the 31st of May 1843, Frémont and Walker had encamped together at Elm Grove on the Missouri frontier. Walker was in company with Joseph B. Chiles, on their way to California. Chiles had crossed the Sierra with the Bartleson--Bidwell party just two years previously, in 1841. Nevertheless, Frémont would have liked to have become the discoverer of the Buenaventura River, so they had been searching for rivers that might drain from the Great Basin into the Pacific. See Buenaventura River

The other branch issued from a nearer pass, in a direction S. 75° W., forking at the foot of the mountain, and receiving a part of its waters from a little lake.

NOTE: The west branch is made up of the flows of Buckeye Creek and Robinson Creek--the latter issuing from Twin Lakes.

I was in advance of the camp when our last guides left us; but so far as could be understood, this was the pass which they had indicated, and in company with [Kit] Carson, to-day I set out to explore it. Entering the range, we continued in a northwesterly direction up the valley, which here bent to the right.

NOTE: From Huntoon Valley into Pimentel Meadows--present Route 395.

It was a pretty open bottom, locked between lofty mountains, which supplied frequent streams as we advanced. On the lower part they were covered with nut-pine trees, and above with masses of pine, which we easily recognized, from the darker color of the foliage. From the fresh trails which occurred frequently in the morning, deer appeared to be remarkably numerous in the mountains.

We had now entirely left the desert country, and were on the verge of a region, which, extending westward to the shores of the Pacific, abounds in large game, and is covered with a singular luxuriance of vegetable life.

The little stream grew rapidly smaller, and in about twelve miles we had reached its head, the last water coming immediately out of the mountains on the right; and this spot was selected for our next encampment.

NOTE: Swauger Creek. Flows through Huntoon Valley--joins Buckeye Creek.

The grass showed well in sunny places; but in colder situations the snow was deep, and began to occur in banks, through which the horses found some difficulty in breaking a way.

To the left, the open valley continued in a southwesterly direction, with a scarcely perceptible ascent, forming a beautiful pass, the exploration of which we deferred until the next day, and returned to camp.

To-day an Indian passed through the valley, on his way into the mountains, where he showed us his lodge. We comprehended nothing of his language; and, though he appeared to have no fear, passing along in full view of the camp, he was indisposed to hold any communication with us, but showed the way he was going, and pointed for us to go on our road.

NOTE: Frémont's guides, Kit Carson and Tom Fitzpatrick, were familiar with the Uto-Aztec rooted languages (which they called "Snake") of the Great Plains, Rocky Mountains, and Great Basin. But in the vicinity of the West Walker River, the Washoe tribes were encountered, who speak a totally unrelated Hokan language. Communication with local tribes would be a continuing problem in crossing the Sierras.

By observation, the latitude of this encampment was 38° 18'01,"

NOTE: The latitude determination is correct. The longitude determination, as published in the report, was 121° 49' 52"--this would have placed them as far west Tracy, CA! The chronometer, which had stopped, was obviously not maintaining its rate.

and the elevation above the sea 6,310 feet

NOTE: This is based on the Frémont's measurement of boiling point of water at 202.2°f. Frémont consistently used a multiplier of 644' per each degree below a boiling point of 212°f. This is only accurate at moderate elevations, and most of his computations are rather wide of the mark. In this case, a combination of errors and weather has yielded a nearly correct result—the actual elevation is about 6400'. His barometer had been broken on October 21st, so he was relying on the thermometer.

Charles Preuss: January 26th.

We are having a day of rest today—quite a surprise. We still do not know where we really are. Yesterday we passed through mountains with deep, deep snow; for tomorrow there are even higher ones ahead of us. It is therefore necessary to let the beasts have some rest. We do not know yet whether the eagerly sought-for Sacramento Valley is behind these last mountains.

The weather, by the way, is magnificent, though very cold at night. I am so used to sleeping in the open that I have no desire at all for a smoke-filled tent, except in case of rain. The oilcloth is sufficient to protect me against snow and hoar frost. To be sure, from time to time I feel a slight rheumatism in my hips. We are told that there is no winter in the Sacramento Valley, only lots of rain at this season. If this is true, I believe this valley is not just beyond these mountains for the sky is deep blue there.

There is no lack of provisions yet. To be sure, we no longer have any meat, but peas, flour, rice, sugar, and coffee are keeping us almost stout. Since we passed the hot springs [Boiling Springs], or at least the trout lake [Pyramid Lake], we also have plenty of grass and water so that my mule competes with me in stoutness. My shoes are in such a miserable state that I don't know how they will last until we reach California.

Frémont, January 27th.

Leaving the camp to follow slowly, with directions to Carson to encamp at the place agreed on.

NOTE: Swauger Creek

Mr. [Thomas "Broken Hand"] Fitzpatrick and myself continued the reconnoissance. Arriving at the head of the stream, we began to enter the pass—passing occasionally through open groves of large pine-trees, on the warm side of the defile, where the snow had melted away, occasionally exposing a large Indian trail.

NOTE: An Indian route between Bridgeport Valley and Antelope Valley, high up, on the opposite side of the West Walker River from today's Route 395. It exists as a dirt road called Burcham Flat Road.

Continuing along a narrow meadow, we reached, in a few miles, the gate of the pass, where there was a narrow strip of prairie about 50 yards wide, between walls of granite rock.

NOTE: Devil's Gate.

On either side rose the mountains, forming on the left a rugged mass, or nucleus, wholly covered with deep snow, presenting a glittering and icy surface. At the time we supposed this to be the point into which they were gathered between the two great rivers, and from which the waters flowed off to the bay.

NOTE: "two great rivers...the bay." The Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers; San Francisco Bay. Frémont records this thought. It is based on the very erroneous lunar determination of longitude that is only recorded in the Astronomical Observations of the Report (p. 479). He was attempting to reestablish Greenwich Time. The results of this very difficult observation, an error in distance of 120 miles West, seemed to place him in both the latitude (correct) and longitude of the actual confluence of the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers. He thought that he might actually have passed through the Sierra Nevada. He was quickly undecieved!

This was the icy and cold side of the pass, and the rays of the sun hardly touched the snow. On the left, the mountains rose into peaks, but they were lower and secondary, and the country had somewhat a more open and lighter character. On the right were several hot springs, which appeared remarkable in such a place.

NOTE: Fale's Hot Springs.

In going through, we felt impressed by the majesty of the mountain, along the huge wall of which we were riding. Here there was no snow; but immediately beyond was a deep bank, through which we dragged our horses with considerable effort. We then immediately struck a stream, which gathered itself rapidly, and descended quick; and the valley did not preserve the open character of the other side, appearing below to form a cañon.

NOTE: The West Fork of the Walker River and the Walker River Canyon.

We therefore climbed one of the peaks on the right, leaving our horses below; but we were so much shut up that we did not obtain an extensive view, and what we saw was not very satisfactory, and awakened considerable doubt. The valley of the stream pursued a northwesterly direction, appearing below to turn sharply to the right, beyond which further view was cut off. It was, nevertheless, resolved to continue our road the next day down this valley, which we trusted would still prove that of the middle stream between the two great rivers. Towards the summit of this peak, the fields of snow were four or five feet deep on the northern side, and we saw several large hares, which had on their winter color, being white as the snow around them.

The winter day is short in the mountains, the sun having but a small space of sky to travel over in the visible part above the horizon; and the moment his rays are gone, the air is keenly cold. The interest of our work had detained us long, and it was nightfall when we reached camp.

NOTE: The head of Huntoon Valley--on Swauger Creek, where the rest of the company had encamped.

Frémont, January 28th.

To-day we went through the pass with all the camp, and, after a hard day's journey of twelve miles, encamped on a high point where the snow had been blown off, and the exposed grass afforded a scanty pasture for the animals. Snow and broken country together made our traveling difficult; we were often compelled to make large circuits, and ascend the highest and most exposed ridges, in order to avoid snow, which in other places was banked up to a great depth.

NOTE: Passing through Devil's Gate and past Fale's hot Springs, they crossed Burcham Flat and ascended the flanks an unnamed mountain pk. 8422' el. This old route exists today as a dirt road called Burcham Flat Road.

During the day a few Indians were seen circling around us on snow shoes, and skimming along like birds; but we could not bring them within speaking distance. [Alexis] Godey, who was a little distance from the camp, had sat down to tie his moccasins, when he heard a low whistle near, and looking up, saw two Indians half hiding behind a rock about forty yards distant; they would not allow him to approach, but breaking into a laugh, skimmed off over the snow, seeming to have no idea of the power of firearms, and thinking themselves perfectly safe when beyond arm's length.

To-night we did not succeed in getting the Howitzer into camp. This was the most laborious day we had yet passed through; the steep ascents and deep snow exhausting both men and animals. Our single chronometer had stopped during the day, and its error in time occasioned the loss of an eclipse of a satellite this evening. It had not preserved the rate with which we started from the Dalles, and this will account for the absence of longitudes along this interval of our journey.

Frémont: January 29th.

From this height we could see, at a considerable distance below, yellow spots in the valley, which indicated that there was not much snow.

NOTE: From the top of the mountain (pk. 8422'el.) looking north along the West Walker River into Antelope Valley.

One of these places we expected to reach to-night; and some time being required to bring up the gun, I went ahead with Mr. Fitzpatrick

and a few men, leaving the camp to follow, in charge of Mr. Preuss. We followed a trail down a hollow where the Indians had descended, the snow being so deep that we never came near the ground; but this only made our descent the easier, and, when we reached a little affluent to the river at the bottom, we suddenly found ourselves in the presence of eight or ten Indians.

NOTE: Deep Creek.

They seemed to be watching our motions, and, like the others, at first were indisposed to let us approach, ranging themselves like birds on a fallen log on the hill side above our heads, where, being out of reach, they thought themselves safe. Our friendly demeanor reconciled them, and, when we got near enough, they immediately stretched out to us handfuls of pine nuts, which seemed an exercise in hospitality. We made them a few presents, and, telling us that their village was a few miles below, they went on to tell their people what we were.

NOTE: Their village was where Mill Creek enters the West Walker River at the head of Antelope Valley.

The principal stream still running through an impractical cañon, we ascended a very steep hill, which proved afterwards the last and fatal obstacle to our little howitzer, which was finally abandoned at this place.

NOTE: The West Walker River Canyon--Frémont uses the original Spanish spelling cañon.

We passed through a small meadow a few miles below crossing the river,.

NOTE: We crossed the West Walker River at a place once called Chinaman's (or, China) Garden. The howitzer already abandoned on the east side before crossing the river.

...which depth, swift current, and rock, made it difficult to ford; and, after a few more miles of very difficult trail, issued into a larger prairie bottom, at the farther end of which we encamped, in a position rendered strong by rocks and trees.

NOTE: Where the river enters Antelope Valley. Settlement of Walker.

The lower parts of the mountain were covered with the nut pine. Several Indians appeared on the hill side, reconnoitring the camp, and were induced to come in; and in the evening we held a council. The Indians immediately made it clear that the waters on which we were also belong to the Great Basin, on the edge of which we had been since the 17th of December; and it had become evident that we had still the great ridge on the left to cross before we could reach the Pacific waters.

We explained to the Indians that we were endeavoring to find a passage across the mountains into the country of the whites, whom we were going to see; and told them that we wished them to bring us a guide, to whom we would give presents of scarlet cloth, and other articles, which were shown to them. They looked at the reward we offered, and conferred with each other, but pointed to the snow on the mountain, and drew their hands across their necks, and raised them above their heads, to show the depth; and signified that it was impossible to get through. They made signs that we must go to the southward, over a pass through a lower range, which they pointed out; there, they said, at the end of one day's travel, we would find people who lived near a pass in the great mountain; and at that point they engaged to furnish us with a guide. They appeared to have a confused idea, from report, of whites who lived on the other side of the mountain; and once, they told us, about two years ago a party of twelve men like ourselves had ascended their river, and crossed to the other waters. They pointed out to us where they had crossed; but then, they said, it was summer time; but now it would be impossible. I believe that this was a party led by Mr. Chiles, one of the only two men whom I know to have passed through the California mountains from the interior of the Basin--Walker being the other; and both were engaged upwards of twenty days, in the summer time, in getting over. Chiles' destination was the Bay of San Francisco, to which he descended by the Stanislaus

River; and Walker subsequently informed me that, like myself, descending to the southward on a more eastern line, day after day he was searching for the Buenaventura, thinking that he had found it with every new stream, until, like me, he abandoned all idea of its existence, and, turning abruptly to the right, crossed the great chain. These were both western men, animated with the spirit of exploratory enterprise which characterizes that people.

The Indians brought in during the evening an abundant supply of pine nuts, which we traded from them. When roasted, their pleasant flavor made them an agreeable addition to our now scanty store of provisions, which were reduced to a very low ebb. Our principal stock was in peas, which it is not necessary to say contain scarcely any nutriment. We had still a little flour left, some coffee, and a quantity of sugar, which I preserved as a defense against starvation.

The Indians informed us that at certain seasons they have fish in their waters, which we supposed to be the salmon trout; for the remainder of the year they live on pine nuts, which form their great winter subsistence—a portion being always at hand, shut up in the natural storehouse of the cones. At present, they were presented to us as a whole people living upon this simple vegetable.

The other division of the party did not come in to-night, but encamped in the upper meadow, and arrived the following morning. They had not succeeded in getting the howitzer beyond the place mentioned, and where it had been left by Mr. Preuss in obedience to my orders;

NOTE: A reference to Deep Creek Canyon

and, in anticipation of the snow banks and snow fields still ahead, foreseeing the inevitable detention to which it would subject us, I reluctantly determined to leave it there for the time. It was of the kind invented by the French for the mountain part of their war in Algiers; and the distance it had come with us proved how well it was adapted to its purpose. We left it, to the great sorrow of the whole party, who were grieved to part with a companion which had made the whole distance from St. Louis, and commanded respect for us on some critical occasions, and which might be needed for the same purpose again.