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## A Winter Rescue March Across the Rockies<sup>1</sup>

By LeRoy R. Hafen

The "Mormon War" broke in 1857. Across the broad plains of Nebraska came the United States troops, while dust-covered oxen pulled the heavy lumbering supply wagons along the winding white line of the Oregon Trail. The aspen leaves were already flashing a brilliant yellow and the chill of autumn was abroad when the little army reached the Green River valley in present western Wyoming. The Mormons at Salt Lake City had learned during the previous July of the intended military movement against them and had sent out Lot Smith with a band of scouts to destroy supplies and retard as best he could the progress of the United States troops. Lot Smith, clever and elusive, captured several of the trains of supplies which were in the rear of the troops. Soon the prairies were lighted with the dazzling blaze from flaming bacon, and clouds of smoke rose in billows from burning clothing and army blankets. When the advance troops reached the site of famous Fort Bridger, for fourteen years past the rendezvous of mountain trappers and recruiting station for overland emigrants, only the charred shell of the wilderness post remained.

The army found itself in a rather hazardous position. With supplies greatly reduced, winter snows already falling, and with one hundred miles of bleak mountains separating them from the Mormon metropolis beside the Great Salt Lake, it was decided to forsake plans of conquest for the present season and establish winter quarters. New supplies in quantity must be had and the nearest source was at Fort Union, New Mexico. To that depot a detachment must be sent for succor. Albert S. Johnston (later killed as a Confederate general in the Civil War) was in command of the United States troops at Fort Bridger. He ordered Captain R. B. Marcy to lead the expedition to New Mexico.

Six inches of snow covered Green River valley in late November as Captain Marcy organized his expedition for the winter journey across the Rockies. Mountain men agreed that a direct southeastern course from Fort Bridger would bring the party to Fort Union in twenty-five days, and snow beyond a depth of two feet, they were sure, would not be encountered on the high plateaus and over the mountain passes. Marcy was no tenderfoot, having seen twenty years of dangerous service on the frontier; so he insisted upon taking thirty days' rations. Sixty-six mules

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<sup>1</sup>The data for this story is taken from R. B. Marcy's *Thirty Years of Army Life on the Border*, 224 et seq.

were provided and among these sturdy animals the packs were properly distributed and the loads balanced and securely tied. The force consisted of forty enlisted men and twenty-five mountaineers. As guide and interpreter went Jim Baker, famous scout of the West, companion of Kit Carson and Jim Bridger. Baker had come to the mountains in the service of the American Fur Company at the age of eighteen and had for years roamed over the mountains and trapped the streams for beaver. Associated with Baker, in the role of interpreter went Tim Goodale, another frontiersman of fur-trade days. Tim's Indian wife, hardy and robust as her squaw-man, rode behind her master. Bedecked in her fringed buckskin, decorated with porcupine quills, with her round, bronzed face grinning from under a scarlet shawl she lent a rather unique note of color to the uniformity of the regular troops.

When all was in readiness the cavalcade set out from Fort Bridger, taking as planned, a southeastward course to the Green River. At the far eastern bend of this great affluent of the Colorado the sheltered valley of Brown's Hole was entered. Here, twenty years before, had been founded a fur trade post to which was given the name of the Texan hero of the Alamo. Fort Davy Crockett was now in ruins, its crumbling walls presenting mute evidence of the passing of the hectic days of the fur trade.

After following an ascending canyon for miles the party came out upon the Roan, or Book, Plateau which separates the waters of the Green and the Colorado rivers. Ten miles of trudging over this bleak stretch of white brought them to the great cliffs that terminate the plateau and break off almost perpendicularly two thousand feet to the Colorado River below. For miles along this escarpment but a single trail was to be found capable of descent by animals. In search of this went Jim Baker, while the soldiers prepared to bivouac on the edge of the bluff. Snow was cleared from patches of gray ground and eager hands gathered wood from scrubby bushes. Soon fires were crackling and spitting and throwing the shadows of dancing troopers against the freshly stretched tents. Mules were relieved of their burdens and permitted to glean a scanty fare from the half-covered bushes and buried grass.

Meanwhile, Jim Baker, the scout, followed along the edge of the cliff looking for familiar landmarks. The noise of the camp grew fainter and presently was replaced by the low muffled roar which rose from the river in the dark shadowed valley below. Familiar signs were unrecognised under the white snow mantle and the disconcerting search continued for hours. Finally the

jutting of a mighty rock beside a precipitous canyon revealed to the scout his whereabouts. It was now easy for him to find the winding path which Indians had cut along the face of the bluff. Triumphantlly he returned to camp and the compliments of the Captain and men were as sauce to his meat and cream for his coffee.

When pale morning light illumined the snow-mantled Rockies to the east, the camp was astir. As the light broadened into day anxious men peered over the cliff into the deep canyon where flowed the river. Brown earth and bare rocks were discernible on the bottomland and happy exclamations of surprise ran through the camp announcing the absence of snow in the canyon. The narrow and tortuous path leading down to the river was steep and slippery. Although the mules carefully watched their footing, occasionally one would lose his hold and go tumbling down the incline, rolling a mad race with detached articles of his pack until some tree or projecting crag brought him to a stop. Meanwhile shouting men gathered the wreck of the race and repaired the damage as best they could. In the beautiful valley of the Colorado River the mules were turned loose to graze and the men enjoyed a brief respite from the frost of the snow fields on the high plateau.

The 8th of December found Marcy and his men in the valley of the Gunnison River, at the site of modern Delta, Colorado. Here were the ruins of another fur trade post, Fort Robidoux, founded in the thirties by a famous trader from St. Louis. Bands of Ute Indians here encountered, were found to subsist on rabbits, bugs and crickets, and were described by Marcy as a "ragged, villainous-looking set" who flocked about the troops trying to steal anything that took their fancy. These Indians were friendly enough until the suggestion was made that they furnish a guide to lead the troops over the mountains. Then they shivered as if with cold and shook their heads, saying they were not yet ready to die. Marcy offered the chief the value of three horses if he would guide the party to Cochetopa Pass, the only feasible route in miles over the continental divide. But the Indian was adamant, indicating that the white men would die if they tried to cross.

But Marcy and his men, knowing that their comrades at Fort Bridger waited for supplies, determined to push on. If all went well, six days of travel would bring the party to the desired Cochetopa Pass—"Pass of the Buffaloes"—so-named because it had been discovered and first traversed by wandering buffaloes. It is located on the continental divide where one would least expect to find a low pass. The best passes across the Rockies in this latitude would appear to be at the headwaters of the Gunnison and

Uncompahgre rivers from the west and the Arkansas and the Rio Grande from the east. But these promising streams lead on and on to the icy, barren wastes above timberline before the backbone of the continent is reached, whereas, a branch of the Gunnison leads to the low and practicable Cochetopa Pass. If the proper affluent were followed by the party all would be well.

On the 11th of December the ascent of the western slope of the Rockies was commenced. Soon snow began to impede progress and presently became deeper with a crust on the surface which cut the legs of the mules. Deeper and deeper it grew and the order of march was changed. Instead of having the animals break the trail the men were ordered in front and proceeding in single file, tramped down a path. But despite this solicitude for the animals the poor beasts began to weaken. The bitter pine leaves from the evergreens formed their only sustenance and on this unwholesome forage the famished brutes grew thin, weak, and began to die. Burdens must be lightened if the crossing was to be made, and accordingly, all surplus baggage was cached. But still the mules continued to perish. One day five were lost, and on the following morning eight others lay stark and rigid on the mountain side. Not only was the pace being greatly reduced but the food supply of the men was becoming alarmingly small. All the beef cattle had been consumed and the bread supply was very limited. To husband the strength of men and animals Marcy now ordered all baggage discarded except arms and ammunition and one blanket for each man.

The snow, now four feet deep, was so dry and light that the men when walking upright sank to their waists in the fluffy whiteness. Jim Baker decided to try snow-shoes, but found the snow too loose and powdery to sustain them. In breaking trail through the deepest part the men in front now found it necessary to crawl on their hands and knees to pack the snow so that it would bear up the other men and the animals. The leading man was usually able to go about fifty yards before he became exhausted and dropped out into a rear position.

Rations had been reduced and finally were exhausted before the summit of the divide was reached. The only food now available to the hungry men was the meat of the famished animals. It was evident that the animal which could best be spared was the pet colt belonging to Tim Goodale's Indian wife. It was not without bitter tears that she finally agreed that her pet should be sacrificed. The meat of the colt was tender and to the starving men was sweet and delicious. The next meal, however, was on an old, tough, bony mare that could perform no further service.

During the twelve ensuing days the men continued to live on the meat of starved or exhausted horses and mules. As the salt supply ran out they discovered that gunpowder sprinkled on the mule steaks took the place of both salt and pepper. The lean meat and the thin soup did not satisfy for long the cravings of the appetite. Within a short time after a meal the men seemed as hungry as before they had eaten. One of the privations most keenly felt was the lack of tobacco, the craving for which drove some of the men almost frantic.

In constructing the nightly bivouac each set of two or three men would dig a hole seven or eight feet square down to the ground. A bed of soft pine twigs was laid and over this a blanket was spread. On the windward side two forked sticks were stuck in the snow and against these a windbreak of pine boughs was constructed. With a fire made in the snow pit the night was passed with a fair degree of warmth. It was during the day that the soldiers suffered most from cold. Their clothes were insufficient and were wearing out from the hard march. Men repaired their shoes with green mule skin and when this wore out wrapped their feet in blankets or pieces of their coat tails. But despite their care the feet of several of the men were frozen. The dazzling reflection from the snow brought on cases of snow-blindness, but Marcy explains that the men found a remedy for this by blacking their faces with powder or charcoal.

New Year's day passed without celebration. Captain Marcy recorded in his diary that night: "We have been engaged since daylight this morning in wallowing along through snow at least five feet deep, and have only succeeded, by the severest toil, in making about two miles during the entire day. From our bivouac tonight we can see the fires of last night, and in the darkness they do not appear over a rifle shot distant."

For some days past Marcy and Baker had been troubled with very grave doubts as to whether they were following the course that would lead to Cochetopa Pass. With the summer landmarks obscured by snow, Jim Baker was not certain of his course. Finally he confessed that he was lost. Notes of despair were now heard in the camp and Captain Marcy grew melancholy and could not sleep. He sensed the responsibility and saw the dangers. All the men knew that but nine years before, the indomitable Fremont had met defeat in these same mountains; that his one hundred twenty mules had perished in the bleak region of timberline; that when the thirty-three men made a last fatal effort to return to Taos, New Mexico, eleven of them dropped by the way and slept under the snowy blanket. They knew too that fifteen years before,

Marcus Whitman, the famous Oregon missionary, had in this same locality lost his way while seeking Cochetopa Pass. There in his moment of despair he had dropped upon his knees in the billows of snow and commended his life and mission to the direction of the Supreme Guide. No wonder it was with direful forebodings that Marcy looked out over the endless stretches of white mountains.

An uncertain course was pursued another day. At night a Mexican, Miguel Alona, came to the Captain saying he was certain they had turned from the proper route three days before. Marcy questioned him and became convinced that the Mexican did know the country; whereupon he promised him a handsome present if he would guide the party safely to New Mexico, but added: "If at any time I find you leading us in the wrong direction, I'll hang you to the first tree." Miguel looked out upon the stretches of snow and walked about the camp. He returned. "I'll risk my neck on it, Captain." "Very well," said Marcy, "you are guide."

There was no sign of road or trail and the snowy mountains rose peak on peak before them. Not a living thing in sight except the ragged, pinch-faced men and the famished, tottering mules. It was too late to turn back, so they resolutely followed the course pointed out by the swarthy Mexican with the piercing eyes. A few more days of difficulty and nerve-racking uncertainty and the saving pass was reached. Ragged caps whirled in the air, raspy voices shouted and the Mexican guide grinned a grin of triumph. Seventy-five miles of snow-covered valley still separated them from Fort Massachusetts, but the road ahead was known. Two men on two of the strongest remaining mules were dispatched to the government fort at the base of Mount Blanca for help and supplies, while the remainder of the party moved slowly toward the point of intended rescue. Eleven days later the rescue party from Fort Massachusetts came in sight.

"The exhibition of joy manifest among the command exceeded anything of the kind ever beheld," wrote Captain Marcy. "Some of the men laughed, danced and screamed with delight, while others (and I must confess I was not one among the former) cried like children. I had not slept half an hour at a time for twenty days and nights and was reduced from 170 to 131 pounds in weight, and, of course, my nervous system was not at that juncture under very good control."

The wagons of supplies were put under guard to prevent the hungry men from gorging themselves, while a supper of soup was being prepared. During the night, however, several of the men stole out and feasted on hard tack and bacon. Next morning

they were suffering excruciating pain and one of the poor fellows died as a result of his indulgence. Two days later, at Fort Massachusetts in present southern Colorado, additional supplies were obtained and easy marches brought the party to the New Mexican settlements.

Here at Taos, the Mexican guide, hero of the journey, was rewarded with \$500 for his valuable services. This he carried forthwith to the monte bank and next day was again a beggar in rags. The squaw wife of Tim Goodale, who had measured up admirably to the severe tests of the exacting journey, was presented by Captain Marcy with a new pony in lieu of her pet colt which had been sacrificed for the larder. Jim Baker, who decided that he would forsake for a time the wilderness life, purchased a new outfit and when Marcy saw him again he hardly recognized the mountain scout. But Baker was paying the price exacted from the votaries of style. When complimented upon his new attire the mountaineer replied: "Confound these yere store butes, Cap., they choke my feet like hell."<sup>2</sup> It was the first time in twenty years he had worn anything but moccasins on his feet and they were not prepared to break-in a pair of ill-fitting boots. Before commencing the return journey, however, he cast aside the boots and resumed the softer foot gear of the mountains.

Marcy with his company proceeded to Fort Union, some miles east of Santa Fé, where supplies for Johnston's army were duly obtained. For the return journey, however, the Captain chose a longer but a safer route.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 406.

## "Bill" Nye and The Denver Tribune

By Levette J. Davidson, University of Denver

Some of "Bill" Nye's finest humor was contributed to the *Denver Tribune* in 1880, in the form of weekly letters from Laramie.<sup>1</sup> Many of them were included in this humorist's first book, *Bill Nye and Boomerang* (1881), which was the beginning of Nye's national fame. He had entered journalism in 1876 as reporter and assistant editor on the *Laramie Daily Sentinel*.<sup>2</sup> Later on he acted as correspondent for the *Cheyenne Daily Sun*.<sup>3</sup> The *Denver Tribune*, however, offered him a wider audience and, by forcing him to depend less on local references for his laughs,

<sup>1</sup> The *Denver Tribune*, vols. 14 and 15 (Colorado State Historical and Natural History Society). Vol. 13—for last half of 1879—is not obtainable.

<sup>2</sup> The *Laramie Daily Sentinel* (Library of University of Wyoming).

<sup>3</sup> The *Cheyenne Daily Sun*, Jan., 1879-April, 1880 (Dept. of State History, Wyoming).