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TRAPPERS

The Fur Trade
in the Far
Southwest, 1540-1846

THE TAOS



David J. Weber

By David J. Weber

- (editor) *Prose Sketches and Poems Written in the Western Country*, by Albert Pike (Albuquerque, 1967)
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it prudent to return." Young then "raised a party of forty men, consisting of Americans, Canadians and Frenchmen," and took command himself, leaving from Taos in August, 1829.²⁵ Aside from Ewing Young, Carson identifies only James Lawrence and James Higgins (the latter shot the former near Los Angeles) as members of the party. Contemporary documents reveal that three Frenchmen from Taos, François Turcote, Jean Vaillant, and Anastasio Carier, were also along. François Turcote had been one of Sylvestre Pratte's employees on an expedition in 1827-28 and Vaillant, who was born in France and had come to New Mexico in 1824, had been with Pratte in the spring of 1827. Anastasio Carier, a Canadian, had married at Taos in 1824 and had lived there ever since.²⁶ These three deserted Young's party in California and tried to get passports to return to New Mexico. According to Young, "All the french that I have with me . . . were owing me Large Debts and wishing to not pay them Mutinied they had Concluded to all remain in this Country but the Americans were too strong for them and forced them out much against their wills."²⁷

In order to circumvent Mexican authorities, with whom he had been unpopular since they had discovered his scandalous smuggling of contraband beaver in 1827, Young used a tactic that was probably common among the foreign trappers. As Kit Carson explained it, Young led his men north to throw officials off his track. Then, fifty miles above Taos he shifted his course to the southwest, skirting the New Mexico settlements and passing through the Pueblo of Zúñi, on his way to the Salt River.

On the Salt the trappers "routed" the Indians who had bothered Young's earlier party. They continued trapping through the awe-

²⁵ Warner, "Reminiscences," *HSSC*, Vol. VIII (1907-1908), 185; Carter, *'Dear Old Kit,'* 42-44.

²⁶ For Turcote, see the Estate of S. S. Pratte, 1828, Chouteau Collection. For Vaillant, see Report of Manuel Martínez, Taos, April 7, 1827, and papers concerning the naturalization of Juan José Vaillant, February 8, 1831, both in MANM. Carier is "Larié" in Chávez, "New Names," *El Palacio*, Vol. LXIV, Nos. 9-10 (September-October, 1957), 313.

²⁷ Young to John B. R. Cooper, October 10, 1830, in Mariano G. Vallejo, *Documentos para la historia de California*, Vol. XXX, 1830-32, 135, MS, Bancroft Library; Hill, "Ewing Young," *OHSQ*, Vol. XXIV, No. 1 (March, 1923), 23.

some canyons of the Salt until they reached the Verde River ("San Francisco River"). Again altering their course, they followed the meanderings of the Verde in a northwesterly direction until they reached its headwaters. There the party divided.²⁸

Some of Young's men returned to Taos with their catch of furs. Obscure documents in the Mexican archives at Santa Fe mention a group of Americans returning from the Gila in February, 1830, going through Cochiti on their way to Taos. They were suspected of trapping, but one witness said they were on foot and carrying no equipment. Perhaps they had cached their furs before reaching Cochiti. Another document, perhaps referring to this same group, speaks of furs confiscated by the alcalde of Jemez.²⁹ Collateral documents have not yet appeared.

Meanwhile, Young led seventeen men west from the Verde. Although he pioneered a new route into California, it was a grueling one which he would avoid on later occasions. This route, and Young's subsequent adventures in California, have been well-described elsewhere.³⁰ It is sufficient to say that they arrived at San Gabriel Mission, probably early in 1830, then spent the remainder of the season trapping the San Joaquin Valley. There they encountered Peter Skene Ogden and some of his Hudson's Bay Company trappers. In late summer, Young sold his furs to the captain of a trading schooner whom they met at San José Mission. By September, Young was on the way back to New Mexico. He retraced his steps to the Colorado, then trapped down that river to the Gila, which he followed to the Santa Rita copper mines. Arriving there, probably in January, 1831, he left his furs hidden at the mines, which were then in the charge of Robert McKnight. Since the furs had been taken without a license, Young could not legally sell them in New Mexico. So Young and Carson traveled to Santa Fe where

²⁸ Carter, *Dear Old Kit*, 44.

²⁹ Declaration of José Martín, Jemez, March 23, 1830 and José Ignacio Ortiz to the Governor, Santa Fe, March 20, 1830. MANM.

³⁰ See Hill, "Ewing Young," *OHSQ*, Vol. XXIV, No. 1 (March, 1923), 23-27, and Holmes, *Young*, 46-57. The accuracy of Carson's account is attested to by documents which Hill found in Bancroft's transcripts from California archives. See especially a letter of José Berryeza, July 15, 1830, in Departmental State Papers, II, 135-39, MS, Bancroft Library.

Young obtained "a license to trade with Indians on the Gila." Then he sent some men to bring in the beaver. As Carson later told it, "Everyone considered we had made a fine trade in so short a period." The fur, he said, was "disposed of to advantage at Santa Fe, some two thousand pounds in all."³¹

While Ewing Young found his way to California, his partner, William Wolfskill, kept shop in Taos. Among his customers were William Williams and Thomas Smith, both of whom bought liberal amounts of whisky at seventy-five cents a pint.³² Some of Wolfskill's customers would soon accompany him to California. Perhaps learning from the trappers who returned from the San Francisco River that Young had pushed on to California, Wolfskill made plans to join his partner there. An important part of his preparation consisted of becoming a Mexican citizen and then obtaining a license to trap in Mexican territory. In early September, 1830, Governor Armijo granted Wolfskill's request to take twenty men on a beaver trapping expedition. By the end of the month they were on their way.

In Wolfskill's employ were many newcomers to the area: John Lewis, Francis "Ziba" Branch, John Rhea, Samuel Shields, David Keller, Love Hardesty, Martin Cooper, and Lewis Burton. Three New Mexicans were taken along, perhaps as cooks or campkeepers: Blas Griego, Manuel Mondragón, and José Archuleta. Traveling along with Wolfskill's contingent were George C. Yount and five veteran free trappers who may have been in his employ: Alexander Branch, whom we have seen on the Gila and the Colorado; Francisco Laforet and Baptiste St. Germain, both former trappers for Sylvestre Pratte; and Zachariah Ham and Bautista Guerra.³³

Wolfskill's trek to California is best known for inaugurating the route that came to be called the Old Spanish Trail, connecting Los Angeles and Santa Fe. Wolfskill's party was the first to travel the

³¹ Carter, *Dear Old Kit*, 44-50. Jean Vaillant had returned to Taos by February 8 to apply for naturalization as a Mexican citizen (Vaillant's request of that date is in MANM).

³² Wolfskill Ledger, 1830-31, photocopy in the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

³³ Iris Higbie Wilson, *William Wolfskill, 1798-1866: Frontier Trapper to California Ranchero*, 61-66.

for he formed a partnership with Ewing Young and David Waldo, the latter a prominent Santa Fe merchant and old friend. Jackson sold his merchandise for Mexican dollars, loaded these on mules, and on September 6, 1831, set out for California with his Negro slave and nine other men. Among these were one of Jedediah Smith's younger brothers, Peter, and J. J. Warner. According to the latter, they traveled south to the copper mines, followed the Gila west, and reached San Diego in early November.⁴²

In October, Ewing Young (who in August had received a passport to go to Chihuahua) followed Jackson to California by a different route.⁴³ Thirty-six men reportedly comprised his party. Of these, we can identify twenty-nine by name: Pleasant Austin, Powell Weaver, James Wilkinson, James Basey, Hace, James Green, Cambridge Green, James Anderson, Isaac Williams, John Price, Job F. Dye, Sidney Cooper, Moses Carson, Benjamin Day, William Day, Isaac Sparks, Joseph Gale, Joseph Defit, John Higgins, Thomas Low, José Manuel Ortega, Manuel Leal, Julián Vargas, José Teforia, Santiago Cordero, José Manuel Servé, José and Mariano García, and Francisco Argüello. The first eleven of this list had just arrived in New Mexico that previous winter after an abortive attempt at trapping in the southern Rockies. Most of these eleven remained in California. The best account of Young's journey comes from one of these men, Job Francis Dye.⁴⁴

Young waited until reaching Zuñi before picking up food supplies, perhaps, says Dye, to avoid calling attention to his activities. There Young's party paused for two days, stocking up on the "Pinole (roasted corn meal) and pinoche (sugar) and frijoles (beans) required on the route."⁴⁵ They continued to the Salt River,

⁴² Warner, "Reminiscences," *HSSC*, Vol. VIII (1907-1908), 178-86; William Sublette to William Ashley, Walnut Creek, September 24, 1831, photostat in the Campbell Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, Missouri.

⁴³ The passport of "Joaquin Jon" dated August 21, 1831, in book of passports, 1828-36, Santa Fe, Ritch Papers, No. 185.

⁴⁴ William Henry Ellison (ed.), *The Life and Adventures of George Nidever*, 1802-83, 20; Dye, *Recollections*, 18, 20; papers relating to the embargo of the furs of Ewing Young, July 12-July 25, 1832, MANM. A biography of Dye by Gloria Griffen Cline is in Hafen, *Mountain Men*, I, 259-71.

⁴⁵ Dye, *Recollections*, 18-19. Pinole was not an uncommon food for trappers

then followed that stream, setting traps as they went. On the Salt, James Anderson and Cambridge Green had a dispute over trapping rights, Green feeling that Anderson had placed his traps in an area which Green had claimed. Green complained to Young about this, and Young, according to Dye, replied, "What makes you let him do it—if I could not prevent him in any other way, I would shoot him." Young's remark, spoken in levity, was taken seriously by Green, who promptly dispatched the hapless Anderson.

Dye recalled that they also trapped for twelve days on the San Carlos River. This would have meant considerable backtracking and would have taken them well off their route. He probably meant the Verde, for Mexican trappers who were along described the route as following the Zuñi River to the Salt and the Verde, and then to the Gila.⁴⁶ When they reached the Colorado, thirteen men made the difficult crossing into California while the remainder trapped their way back to New Mexico. J. J. Warner heard that Young's beaver traps, "mostly new ones bought in New Mexico," were defective, allowing many beaver to escape. Dye does not mention this problem, however.⁴⁷

As planned, Young and David Jackson rendezvoused in California. J. J. Warner, who was in Jackson's employ, tells that Jackson had gone as far north as San Francisco to search for mules, but neither he nor Young were as successful as they had hoped. Instead of the fifteen hundred or two thousand mules they had planned on they had only six hundred mules and one hundred horses. Jackson could get the animals back to New Mexico without Young's assistance. Young went as far as the Colorado River to help Jackson make the crossing, then returned to the coast.⁴⁸

When Jackson returned to New Mexico, apparently in July, 1832, it was discovered that he had brought more than mules and

in the Southwest. See Camp, "Journal of a 'Crazy Man,'" *CHSQ*, Vol. XV, No. 2 (June, 1936), 105.

⁴⁶ Dye, *Recollections*, 23-24. See the testimony of David E. Jackson in papers regarding the embargo of the furs of Ewing Young, July 12-July 25, 1832, MANM.

⁴⁷ Dye, *Recollections*, 24-27; Warner, "Reminiscences," *HSSC*, Vol. VIII (1907-1908), 186.

⁴⁸ Warner, "Reminiscences," *HSSC*, Vol. VIII (1907-1908), 179.