

forest protected us from the north winds, and a countless number of dead trees furnished us with abundant fuel for our fires during the inclement season. We were encircled by ranges of lofty mountains, whose snow-clad summits reflected in the sun their brightness on all the surrounding country.

"At the beginning of winter, as soon as the snow begins to fall in abundance, thousands of deer come down from the mountains. Sometimes the snow attains a thickness of two and three feet, and when the surface is frozen, it often happens that forty hunters will kill 300 in a day. You may judge of the great numbers of deer that fill the valleys and low places in winter. Where we were encamped we lived entirely on the chase. But if the snow is light, the Indians go hungry, and though the ground is frozen they have recourse to the Camas-root, which is very abundant in that region, and which the natives call Sx̄aolot."

~~.....~~

In the above, Father De Smet speaks as if it were not common, ~~at~~ at the precise locality of the Pend d'Oreilles' camp at least, for the snow to attain a depth of more than two or three feet. However that may be, in the winter of the Big Snow, in February, it had attained a general depth of five feet. For after a short account of how the Pend d'Oreilles built a "little church of the wilderness," and a rather lengthy story of Christmas and other religious observances, the good father continues:

"In the beginning of February, [1845] I set out to visit our different settlements and stations, and to form new ones among the neighboring tribes of our reductions. The entire surface of this region was then covered with snow five feet deep; and I was compelled to go from the Bay of Pend d'Oreilles to the Horse Plain, in a bark canoe, a distance of 250 miles.

"I was among my dear Flatheads and Pend d'Oreilles of the mountains, during Paschal time, and had the great consolation of finding them replete with zeal and fervor in fulfilling the duties of true children of prayer."

It was not until after the Paschal, or "solemn feast of Easter" had been celebrated among these phenomenally religious tribes, that he records that "the snow was fast disappearing."



Several of the Dakota Indian "winter counts," or painted robe calendars, set forth by Mallery in the Fourth and Tenth Annual Reports of the Bureau of Ethnology, preserve a recollection of this winter of 1844-5 as a winter of deep snow in ~~the region~~ <sup>and east</sup> of the Black Hills of Dakota, ~~and elsewhere~~. The pictographic emblem of that winter is a ~~teepee~~ tepee connected with a pine tree; and, as displayed on one such calendar, the explanation obtained for it from the Indians through interpreter Jean Primeau at Cheyenne Agency, Dakota, in 1868, was, "Unusually heavy snow; had to build corrals for ponies." And the interpretation from another calendar, obtained at the same place in 1870, was, "Heavy snow, in which many of their [i.e., the Indians] ponies perished." Interpretations from yet other calendars were, that "The Minneconjous built a pine fort" that winter; and that "Mandans wintered in the Black Hills." These Mandans were probably a party ~~of the Mandan nation~~ of that nation that had been hunting in the Black Hills country, and was caught by the Big Snow, and detained there till spring. Evidently, in the device by which this heavy snow winter was designated in the above said winter counts, the tepee is emblematic of an Indian village; and the pine tree, of the pine forests of the Black Hills. And it is equally evident that the Big Snow winter was a familiar topic among the Dakota and Mandan Indians of the Upper Missouri Valley.

The winter of 1846-7 was one of deep snows and bitter cold across the entire breadth of the Far West.

In his "Memoirs," Fremont says of it, "This happened to be one of the severe winters on the western coast. The snow fell deep in the mountains, and in the low country travelling in large bodies // of men was made hard and difficult by prolonged easterly storms, during which cold rains flooded the country. This was the winter of the Donner disaster; snows had already barred the passes of the Sierra Nevada, when that party reached the head of the Salmon Trout [now called Truckee] River."

The Donner disaster, one of the most distressing events of early far western history, need not be related here. Its story has been well narrated in McClashan's "History of the Donner Party, A Tragedy of the Sierras"—not to mention other accounts—and is burned into the memory of all who have read or heard it.

In the Rocky Mountains and Great Plains, there was also such suffering that season. As it was the first winter after our occupation of northern Mexico, there was more than ordinary winter travel between



New Mexico and the Missouri River; and the Santa Fe Trail, with its Bent's Fort branch then recently come into use as a wagon road, were strewn with the carcasses of starved and frozen creatures. Mules driven in harness, oxen in ~~xxxx~~ yoke, sank down and perished. In camp, tired animals lay down to rest, never to rise again. Some, even, of the very wolves of the wilderness were stricken. Men traversed the great roads with icy beards and frosted feet; and some even succumbed to the biting blasts, or to suffocation beneath deep snowdrifts. A perusal of Lieutenant Abert's itinerary, relating the experiences of his own and other parties between Santa Fe and Fort Leavenworth in December and January, will satisfy the inquirer as to the character of that winter on the Plains.

Throughout the forties, curiously, the rule, "every other winter a hard one," seems to have prevailed.

The winter of '48-9, in the Rocky Mountains at least, conformed to that rule. For that was the winter of Fremont's "starvation expedition," when, so early as the 17th of November, that explorer wrote from Bent's Fort, "Both Indians and whites here report the snow to be deeper in the mountains than has for a long time been known so early in the season," a like report being heard but a week later from most of the old trappers at Fort el Pueblo, with the addition, says McGehee, "that it was impossible to cross the mountains at that time;" so that "it was not without some hesitation" that one of them ~~consented~~ consented to go as Fremont's guide, while Dick Wootton, who had joined the expedition at Bent's Fort, soon saw its rashness, and very wisely abandoned it.

"Until we reached the summit of Wet Mountain," says Breckenridge, "our party consisted of thirty-three men; but at that point, Dick Wootton, one of Colorado's pioneers who had joined us at Fort Bent, turned back. After a good long look at the valley below and the snow-covered Sangre de Cristo mountains beyond, he exclaimed: 'There is too much snow ahead for me,' and immediately mounted his horse and disappeared down the mountain toward Hardscrabble. That was the last we saw of Dick Wootton. I have always since thought Wootton's head was level on the subject of mountain travel in the winter."

"Old Bill Williams," the guide engaged at the Pueblo, who had been a wilderness dweller since the War of 1812 and a trapper in the mountains since the middle twenties, told Breckenridge, after they had reached the Rio Grande near present Alamosa, that "the snow was deeper and the weather more severe than he had ever known it to be before." But he was doubtless aware that Whitman and Lovejoy had crossed by the

*For the San Luis Valley, by the second week in December, Fremont found that "Even along the river bottoms the snow was already belly deep for the mules!"*



Cochetopa Pass in the severe winter of '42-3, and he perhaps knew of the Indian and Mexican routes by way of ~~the~~ <sup>of</sup> Garnero Creek and Pass and by way of the Puerto del Rio del Norte and the lakes Santa Maria and San Cristoval, and in any event he had ~~thought~~ thought they "could manage to get through, though not without considerable suffering," and his employer was determined to prove the mountains traversable ~~and~~ even in winter; so, disregarding the portentous white shroud ~~that~~ that confronted them, Fremont, guided by Williams in a direction said to have been insisted on by Fremont against the old trapper's judgment and remonstrance, pressed forward to the divide north of the Puerto del Rio del Norte <sup>(Wagon Wheel Gap)</sup> and to the disaster in which ten men and a cavallada of 120 mules perished and the greater part of a valuable material equipment was lost.

To 1852-3, in the Ogallala Dakota country, attention is called by the winter count of White Cow Killer, which styles it a "Great-Snow Winter." That it was such in the Rocky Mountains also, is indicated by the experiences of Beale and Heap's party enroute from Missouri to California in 1853, which in June of that year found <sup>all</sup> the tributaries of Gunnison River greatly swollen, the Uncompahgre impassable, and the Gunnison itself, where the Uncompahgre joined it, a mighty flood with "a breadth of over two hundred and fifty yards," flowing "with a loud and angry current, its amber-colored waters roaring sullenly past, laden with the wrecks of trees uprooted by their fury," while constantly were heard "sounds like the booming of distant artillery, occasioned by the caving in of its clayey and sandy banks." The guide, Felipe Archuleta, "stated that he had never seen the river so high, and that it was owing to the unusual quantity of snow which had fallen in the mountains during the last winter."

In the following winter, Fremont did not find <sup>depth of</sup> the snow on the mountains between San Luis Park and the Grand River Basin at all comparable ~~with~~ with what he had seen in his <sup>disastrous</sup> journey of '48-9; but <sup>westward</sup> the snow became deeper and the cold more intense, and Fremont considered the winter <sup>one</sup> of unusual cold; and at Parawan, Utah, he was told by the citizens that it had been "altogether the severest since the settlement of this valley."

Two years later, on the eastern border of the Far West, a severe season ~~is~~ is attested; for in the winter of '55-6, was repeated the condition seen in '42-3— the Mississippi River being frozen over at St. Louis solidly enough to admit of being crossed by wheeled vehicles upon the ice.

In the winter of 1857-8, <sup>Randolph B. Marcy made</sup> Capt. <sup>a</sup> perilous march across the southern

