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# Book Review: Citizen Explorer: The Life of Zebulon Pike. / Jared Orsi

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## Citizen Explorer: The Life of Zebulon Pike

Jared Orsi, *Citizen Explorer: The Life of Zebulon Pike*. Oxford University Press, USA. 392 pp.

### Reviewed by Tom Pelikan

It's a very good thing when a book inspires you to say "I never knew that before" a lot and for Santa Fe Trail buffs whose focus, quite properly, is on the actual era of the Trail after Becknell's expeditions in 1821, *Citizen Explorer, The Life of Zebulon Pike* does just that.

As the author Jared Orsi correctly points out, Josiah Gregg in his *Commerce of the Prairies* gave Pike and his published journal of his southwestern expedition full credit for inspiring the exploration of the Southwest. But as Orsi quite clearly shows, Pike was more than just the man who first publicized Pike's Peak. He was very much a man of his times and a man who had to navigate the tricky waters of Army politics as daunting as those of the Arkansas or the Mississippi.

The son of a Revolutionary War officer who returned to the Army after efforts at civilian life took him and his family from New Jersey to Bucks County, Pennsylvania, and then to the Pittsburgh area, Zebulon joined the Army himself at the now impossibly young age of fifteen. Orsi noted the impact of the Whiskey Rebellion and other post-Revolutionary War struggles on Pike's commitment to the nation. Orsi also firmly reminds us that what we perceive to be a settled and industrialized region today, the Midwest, was mostly unexplored wilderness in the first decade of the nineteenth century. In fact, Pike's first mission of exploration took him up the Mississippi to what is now Minnesota in 1805 and the first Pike's Peak is in fact a flat-topped hill in Iowa overlooking where the Wisconsin River flows into the Mississippi and is now an Iowa State Park.

But it's naturally Pike's exploration of what is now Colorado and New Mexico that is of most interest to us rut nuts. Orsi makes a very clever and quite accurate observation about Pike's first look at the mountain that now bears his name: "The possibility that he could see a mountain and still be more than a hundred miles away from it was not something he could wrap his Ohio Valley mind around." Orsi goes into considerable detail with his descriptions of Pike's journey across the plains, interacting with a variety of Native American tribes, and then his exploration of the Arkansas Valley almost to the headwaters and down into the Wet Mountain and San Luis Valleys and then, under Spanish military escort (Mexico didn't become independent of Spain until 1821), to Santa Fe and Chihuahua.

Upon his return to America, Pike's loyalty to his commanding officer General James Wilkinson and Wilkinson's often opportunistic dealings with Aaron Burr and the Spanish

## That Broad and Beckoning Highway: The Santa Fe Trail and the Rush for Gold in California and Colorado

### Reviewed by Steve Schmidt

Dr. Michael L. Olsen, under contract to the National Park Service, has completed a book-length manuscript about the role of the Santa Fe Trail in the 1849 and 1859 Gold Rushes. A Microsoft Word read-only copy can be downloaded by Googling "Santa Fe Gold Rush Study" and clicking on the NPS Link. The study is titled "*That Broad and Beckoning Highway: The Santa Fe Trail and the Rush for Gold in California and Colorado*."

Dr. Olsen's much-needed study is really a nice work. The organization flows logically, and he uses period accounts to guide, support, and amplify the text, which gives historical perspective, interpretation, and continuity. This is not unlike how Stephen Hyslop presented his *Bound for Santa Fe* which may be my favorite Santa Fe Trail book, behind *Commerce of the Prairies*. The extensive bibliography in Dr. Olsen's study is an essential element of any scholarly work. In exploring various bibliographies over the years, I have found clues to answering questions that came up in my own research and studies.

Dr. Olsen's study fills a void in the history of the Santa Fe Trail, which heretofore largely ignored the gold rush emigrations. This study is interesting, very readable, and "gets my wheels turning." This manuscript should become one of the standard references on the SFT. ♦

government often compromised and interfered with his being compensated for the success of his mission. Orsi makes it clear that he believes those who think Pike was somehow connected with Burr's conspiracies are quite mistaken. And Pike found himself vindicated, rising quickly in rank from Lieutenant to Lieutenant Colonel before the War of 1812 and later given a Brigadier General's star as he led the campaign at York, now Toronto, where he perished at the age of 34. Orsi writes a rather stirring epilogue in which he notes that Pike received far more praise and credit after his death than he received in life, and his legacy includes the inspiration for the Santa Fe Trail and the progress of the American West.

Zebulon Pike is a name almost everybody knows, but who had a life that not too many know much about. Jared Orsi's book fills that gap and fills it well and it is thoroughly documented with an extensive bibliography, from which I will certainly look into acquiring a few more books. ♦

*Jared Orsi received an SFTA research grant in 2005 for work on this book. He also spoke about Pike at the 2006 Rendezvous in Larned, Kansas.*