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FORTS ROBIDOUX AND KIT CARSON IN NORTHEASTERN UTAH

By ALBERT B. REAGAN

FORT ROBIDOUX

THE first year-long abode of white men in Utah seems to have been Fort Robidoux, which was also known as Fort Winty or Fort Uintah. This fort was established at the Utah (Uintah) Indian village, near the present White-rocks, Uintah county, Utah, in the last days of 1831. Its owner was Antoine Robidoux, formerly of St. Louis, and this store was one of his chain trading posts out from Taos, New Mexico, it being a branch of the tradingpost on the Gunnison river, just below the Uncompahgre in western Colorado. The post here, as well as the one in Colorado, was on the trail from Taos to Fort Hall. The Utah fort was also on the trail from the upper Platte outposts to Utah Lake, in Utah. It was also located in a populous Indian region and was well patronized. However, the information sources concerning it are meagre, and are presented here-with so far as known. The Indians overwhelmed and completely destroyed this fort in 1844, as will be mentioned later.

THE ROBIDOUX INSCRIPTION

While going to establish this tradingpost Robidoux mostly followed the old Spanish trail of the Escalante Expedition of 1776 into the region. Enroute he camped in West Water Canyon, just above the present Tom Larson ranch, over the mountains from the Uintah Basin, in Utah, east of Bitter creek and the present town of Dragon, about on the Utah-Colorado line.¹ While in this canyon he, or his guide, Denis Julien, carved the famous Robidoux inscription on a Book Cliff wall: "Antoine Robidoux pass ic 3-4 E, 13

1. Another description gives it as twenty miles west of Fruita, Colorado, which is apparently the same location.

Novembre, 1831, pur etablire maison traitte a la ry vert ou wyte" (Antoine Robidoux passed this way November 13, 1831, to establish a trading house on the Green or White River).

DENIS JULIEN

It would probably not be out of place to add a note here about this Denis Julien.

When Major J. W. Powell made his famous trips down the Colorado river in 1869 and 1872 he discovered that a "D. Julien" had preceded him and left his carvings on the canyon walls 43 years before, a man of mystery of whom search was made even at the Vatican in Rome, it being believed that he had possibly been a missionary of the Catholic Church in these parts.

On August 6, 1930, the writer found a carving on "Inscription Rock," east of the Uintah river, east of Mrs. Daniels' place, about halfway between Fort Duchesne and Whiterocks, near where the Robidoux fort of the early trapping days was located, which reads, "Denis Julien, 1831." This led to investigations which brought out the following concerning this man of mystery.

It is found that he either acted as guide for Robidoux or accompanied his trading expedition to the Uintah Basin in 1831, leading that same year to the establishing of Fort Robidoux (also called Fort Uintah or Winty, as previously noted), near the present Whiterocks. It would therefore seem that he made the carving on the rock near Mrs. Daniels' place sometime in December of that year (1831).

The records of the St. Louis Cathedral as to births and deaths and baptisms give entries concerning this man's family as follows:

Julien, Marie Jos., born May 5, 1793, daughter of Denis Julien and Cath. (Indian), baptized April 15, 1798. Julien, Pierre Paschal, 18 mos. old, same parents, baptized October 25, 1801. Julien, Etienne, 5 years old, same parents, baptized October 21,

1804. Julien, Paschal, 9 years old, son of Denis Julien and Cath. (Indian), buried Feb. 3, 1809.

Denis Julien was one of many French Canadians of St. Louis and made a business of trapping and trading with the Indians. In 1807, he was granted a license to trade with the "Sioux and Iowas" in the superintendency of Louisiana. This license was renewed in 1810, with Pierre Choteaux as surety.

In 1800 Denis Julien and his brother Etienne² volunteered "for service in Louisiana," in an artillery company organized by Gov. William Clark and captained by Benjamin O'Fallon. Next we find in the old papers on file in the St. Louis library an order for "358 barrels of lead" belonging to Denis Julien, which is being shipped by Antoine Busebois to William Clark, on Mr. Wilson's barge. We next find the Robidoux inscription near Fruita, Colorado, which Denis Julien probably carved for Robidoux, of the date of November 13, 1831; and then his own inscription on "Inscription Rock," of the same year. His name appears twice on this rock, at one place with the name "Larva or Jarva," probably the name of another trapper.

After 1831 there is no further notice of this man until he took a journey down the Green-Colorado river in 1836. Here he carved his name as "D. Julien" on the rock walls at five different places, as seen by Powell; one near the lower end of Cataract Canyon; one on the east side of Labyrinth Canyon, about half way around "Bowknot Bend," of the date of "16 Mai"; the Hell Roaring inscription, of the date of "3 Mai"; one on the right wall of Stillwater Canyon, four miles above the mouth of Green river; and another in the upper end of Cataract Canyon, all dated "1836." The last inscription is dated "16 Mai, 1836," and it is supposed that he actually tried to navigate the dangerous rapids of Cataract Canyon and that he lost his life in those swirling waters.

2. Probably the Stephen Julien who rendered such good service as guide to Maj. S. H. Long's expedition in 1820.

We shall now have various accounts of trips to Fort Robidoux.

THE KIT CARSON STORY

The Carson story is here given with corrected dates as supplied by Miss Blanche Grant, since Carson was dictating from memory.

We arrived at Taos in October 1832 [1833], disposed of [our] beaver for a good sum, and everything of mountain life was forgotten for the present.

At Taos, I found Captain Lee [Stephen Louis Lee] of the U. S. A., a partner of Bent and St. Vrain. He purchased goods to trade with the trappers. I joined him, and in the latter part of the month of November we started for the mountains to find trappers.

We followed the old Spanish trail to California till we struck White river, took down White river till we struck Green river, crossed Green river to Winty [Uintah], one of its tributaries. There we found Mr. Robidoux. He had a party of some twenty men that were trapping and trading.*

The snow was now commencing to fall and we concluded to go into winter quarters. We found a place that answered every purpose on the mouth of the Winty. We passed a very pleasant winter and in March we heard of Mr. Fitzpatrick and Bridger being on Snake river. During the winter a California Indian of Robidoux's party ran off with six animals—some of them worth two hundred dollars per head. Robidoux came to me and requested that I pursue him. I spoke to Captain Lee and he informed me that I might use my pleasure. There was a Ute village close by; I got one of the Indians to accompany me. We were furnished with two fine animals and took the trail the runaway had taken down the river, his object being to make California.

When traveling about one hundred miles the animal of the Indian gave out. He would not accompany me further, but I was determined not to give up the chase. I continued in pursuit and in 30 miles I overtook the Indian with the

3. Escalante and modern geographers considered the Uintah to be an affluent of the Duchesne, while all the intervening writers and explorers considered the Uintah the main stream and the Duchesne its affluent. This explains many of the points which have puzzled investigators.

horses. Seeing me by myself [he] showed fight. I was under the necessity of killing him, recovered the horses and returned on my way to our camp, and arrived in a few days without any trouble.

Some trappers came to our camp and informed us that Fitzpatrick and Bridger were on Snake river encamped. In March [1834] we struck out for the purpose of finding their camp. In fifteen days we found their camp.

Kit Carson and a Mr. Thompson passed the winter of 1837-1838 at Fort Davy Crockett (Fort Misery, Fort de Misère), between sixty and sixty-five miles northeast of Fort Robidoux, in Brown's Hole near our Whiterocks. At that time the place was owned by Messrs. Thompson, Gray, and Sinclair. Thomas J. Farnham and Dr. F. A. Wislizenus were also there in 1839, twenty men being at this fort at this time.

THE VISIT OF WILLIAMS AND SAGE

Mr. Robidoux was still doing business at Fort Uintah (Fort Robidoux) in 1842, as is shown by the journals of Joseph Williams and Rufus Sage next quoted, and Captain Frémont indicates Robidoux's presence in that region until the fort was destroyed.

We are now [July 10, 1842] on the head of the Winty river, down which we pursued our journey towards Robedean's Fort. About two miles of our journey was almost impassable for the brush, and the logs and rocks. Then we got out of the mountains into a prairie and reached the fort about 2:00 o'clock.

Starvation among the Indians

We had to wait there for Robedean about eighteen days, till he and his company and horsedriers were ready to start with us to the United States. This delay was very disagreeable to me, on account of the wickedness of the people, and the drunkenness and swearing, and the debauchery of the men among the Indian women. They would buy and sell them to one another. One morning I heard a terrible fuss, because two of their women had run away the

night before. I tried several times to preach to them; but with little, if any effect.

Here I heard the mountain men tell of the miserable state of the Indian root-diggers. Numbers of them would be found dead from pure starvation; having no guns to kill game with, and poor shelters to live in, and no clothing except some few skins. These creatures have been known, when pressed with hunger, to kill their children and eat them; and to gather up crickets and ants and dry them in the sun, and pound them into dust and make bread of the mixture to eat. These creatures when traveling in a hurry, will leave their lame and blind to perish in the wilderness. Here we have a striking example of the depravity of the heathen in their natural state. I was also told here, of a Frenchman, who lived with an Indian woman, and when one of his children became burdensome, he dug a grave and buried it alive! At another time he took one of his children and tied it to a tree, and called it a "target" and shot and killed it.

Trappers' Use of Squaws

Mr. Rubedeau had collected several of the Indian squaws and young Indians, to take to New Mexico, and kept some of them for his own use! The Spaniards would buy them for wives. This place is equal to any I ever saw for wickedness. The French and the Spaniards are all Roman Catholics, but are as wicked men, I think, as ever lived. No one who has not, like me, witnessed it, can have any idea of their wickedness. Some of these people at the Fort are fat and dirty, and idle and greasy.

July 27th we started from Rubedeau's Fort, over the Winty river, and next crossed Green and White rivers. Next night we lay on Sugar Creek,⁴ the water of which was so bitter we could scarcely drink it. Here two of Rubedeau's squaws ran away, and we had to wait two days until he could send back to the Fort for another squaw, for company for him.⁵

The Sage journal is as follows:⁶

4. Bitter creek, about forty-five miles southeast of Ouray, Utah.

5. Joseph Williams, *Tour of Oregon*. (1845).

6. *Rocky Mountain Life; or, Startling Scenes and Perilous Adventures in the Far West*. By Rufus B. Sage, 1841-1844. See also J. Cecil Alter, *Utah the Storied Domain*, vol. 1 (1932).

A small party from a trading establishment on the waters of Green river, who had visited Taos for the procurement of a fresh supply of goods were about to return, and I availed myself of the occasion to make one of their number.

On the 7th of October [1842] we were under way. Our party consisted of three Frenchmen and five Spaniards, under the direction of a man named Roubideau, formerly from St. Louis, Mo. Some eight pack mules, laden at the rate of two hundred and fifty pounds each, conveyed a quantity of goods; these headed by a guide, followed, in Indian file, and the remainder of the company, mounted on horseback, brought up the rear.

Crossing the Del Norte, we soon after struck into a large trail bearing a westerly course; following which, on the 13th instant, we crossed the main ridge of the Rocky Mountains by a feasible pass at the southern extremity of the Sierra de Anahuac range, and found ourselves upon the waters of the Pacific.

Six days subsequent, we reached Roubideau's Fort, at the forks of the Uintah, having passed several large streams in our course, as well as the two principal branches which unite to form the Colorado. This being the point of destination, our journey here came to a temporary close.

Roubideau's Fort is situated on the right bank of the Uintah . . . The trade of this post is conducted principally with the trapping parties frequenting the Big Bear, Green, Grand, and Colorado rivers, with their numerous tributaries, in search of fur-bearing game.

A small business is also carried on with the Snake and Utah Indians living in the neighborhood of the establishment. The common articles of dealing are horses, with beaver, otter, deer, sheep, and elk skins, in barter for ammunition, fire-arms, knives, tobacco, beads, awls, etc.

The Utahs and Snakes afford some of the largest and best finished sheep and deer skins I ever beheld—a single skin sometimes being amply sufficient for common sized pantaloons. These skins are dressed so neatly as frequently to attain a snowy whiteness, and possess the softness of velvet.

They may be purchased for the trifling consideration of eight or ten charges of ammunition each, or two or three awls, or any other thing of proportional value. Skins are very

abundant in these parts, as the natives, owing to the scarcity of buffalo, subsist entirely upon small game, which is found in immense quantities. This trade is quite profitable. The articles procured so cheaply, when taken to Santa Fe and the neighboring towns, find a ready cash market at prices ranging from one to two dollars each . . .

CAPTAIN JOHN C. FREMONT

In 1844 and 1845, Captain John C. Frémont visited the Uintah Basin in which Fort Robidoux was located, according to U. S. Commissioner John R. Bartlett's Map of the West of 1850, 1851, 1852 and 1853; and his Map of the West also shows "Frémont's Route 1843" through Fort Uintah (Robidoux). The maps, however, do not agree, as the route of 1845 on the first map is the route of 1843 on the second. The route of 1843 seems, however, to have missed Fort Robidoux, as it was down Beaver river—the usual trappers' route to the mouth of Weber river. The route of 1844 shows him going eastward from Utah Lake by way of Fort Robidoux on his way out of the region. Extracts from his journal are presented herewith:⁷

Turning our faces once more eastward [after having spent three days at Utah Lake] on the morning of the 27 [of May, 1844] we left the Utah Lake, and continued for two days to ascend the Spanish Fork . . . We descended by a narrow ravine, in which was a rapidly gathered little branch of the Uintah.

The next day we descended along the river, and about noon reached a point where three forks came together . . . We camped at evening on another tributary to the Uintah, called the Duchesne Fork . . . the name it bears is probably that of some old French trapper.

June 1. We left today the Duchesne Fork, and after traveling over a broken country for about sixteen miles, arrived at noon at another considerable branch, a river of great velocity, to which the trappers have improperly given the name Lake Fork. The name applied to it by the Indians

7. *Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the year 1842, and to Oregon and North California in the years 1843-1844.* By Brevet Captain J. C. Fremont.

signifies great swiftness, and is the same which they use to express the speed of a race horse . . . Continuing our route across a broken country of which the higher parts were rocky, and well timbered with cedar, and the lower parts covered with good grass, we reached, on the afternoon of the 3d, the Uintah [Robidoux] Fort, a trading post belonging to a Mr. A. Roubideau, on the principal fork of the Uintah river. We found the stream nearly as rapid and difficult as the Lake Fork, divided into several channels, which were too broad to be bridged. With the aid of guides from the fort, we succeeded with great difficulty, in fording it, and camped near the fort, which is situated a short distance above the junction of the two branches which make the river . . .

It was a motly garrison of Canadians and Spanish *engagés* and hunters, with the usual number of Indian women. We obtained a small supply of sugar and coffee, with some dried meat and a cow, which was a very acceptable change from the *pinali* on which we had subsisted for some weeks past. I strengthened my party at this place by the addition of Auguste Archambeaux, an excellent voyageur and hunter, belonging to the class of Carson and Gody.

On the morning of the 5th we left the fort and the Uintah river. (This fort was attacked and taken by a band of Utah Indians since we passed it; and the men of the garrison killed, the women carried off. Mr. Robidoux, a trader of St. Louis, was absent, and so escaped the fate of the rest.) After marching 25 miles, we were again checked by another stream, called Ashley's Fork, where we were detained until noon the next day.

Halting at Brown's Hole on June 7th, the Frémont party passed on eastward.

Marcus A. Whitman, with Dr. Lovejoy, Oregon Protestant missionaries, spent a few miserable days in northern Utah, because of the terrible weather, part of which was at Fort Winte (Robidoux, or Uintah); about October 18-20, 1842.

Fort Robidoux (Fort Winty, or Uintah) is said by the Uintah Indians to have been on Big Tom's allotment, about a mile and a half east of the present Whiterocks post office

and the Uintah Boarding school. An old dugout, near there, is also said to be where Kit Carson traded with the Indians when he visited the fort in 1833-34. John Harmes now owns (runs) Big Tom's allotment; while Ignacio Tom lives on it.

FORT KIT CARSON

In Kit Carson's account of his trip to what is now the Uintah Basin in northeastern Utah for the purpose of trading with Fort Robidoux, near the present Whiterocks, he states: "The snow was now commencing to fall and we concluded to go into winter quarters [winter of 1832-33]. We found a place that answered every purpose on the mouth of the Winty . . ." It is therefore evident that his quarters for that winter were somewhere in the vicinity of Ouray (Utah) at the junction of Green, White and Winty (Uintah) rivers, the latter now being called the Duchesne in its lower course.

We looked for this winter fort and found it, now reduced to wall mounds, in the woods on the east side of Green river, about a mile opposite (southeast of) the mouth of the Duchesne, the then Winty river.

The writer's attention was first called to this fort-building by Wallace Stark and C. A. Broome of Ouray, Utah, the latter also stating that there are the remains in ground-plan mounds, of a similarly built fort-building, on the east side of Green river, some miles farther to the southward down the river. W. J. Willes, an employee of the Daly hotel at 203 Broadway, Salt Lake City, also told the writer that when he was wrangling cattle on the range in these parts in 1873 he saw the two forts above, and that they were reduced to wall mounds as they are now. Who occupied the south fort can not even be conjectured at this time.

The fort-building which is here named "Fort Kit Carson," is laid off in an approximately north-south direction. Its east and west walls are about 95 feet in length each, and the north and south walls 78 feet each. Outside the inclosure but connected with the fort wall were two bastions (towers), which like the walls were made of earth (adobe),

and judging from the mounds, must have been quite a bit higher than the fort.

One of these towers abutted the southwest corner so that it controlled the south and west sides of the fort, its mound now being 22 feet in an east-west direction and 16 feet in a north-south direction. The other bastion, whose mound is now 18 feet in an east-west direction and a little over 15 feet in a northeast-southwest direction, abuts the northeast corner of the fort so that it controlled the east and north sides of that edifice.

Some distance south of the fort inclosure there are also the remains of a wall which conjecturally was constructed so as not to give room for ramming of the main wall in battering-ram fashion with pole ends, should the place be attacked. Within the inclosure there was a tier of rooms on both the east and west sides, with a plaza between.

It would seem from records at hand that Kit Carson, during this winter (1832-33) occupied the same site as that of Sta. Serafina, which is given in Bulletin No. 870 of the United States Geological Survey as occupying this site.

It might be well to add that Antoine Robideaux, who then had Fort Winte near the present Whiterocks in the Uintah Basin, Utah, at that time jointly occupied this fort with Kit Carson in the winter of 1832-33.

After Kit Carson's time this same fort was occupied by the Hudson Bay people and exactly what happened during their occupancy is yet not clear. This much, however, is certain, that there was friction between it and the American Fur Company. At that time the Hudson Bay people had a boathouse at a landing on the island southwest of the mouth of the Duchesne River and across the river about due west of the fort, from a notice which was seen in some publication, a record of which was not made at the time. There is also a record that there was an attempt to capture the horses belonging to this fort, presumably by the American Fur Company people—some records seem to indicate that Robideaux's people were the ones who attempted to cap-

ture the H. B. Company's horses, and the horses were run into the plaza to save them from falling into their hands.

A further note on this fort location and troubles that arose over its occupancy by the Hudson Bay people is given by Harrison C. Dale:⁸

... The Hudson's Bay Company at a later period [later than Ashley's visit in 1825 and Robideaux's establishing Fort White in 1831] undertook to penetrate this country [of the Uintah]. Sir William Dummond Stewart in a letter to William L. Sublette, dated Head of Blue Fork, August 27, 1838, writes, "The H. B. Company have established a fort on the Winty [Uinta] and Andy's people [the men in the employ of Andrew Drips, agent of the American Fur Company] will be driven from there, if the government does not take some steps." Sublette Mss., Carton 12, Missouri Historical Society.

8. *The Ashley Smith Explorations, and The Discovery of a Central Route to the Pacific, 1822-24*, (A. H. Clark Company), 152, footnote.