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ALBERT PIKE AS A TENDERFOOT

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IN the summer of 1831, Albert Pike was faced with a somewhat unusual problem: should he take a long steamboat ride up the Missouri River to the Yellowstone, or should he cross the plains to Santa Fe with a trading party?[1]

A few months earlier, Pike had been teaching school in Newburyport, Massachusetts, with never a thought of tasting the delights and dangers of the West. But in March the town authorities had turned him out of his job—partly for demanding an assistant and partly for playing the fiddle on Sunday. So Pike, who was then twenty-one years of age, decided to head for the frontier, where, since he was "finely educated," he confidently expected to find his opportunities for success "greatly improved." Later, of course, he came to realize that "what a man needed out there more than a school education was practical common sense."[2] Such wisdom, however, came gradually; and before he finally attained it, Pike was to experience all the classic misadventures of the lowliest of Westerners, the tenderfoot.

When he left Newburyport, Pike took the stagecoach to Boston and from there began his long trek westward, sometimes hiking or riding horseback and sometimes traveling by stagecoach. His route lay through Albany, Rochester, Buffalo, Cleveland, Cincinnati, and Nashville. In Nashville he searched unsuccessfully for suitable employment and then wandered on through Tennessee and Kentucky. At Paducah he boarded a keel boat and floated down the Ohio to Cairo, where he took deck passage on a steamboat headed up the

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1. Although Fred W. Allsopp has dealt briefly with Pike's adventures in the West in chapters II to IV of *Albert Pike: a Biography* (Little Rock, Ark., 1928), his sources of information were severely limited, consisting chiefly of the so-called *Pike Diary* as published in the *Arkansas Advocate*. The present study, on the other hand, is based primarily on the unpublished manuscript, "Autobiography of General Albert Pike: from Stenographic Notes Furnished by Himself" (Library of the Supreme Council, 33°, Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry, Southern Jurisdiction, U. S. A., Washington, D. C.); and it therefore contains much material never previously printed. Whenever dates or other specific details given in the present study differ from those cited by Allsopp, my authority is the Pike "Autobiography."

2. "Autobiography," p. 6.

Mississippi. And so it came about that in August, 1831, he found himself in Saint Louis, wondering whether fame and fortune lay at the headwaters of the Missouri or somewhere along the Rio Grande.

After due deliberation, Pike decided to join the Santa Fe trading party. On August 10 the ten wagons left Saint Louis and creaked across Missouri to Independence, where the men bought oxen, repaired their wagons, and added to their stores. At last, when all was in readiness, the little caravan rumbled out of Independence on September 10 and bumped along the rutted trail to Council Grove, where there was another stop for repairs and the checking of supplies. Then, finally, they began their long journey across the vast rolling prairies which reminded Pike of the sea.

At first the trip was high adventure. Pike was awed by the vast herds of buffalo which the party encountered; and when the men shot several of the beasts for food, he found the meat exotically delicious. Furthermore, his comrades showed him the trick of leaving a buffalo leg overnight on an ant hill. The ants would strip all the flesh away, and next morning the men would roast the bones and then crack them to get at the marrow.

Prairie wolves also added drama to the journey. Years later, Pike liked to tell how at least a thousand wolves followed the trading party, and how at night they sent up such a chorus of howls that "you would have supposed there were twenty thousand of them."[3] Buffaloes, wolves, and the ever-present threat of hostile Indians—Pike was enjoying life to the full. And then, somewhere along the Cimarron River, his horse became frightened during a thunder storm and ran away, leaving Pike stranded. Almost immediately, the term "tenderfoot" acquired added significance.

More than five-hundred miles remained, and Pike covered most of them on foot. When his shoes wore out, he replaced them with moccasins. But these gave him scant protection against sharp stones and sand burs; and little pieces of gravel kept getting inside, where they bruised his feet. Somehow he acquired another pair of heavy shoes be-

3. "Autobiography," p. 10.

fore reaching Taos; but meanwhile his throbbing feet became such an obsession that they kept turning up in the verses he tried to write. Although he told himself, "Well, I have chosen my own rough way, / And I will walk it manfully,"[4] in more candid moments he admitted that life already seemed too long "To one who walks with bleeding feet / The world's rough paths...."[5]

As Pike trudged southwestward, he gradually became aware of another problem: summer was ending, and the weather was becoming chilly. Before leaving Saint Louis, Pike had asked Captain Bent, the leader of the trading party, what clothing he would need on the trip. Bent had assured him that they would reach Santa Fe before cold weather; and, guided by the captain's opinion, Pike had sold his extra clothing in order to get enough money to buy a horse. Now, therefore, he was shivering in the November wind as he limped toward Taos. A snow fell; the situation began to grow quite serious. Then, at last, they reached the mountains; and Taos lay just beyond. Pike heaved a sigh of relief—and, as if in answer, a sudden blizzard halted the party in its tracks. For a week the men camped in the mountains while over five feet of snow fell on them. "It was," said Pike years later, "as big a snow storm as I ever saw in my life. I stood guard one night when a horse froze to death within twenty feet of me, and I would have frozen to death myself if we had not gotten something that would burn and made a fire and squatted down over it and by this means kept alive. I froze my feet in the mountains twice.... It was a horrible time."[6]

When the men were at last able to dig the wagons out of the drifts, they floundered along the buried trail to Taos, where there was a week's stop. Then they made the last lap of the journey without incident.

Santa Fe, Pike discovered upon arrival, was not without a certain charm; but as the novelty wore thin, he began for the first time to experience the pangs of homesickness. Apparently he spent the next ten months there, although the

4. "Noon in Santa Fe," *Gen. Albert Pike's Poems* (Little Rock, Ark., 1900), p. 186.
5. "Lines Written in the Rocky Mountains," *Gen. Albert Pike's Poems*, p. 240.
6. "Autobiography," pp. 8-9.

record is vague concerning his activities during the period. In September, 1832, however, he heard that a trapping party was forming in Taos and that its leaders planned to head down the Pecos River and onto the Staked Plains. Immediately, Pike's love of adventure made him decide to join the trappers, and he rode north out of Santa Fe highly exhilarated:

> Farewell, my land! Farewell, my pen!
> Farewell, hard world—thy harder life!
> Now to the desert once again!
> The gun and knife![7]

But unfortunately for this mood of derring-do, Pike got lost on his way back to Taos and wandered in baffled exasperation for almost a day. Finally, however, he was able to overtake the party; and so the trip proper began.

At first the journey proved uneventful. The party was a large one—almost eighty men—and consequently had little fear of any hostile Indians. But after a few days they discovered that both game and water were growing scarce. The men were forced to travel nine days before striking water; and for five of those days Pike had nothing to eat. The situation was acute, and at last some of the men took up a collection to buy a horse from Holliday, who had several. "The horse," said Pike in later years, "was old and worn out. And I recollect I would not eat the meat and William Boone made a soup out of it . . . . I tasted some of it and it tasted like?...."[8]

To hunt more efficiently, the party now broke up into little bands of men which fanned out across the countryside. There were thirteen in Pike's group; and although one of them managed to shoot an antelope a day or so later, it made only a token meal when divided among all the men. Next, they killed a buffalo—only to discover that they had no more fuel: "The only chance we had to make a fire was to cut down weeds and throw them into a pile and set fire to them and then throw the meat into the blaze. It would get partially

7. "Lines," *Gen. Albert Pike's Poems*, p. 520.
8. "Autobiography," p. 17.

cooked and when we tried to eat it, the longer we chewed it the larger it would get. It was horrible stuff."[9]

Although such unscientific cookery was sobering enough, the men had a more serious problem: they were almost out of water again. Repeatedly they hastened toward a promising water hole, only to discover that they had been pursuing a mirage. Or, if they did actually find a water hole, its dry, salt-encrusted bottom mocked them silently. Pike had neither food nor water for three days; and to relieve his thirst, he first tried chewing on a bullet and then ate narcotic mescal beans. When his group reached the headwaters of the Brazos River and found the stream dried up, they dug all night with their knives, hoping to find water below the surface of the river bed. And, finally, they did indeed strike water—but so brackish that they were unable to drink it. The situation was now desperate, and Pike began to reflect somberly upon the bleached bones he had encountered along the way and to wonder if his was to be a similar fate.

When the men had done their utmost, and had failed, the horses suddenly found water—and plenty of it. The thirsty animals rushed into the pool they had discovered; and, despite their owners' efforts to get them out, there they stood, knee deep, drinking water eagerly until their swollen sides resembled barrels. It is quite possible that upon this occasion Pike's horse saved its master's life; however, by bloating itself with water, it lost its own. Three days later Pike found himself without a mount, and so once more obliged to trudge into Taos on foot.

Perhaps this inglorious return from the trapping expedition soured Pike on frontier life. At any rate, after another two months in Taos he decided it was high time he got back to civilization, and he therefore acquired another horse and started north with a group of traders. At first the trip was marred only by petty annoyances—Pike lost his knife, scratched his legs while attempting to force passage through brier thickets, and became sick after unwisely eating a prickly pear. Then his own peculiar brand of tenderfoot misfortune struck again: he lost his horse and was faced with

9. "Autobiography," pp. 17-18.

the prospect of walking back to Missouri. Very possibly, he thus became the only man ever to make a round-trip hike on the Santa Fe Trail.

Soon after crossing the Red River, Pike and his companions encountered an Osage hunting party, and the Indians took them back to camp to meet the chief, who seemed at first a trifle unfriendly. Pike therefore filled his pipe, took a couple of puffs, and handed it to the chief. When the latter accepted the pipe gravely and sucked on it in his turn, the palefaces knew that all was well.

After the men had smoked for several minutes, the chief said something to his squaw, who left the tent immediately. In a little while she was back, carrying a kettle and a couple of pots. She hung these over the fire, dropped some meat into them, and superintended the ensuing barbecue. Pike and his companions watched her progress hungrily, for game had been scarce on the prairie. When the food was ready, Pike ate ravenously, suspecting that he might not get another opportunity to stuff himself before reaching civilization. Furthermore, the meat, which he had momentarily suspected of being fox, proved to be venison and was very good. So he filled himself to bursting, sat back with a contented sigh, and had another smoke.

Just then, however, another Indian made his appearance; and the chief indicated through sign language that the stranger desired the white guests to eat in his lodge, too. "Of course," explained Pike later, "it would not do to refuse, and he had some ribs of a bear roasted, so we ate some of that and took a smoke with him."[10]

At the end of this second meal, Pike and his companions could scarcely move; but another Indian appeared, and then another. "The end of it was that we had to go to thirteen different places to eat and we had to eat at every place and the last mess we got was a pole cat. I got a taste of the liquid, and I did not get it out of my mouth for a week."[11]

Leaving the overly hospitable Osage camp behind, Pike and his companions headed north again. Encountering very

10. "Autobiography," p. 14.
11. "Autobiography," p. 14.

little game, they finally found it necessary to slaughter Gillette's horse for food; and now Pike was not the only member of the party on foot. A few days later they passed through a river bottom where deer and turkeys were plentiful, and for a time feast replaced famine. But thereafter food became increasingly scarce. In desperation, Pike traded his rifle to an old Choctaw Indian for honey and bear meat; and a day or so later, when he ran out of tobacco, he was able to borrow a supply from another Indian. But he was now destitute and thoroughly tired of life in the wilderness. Furthermore, his clothing was in ruins: "I had a pair of buckskin pantaloons—and they were very handsome when I first got them," said Pike years later, recalling the trials and tribulations of life on the prairie. "But when I got east of the mountains I wanted some fir balsam, and in my efforts to get it I got the legs of my pantaloons wet. And they stretched out so that they got tangled about my feet, and I had to take them off and put them out to dry. When I got them back and dried, they drew up until they were around my knees. We had no money and no clothes."[12] So, when the party was forced to camp without shelter in a chilling autumn rain storm, Pike decided that it was high time to find a new route to fame and fortune.

His eventual decision was a novel one: he now determined to head for Louisiana, where, he had heard, there were many rich people. Once in Louisiana, he planned somehow to accumulate sufficient capital for a trip to South America. But on the morning after he had formed his plan, nature once more betrayed the tenderfoot: "We struck this road in the morning, and it was a cloudy day. We were puzzled, for we did not know which end of the road went to Fort Smith and which end went to Fort Towson. . . . It was a very cloudy day, and we took the wrong direction and travelled ten or fifteen miles on that day and camped on the road. The next morning the sun rose bright and clear, and we found that we had been going in the wrong direction."[13] Previously, Pike had had no intention of going to Arkansas; but now, tired and

12. "Autobiography," p. 23.
13. "Autobiography," pp. 21-22.

discouraged, he decided to give up the Louisiana venture rather than retrace his steps. So it was that Albert Pike, ragged and hungry, entered Fort Smith on December 10, 1832, unaware of the distinguished career that lay before him. For, as he said in later years, "If it had been [sunshiny] when we struck that road, I should never have been in Arkansas, never."[14]

14. "Autobiography," p. 22.