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## A LETTER FROM TAOS, 1826

WILLIAM WORKMAN

*edited by David J. Weber*

## INTRODUCTION

IN FEBRUARY 1826 William Workman, a merchant residing in Taos, New Mexico, wrote to his brother, David Workman, of Franklin, Missouri. This simple act is of interest because Workman's letter is one of the few that have survived from the first years of the Santa Fe trade. The original is in the possession of Mr. Conrad Krebs, a great-grandson of David Workman,<sup>1</sup> and a photostatic copy donated by the Krebs family is on file in the State Records Center at Santa Fe. To this writer's knowledge, it has only once been cited in a published work.<sup>2</sup>

The Workman brothers were born in England, David in 1798 and William in 1800. As young men, both migrated to America and established a saddlery in Franklin, Missouri.<sup>3</sup> David Workman and the saddlery achieved lasting, if minor, fame, when his apprentice, sixteen-year-old Kit Carson, ran away to begin his adventures in the far west. David Workman advertised: "One cent reward will be given to any person who will bring back the said boy."<sup>4</sup>

That the Workman brothers soon found their way to New Mexico is not surprising, for in the early 1820's Franklin was the most important town west of St. Louis and the "cradle" of the Santa Fe trade.<sup>5</sup> William was the first to be enticed by the opportunities of Mexico's northern frontier. In the spring of 1825 he joined a group of traders, probably the large caravan captained by Augustus Storrs, and arrived in Santa Fe in early July. Traveling with him were two of the persons mentioned in the letter here

published: Elisha Stanley and Mathew Kinkead.<sup>6</sup> Most of the traders returned to Missouri in the fall; William Workman was among the few who remained to make New Mexico their home.

Workman's main reason for writing to his brother that winter was to obtain materials to build a distillery in Taos, with Samuel Chambers and Mathew Kinkead as his partners. Native distilleries were, of course, already in use in New Mexico, and Workman's letter indicates that he intended to make whiskey that spring, before the arrival of the requested equipment. Furthermore, Peg-Leg Smith claimed to have built a distillery near Taos in the previous winter, 1824-1825, in partnership with Samuel Chambers, James Baird, and one Stevens.<sup>7</sup> But Workman's letter furnishes the most detailed description yet found of the equipment that "Anglos" used to make that famous and popular beverage of the mountain man, "Taos lightning."<sup>8</sup> There is no record of the arrival of the equipment, perhaps because, as Workman said, it was "countraband." If the two eighty-gallon stills did arrive, they were probably the first American-made distillery equipment to be imported over the Santa Fe trail.

In this early New Mexico "bootlegging" operation Samuel Chambers was to own half of the assets and Workman and Kinkead the other half. Chambers had long been associated with the area. In 1812 he was a member of a party that tried, unsuccessfully, to establish commercial relations with Santa Fe, and he spent the next nine years in a Chihuahua prison. Released in 1821, he made his way back to the United States and then returned to Santa Fe with another trading party in 1822.<sup>9</sup> Chambers continued to be active in the commerce of the prairies and apparently made Taos his home until his death, sometime after 1835.<sup>10</sup>

Mathew Kinkead, like Workman, was a resident of Franklin. Just as David Workman is best known as the person from whom the young Kit Carson escaped, Kinkead is best remembered as the kindly "old mountaineer" who sheltered Carson during the lad's first winter in Taos.<sup>11</sup>

Workman's letter is not entirely concerned with establishing a distillery. His complaint that Taos was "one of the meenest Country to be sick in the world for their no nurishments to be got," probably reflected many an Anglo trader's attitude toward Mexican cuisine. The lack of a doctor and the scarcity of specie in the area were typical frontier problems. Doctors had been few during the Spanish colonial period and the Mexican period saw only the occasional visit of a foreign doctor.<sup>12</sup> Workman was not the only Missouri trader to find a shortage of hard cash in New Mexico.<sup>13</sup> That specie and fur were synonymous to Workman is suggestive of the importance of the fur trade within the early Santa Fe trade—an aspect which has often been overlooked.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Workman probably obtained the two-hundred-dollar draft he sent to his brother "on old man Prat," from the sale of furs or by equipping some of Pratte's trappers. "Prat" is almost certainly Bernard Pratte, the prominent St. Louis fur trader. Perhaps Workman acquired furs through trade or by trapping and sold them to Pratte's son, Sylvestre, who was then operating out of New Mexico.<sup>15</sup>

Two days after Workman wrote to his brother, a small party led by Captain Richard Brannin left Taos for Missouri. Brannin had come to New Mexico with the United States Santa Fe trail survey party under George C. Sibley. He bought a mule from Workman for the return trip. Several Santa Fe traders, including Thomas H. Boggs, joined Brannin's group.<sup>16</sup> Boggs had entered the Santa Fe trade as early as 1825 and settled in New Mexico. There, known as José Tomás Boggs, he became a Catholic and a citizen and used the area as a base for trapping and trading.<sup>17</sup> Since he was performing other errands for William Workman on his 1826 trip to Missouri, it seems likely that he also delivered Workman's letter to his brother. The two apparently remained friends. William Workman successfully represented Boggs before the alcalde of Taos in 1828 when a local señorita, who had bestowed certain favors upon Boggs, sought redress for Boggs's failure to marry her.<sup>18</sup>

William Workman remained in Taos, was baptized a Roman

Catholic, married a local girl, and became a Mexican citizen.<sup>19</sup> He operated a store and, in partnership with John Rowland, a distillery.<sup>20</sup> He continued to import merchandise over the Santa Fe trail.<sup>21</sup> In 1837, when he tried to smuggle goods into Santa Fe by concealing them inside of two stills, he was found out and the merchandise confiscated.<sup>22</sup> In 1841 Workman was suspected of conspiring with the Texan-Santa Fe expedition. He and John Rowland, thinking it prudent to depart, led a well-known immigrant party to California. There they purchased a large rancho near Los Angeles.<sup>23</sup>

Although David Workman continued to make Missouri his home, he too became involved in the Santa Fe trade. He visited New Mexico in 1827 and was seen on the Chihuahua trail as late as 1846.<sup>24</sup> In 1854 he and his family joined William in California, where David died in an accident the following year.<sup>25</sup> William Workman prospered and became a prominent Californian. He committed suicide in 1876 when a bank, in which he was partner, failed.<sup>26</sup>

#### THE LETTER

Toes,<sup>27</sup> St. Vernandes Feb. 13, 1826

Dear Brother

You will think it is a long time befor you hear from me but their has not been a company gone in expect [except] one and at that time I was not able to moove in bed I have had a severe spell of sickness morso than I ever had in my life and if it had not a been for Mr Stanly<sup>28</sup> I should have died for they was no Doctor hear and not much medison, and it is one of the meenest Country to be sick in the world for their no nurishments to be got, but I have got quit well again and injoy good health which I hope you do the same and the Boys that is with you, David I have sent you in a draft of two hundred dollors by . . . Th. Bogs and I wish you to collect it as soon as possible for their is a great many drafts on

the old man Prat but I have no doubt but he will pay it at sight; you may think I ought to have sent in more money but it is out of my Power [to] do it at Present it is not in the power of man to sell goods where there is no money I have bought up a large quantity of corn and wheat which I hope to sell it for cash in the spring or turn it into whiskey and that is cash or fur so you may expect one or the other in the spring. my chance was never more flattering than it is at present Chambers has been to St ta Fee and got the holy water put on his head and the Governor<sup>29</sup> is a great friend of his he will assist us in any thing that we undertake so we have want you to get of Aberham Barns<sup>30</sup> eighty gallon stills and some other articles which I will give you a list of, if you could do me the favour I shall be very glad for we are not on any uncertainty about it for we have got the stuff that will bring the money in the spring so that you and Mr Barns need not be the least affraid to get those articles but be shoor never to name it to any person for they are countraband Articles, and I hope by this time that you have got that money from Johnson and Mc Keney if not make them pay if they have got it for they used me very bad Johnson is as meen a man as ever lived give me an axact account how you come on with them for I am affraid that you will have some trouble with them.

#### A list of the Articles

Two Eighty gallon stills, the caps to be of the goose neck kind  
 Six Brass cocks [faucets]  
 Six falling axes  
 Two grubing hoase [hoes]  
 Irons for one tub mill  
 one inch and half Chisel  
 one inch ditto of the very strongest kind  
 Two Augers one inch and the other half inch  
 Two Mill picks, one stone hammer Iron  
 Twenty pounds of steels, One hundred lb of hoop  
 One Crane for Drawing water twenty lb of  
 Flouring [flooring] nails. One good strong Plantation  
 Waggon

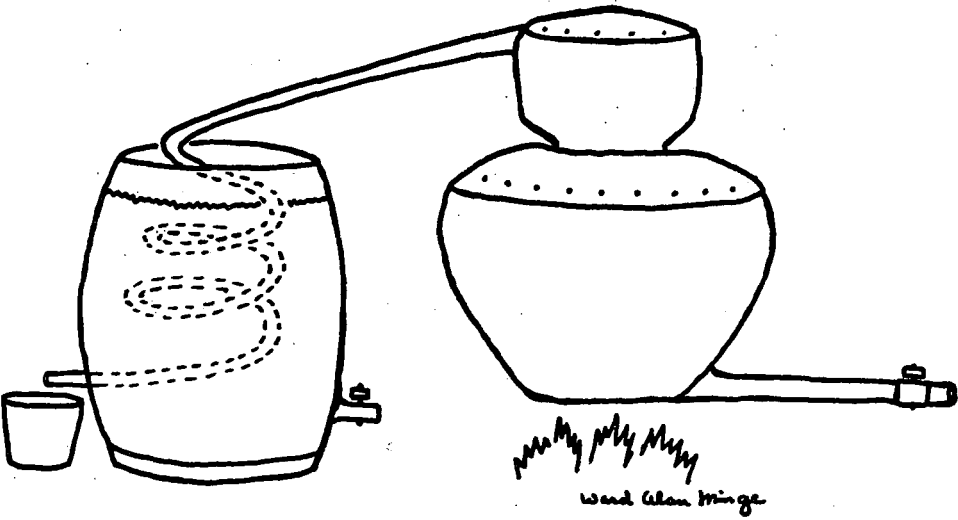
The things that I have named I want you and Aberham Barns to see to getting them if it is convenient, Mathew Kinkead and myself pays for half of them which I expect it will come to about eighty five dollors for each of us, Chambers pays for half and we the other half and perhaps you can get some of them with traid The goods that I named in my other letter I dont want you to send them but if any of the stores will credit me for five hundred yards of the Cheepest cind [kind] of Brown Domestic some narrow and some of the widest kind I will send them in the money this summer without fail and some tobacco if it can be got cheap, and one Blue settute [surtout] coat made in the same fashion that my other on[e] was but have it made a little larger so it will button easy on you and the ballance of my close I think I can make out except [shoes] and a hat you must send me two pair of shoes of . . . high quarter, and tell P. B. Ranys that he [must pick me] out a good hat, unfinished so that I can get it finished hear and I will send him the money or fur in the spring, there will be a very large company that will start from hear in march with about two thousand head of stock which they may calculate to loose half them I could have sent you in stock but it is so uncertain about them getting in for this reason I think that man in any Business that started with as little as I did ought to lie on a shoor futting [footing], I have to furnish mule to Capt Brannin and you cant get one convenient I wish you to get one of M Kinkeads if they are not sould, I have sent you in twenty dollor by Thos Bogs to get us some Sugar and Coffee, and you must send me out colourd paper for lining Trunks and some saddlers tacks as as I did not bring any with me and some morocker [morocco] Leather as mine was taken from me, I want you to send me out my tools such as [B]eck planes and schels gouges holers and rounds and one male turning saw and my smool hammer so I reman, yours

W Workman

Mr Patton<sup>31</sup> and myself tried our work in St ta Fee this winter and could sell nothing as for trunks I can Barter them of to a good advantage but their is very little money in Country and they

thought that we would make them up and the[y] would get them for nothing but be shoor to send me out that coulerd paper and nails and some locks of a better quality for their is half them that I brought is good for nothing and I want some good ones for some particular Persons in this country, Capt Brannin has to load his waggon with his goods and our Articles and if he cant fitit all of them Mr Thos Bogs has promised to bring them that we want, and if you can get some sassifress Bark . . . if you please, you will oblige yours

W Workman





## NOTES

1. Mrs. Conrad Krebs to David J. Weber, Albuquerque, October 15, 1965. Mr. and Mrs. Krebs kindly made the original available for transcription.
2. Janet Lecompte, "Mathew Kinkead," in LeRoy R. Hafen, ed., *The Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West* (Glendale, 1965), vol. 2, p. 192.
3. Marco Newmark, "The Workman Family in Los Angeles," *The Historical Society of Southern California Quarterly*, vol. 32 (1950), p. 318.
4. Edwin L. Sabin, *Kit Carson Days* (Chicago, 1919), vol. 1, p. 12.
5. Josiah Gregg, *Commerce of the Prairies*, edited by Max L. Moorhead (Norman, 1954), p. 22.
6. Stanley was traveling in Storr's caravan. Kate L. Gregg, ed., *The Road to Santa Fe* (Albuquerque, 1952), p. 254, n. 46. Workman checked into the customhouse at Santa Fe on July 8, and Kinkead on July 9. Santa Fe Custom House Records, January 1 to July 5, 1825, Ritch Collection, no. 81, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.
7. "Sketches from the Life of Peg-Leg Smith," *Hutchings' Illustrated California Magazine*, vol. 5 (1860), p. 318.
8. See Ward Alan Minge, "The Last Will and Testament of Don Severino Martinez," *New Mexico Quarterly*, vol. 33 (1963), p. 39.
9. Hiram Martin Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West* (Stanford, 1954), vol. 2, pp. 496, 501, 504.
10. William Henry Ellison, ed., *The Life and Adventures of George Nidever, 1802-1883* (Berkeley, 1937), p. 21; William Waldo, "Recollections of a Septuagenarian," *Missouri Historical Society Glimpses of the Past*, vol. 5 (1938), p. 78; *Guía* for Samuel Chambers to travel in the direction of Chihuahua and Durango, Santa Fe, October 16, 1835, Mexican Archives of New Mexico (cited hereinafter as MANM), State Records Center and Archives, Santa Fe, New Mexico.
11. More significant aspects of Kinkead's eventful life have been brought to light in the previously cited biographical sketch by Janet Lecompte.
12. As late as 1812, when Pedro Bautista Pino wrote his *Ojeada Sobre Nuevo Mexico*, there was no doctor in New Mexico. H. Bailey Carroll and J. Villasana Haggard, eds., *Three New Mexico Chronicles* (Albuquerque, 1942), p. 94. Josiah Gregg, writing toward the end of the Mexican period, found no native doctor in Santa Fe (p. 143). One Dr. Willard practiced medicine in Taos for two months in 1825. "Inland Trade with

Mexico," in *The Personal Narrative of James O. Pattie of Kentucky* (Cleveland, 1905), pp. 332, 337. Dr. J. H. Lyman and Dr. James D. Mead were also physicians who passed through New Mexico. LeRoy R. and Ann W. Hafen, *Old Spanish Trail* (Glendale, 1954), pp. 205, 207-08. Dr. Phillippe Auguste Masure, a Belgian doctor who emigrated to St. Louis in 1827, was in New Mexico from about 1832 to 1838, according to various documents in MANM.

13. Max L. Moorhead, *New Mexico's Royal Road* (Norman, 1958), pp. 62-63.

14. See, for example, Harrison C. Dale, *The Ashley-Smith Explorations and the Discovery of a Central Route to the Pacific, 1822-1829* (Glendale, 1941), p. 303.

15. Although Workman is best remembered as a trader he was apparently not above trapping. He is remembered as having accompanied James O. Pattie and others to the Gila in 1827. *Alta California* (a San Francisco newspaper), July 2, 1865, quoted in Robert Glass Cleland, *This Reckless Breed of Men* (New York, 1950), pp. 194-95.

16. Kate L. Gregg, pp. 85, 146, 150.

17. Santa Fe Custom House Records, Ritch Collection, no. 81. Fray Angelico Chávez, "New Names in New Mexico, 1820-1852," *El Palacio*, vol. 64 (1957), p. 298; List of persons naturalized in New Mexico in 1829, 1830 and 1831, Ritch Collection, no. 113; Cleland, p. 213; Papers pertaining to the case of Tomás Boggs, May 5, 1828, MANM; Report of Manuel Martínez, Alcalde of Taos, April 7, 1827, MANM. Thomas H. Boggs is apparently not related to his contemporary, Governor Lilburn Boggs of Missouri, nor should he be confused with Thomas J. Boggs, also of Missouri, who entered the Santa Fe trade in the 1830's.

18. Vicente Trujillo, Alcalde of Taos, to the governor, September 16, 1828, MANM.

19. Blanche C. Grant, *When Old Trails Were New* (New York, 1934), p. 298. Chávez, pp. 379-80. Although I have not found any record of his naturalization, Workman is referred to frequently as "el naturalizado," in documents of the period.

20. Ellison, p. 27; Letter of Simeon Turley to his brother, Taos, April 18, 1841, quoted in Hafen and Hafen, p. 210.

21. See, for example, *manifiesto* of goods imported by Julian Workman, Santa Fe, June 23, 1839, MANM.

22. Case before Santiago Abreu, Juez 1.º Suplente del Distrito, Santa Fe, July 24, 1837, MANM.

23. The story of their involvement with Texas and the move to California is well told in Hafen and Hafen, pp. 199-214.

24. *A History of Howard and Cooper Counties* (St. Louis, 1883), p.

172; Chittenden, vol. 2, p. 509; LeRoy R. Hafen, ed., *Ruxton of the Rockies* (Norman, 1950), p. 136.

25. Newmark, p. 319.

26. Hafen and Hafen, p. 216, provides a succinct sketch of Workman's California activities.

27. Original punctuation and spelling have been preserved. Brackets indicate letters or words missing in the original or clarify unusual spellings. Three dots, (. . .) indicate an illegible word or words.

28. Elisha Stanley entered the Santa Fe trade at least as early as 1825 and became a prominent merchant. Josiah Gregg acknowledged a debt to Stanley for some of the material in his *Commerce of the Prairies* (p. 5).

29. Antonio Narbona.

30. Abraham Barnes was one of the early settlers in the area of Franklin. During the War of 1812 he was a resident of Fort Kincaid, capable of bearing arms. He entered the Santa Fe trade, probably for the first time, in 1827. *A History of Howard and Cooper Counties*, pp. 98, 158. List of foreigners who have arrived in the territory of New Mexico, July 8, 1827, Ritch Collection, no. 96.

31. John Patton, a carpenter from Kentucky, was a prominent merchant on the Santa Fe and Chihuahua Trails throughout the Mexican period. List of foreigners who have arrived in the territory of New Mexico, July 8, 1827, Ritch Collection, no. 96. Moorhead, pp. 118, 173.