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WILLIAM BECKNELL AS A MOUNTAIN MAN:
TWO LETTERS

edited by DAVID J. WEBER

WILLIAM BECKNELL'S arrival in Santa Fe 150 years ago, on November 16, 1821, marked the beginning of the flourishing and long-lasting Santa Fe trade. Becknell's reputation as the Father of the Santa Fe Trail is well deserved.¹ Not only did he inaugurate the "commerce of the prairies," he improved upon it. In 1822 Becknell led a second expedition which avoided Raton Pass, pioneering the shorter, more level Cimarron Cutoff and proving the practicality of using wagons on the road to Santa Fe.² Becknell's contribution to the Santa Fe trade has obscured the fact that he, like many other Missouri merchants, also tried his hand at trapping in the beaver-rich streams of New Mexico.

Becknell's first, and perhaps only, Rocky Mountain trapping venture occurred in 1824, only three years after the Santa Fe trade had begun. By that time merchandise from Missouri was flooding the New Mexico market and Missouri merchants had sensed that greater profits could be made by trapping. By 1824, streams in the Rio Grande Basin were being depleted of beaver, so many would-be trappers headed northwest toward the Colorado Basin. Among them were such well-known mountain men as Étienne Provost, Peg-leg Smith, Antoine Robidoux, and William Wolfskill and Ewing Young who had come to Santa Fe in 1822 with Becknell.³

Even before he left Missouri in 1824, Becknell had planned to trap northwest of New Mexico. In mid-August, one of his neighbors reported that Becknell was "about to depart from Santa Fe, accompanied by sixteen men. He intends to visit the Oregon before

he returns."⁴ The Father of the Santa Fe Trail apparently had visions of opening still another road, but a Rocky Mountain winter presented so many problems that, as we shall see, he abandoned the idea.

Were it not for the two remarkable letters which follow, we would know almost nothing of Becknell's trapping venture. He wrote the first at Santa Cruz, near the confluence of the Rio Grande and the Chama, on November 29, 1824, a few days before his departure. This letter, addressed to Governor Bartolomé Baca, has never been published in its entirety.⁵ Becknell told Baca of his impending hunt, thanked Baca for a "license," promised to obey Baca's instructions, and responded to the governor's inquiry about other foreign trappers. Since trapping by foreigners in New Mexico had been outlawed in 1824, Governor Baca had more than an idle interest. Josiah Gregg reported that Baca granted trapping licenses to foreigners "upon condition of their taking a certain proportion of Mexicans to learn the art of trapping,"⁶ a requirement Becknell seems to have met.

In the second letter Becknell describes his expedition. The letter first appeared in the June 25, 1825 *Missouri Intelligencer* at Franklin, where Becknell then lived.⁷ Becknell is vague about his route, saying only that he started toward the Green River. Probably he followed what came to be called the Old Spanish Trail, traveling up the Río Chama from Santa Cruz, crossing over into the drainage of the San Juan River, then perhaps ending up in what is today southwestern Colorado in the area of Mesa Verde National Park, or in southeastern Utah. The "Spaniards" he mentions probably guided him. Becknell's letter to the *Intelligencer* indicates that he had failed as a mountain man; indeed he says that the difficult winter "rendered trapping almost impracticable," and refers to his "unfortunate speculations." Nevertheless, upon his return to Missouri the *Intelligencer* of June 11 reported:

By the arrival of Capt. Becknell, from Santa Fe, we learn that the company which left this place last summer for the purpose of trapping, *have been successful* [italics mine]. Three or four of the party are reported as missing, and one was killed. The young gentleman

who has thus fallen a victim to the hostility of the Indians, was George Armstrong, the son of Mrs. Means, of this town, an amiable young man, . . .

We feel much regret in having to record this unhappy catastrophe. The trade, however, in furs and merchandise to that country is still carried on with increasing vigor, and promises the adventurer a rich reward for his dangers and privations.

Becknell's letters require no further comment. They are clear in themselves and are transcribed as faithfully as possible. Becknell's letter to Baca required some additional punctuation for clarity; it is one long unbroken sentence. The other shows that someone, perhaps the editor of the *Intelligencer*, Nathaniel Patten, gave Becknell considerable editorial assistance, for literary skill was not among his attainments.

Santa Crus Oct 29th 1824

To His Excelannce
governor of
New mexico
Bartolar Mr Barker

Seur I have recvd the Lisance you granted me by the onrabel preste [priest] of santa Cruse Manuel Radar and will Comply with your orders and obey them punctaly. Thar is 10 of us to gether all amearican. Those men at Tous [Taos] I Have Nothing to Dew with. What thaar going to Dew I Know not. As you Requested me to Let you know of any that wars goin to trape I Cante say wheather tha ar or not. Tha Have sum trapes with them. If any Cums within my notis I shal give you notis of them as you requesid it of me. I shal be in Next June if nothing Hapins to us. Your Exlantance wishus me to send you sum medison. I sende you sum Rubarb and sum Campher. The Rubarbe you Can take at any time what will Ly on the pinte [point] of a pocket Knif in sum shuger and a spunful of Cold warter. You May Eaeght or drinke

any thing Hot or Cold. The Best time to take it is of a night when you go to Bed. It is not apecke [ipecac?] a gentil purge and wil futufy the Stumak when in Bad order. The Campor you can desolve in whiskey. Put a few dropes in a dram of whiskey in the morning will Help the stumake very much. I send you A few of the gusawit Barks [Jesuits' bark, or camphor]. Put them in to a botel of whiskey 1 quart in [illegible] and let them stand in the sun for one or 2 Days and then drinke them as Biter [bitters?] in the morning what you Like of them. The preste of santa Clarar wishes to go to the united States with me next spring if it is agreabel to your Excelances. My Friend Mr. Lagrand [Alexander Le Grand] will translats this to your oner [honor]. I shal Cum an see you when I Cum in from the woods. The winte[r] is aprochin so near I Cante [find] time to Cum now but all orders from you Shal be apentual [punctually?] obad [obeyed] by me from your oner Seur. Your moste obedante umbil Sarvunte.

CAPT. WM. BECKNELL

CAPT. BECKNELL'S TOUR

Mr. Patten,

If the following narrative of my late tour in the upper province of Mexico, is sufficiently interesting to deserve a place in your columns, you are at liberty to publish it.

On the 5th of November last, I left Santa Cruz with a party of nine men, employed in my service, with a view of trapping on the Green River, several hundred miles from Santa Fe.

In the course of my route towards the point of destination, I passed through the gap in a mountain, which was so narrow as greatly to resemble a gate-way. This mountain, which had the appearance of an artificial mound, was about three or four hundred feet high, and not more than ten feet in breadth at the base. The country here is poor, and only timbered with pine and cedar. I met in this vicinity, several parties of Indians, who were poor and in-

offensive. It was, however, reported that some of the Indians who spent some time with us, afterwards committed murders upon the persons of some of the *engages* of Mr. Prevost [Étienne Provost] of St. Louis, and robbed the remainder. We suffered every misery incident to such an enterprise in the winter season, such as hunger and cold—but were exempted from robbery. The flesh of a very lean horse, which we were constrained to break our fast with, was, at this time, pronounced excellent. But when his bones were afterwards served up, as a matter of necessity, they were not as well relished, but had nearly proved fatal to the whole party. We found to our cost, that our stomachs, although tolerably commodiously disposed, were not equal to the task of digesting bones. You can readily imagine, that we were in that deplorable condition where it would be justifiable to adopt the philosophy of the ancient Romans, and give odds to die. But such is not the practice of Missourians. Although we were forty days from settlements, the snow three or four feet deep, and our small stock of horses, our principal reliance for effecting a retreat, considered sacred, so that to have eaten them would have been like dining upon our own feet, we still contrived to supply our tables, if not with the dainties of life, with food of the most substantial kind. For instance, we subsisted two days on soup made of a raw hide we had reserved for sealing our moccasins; on the following morning the remains were dished up into a hash. The young men employed by me had seen better days, and had never before been supperless to bed, nor missed a wholesome and substantial meal at the regular family hour, except one, who was with me when I opened the road to Santa Fe. When afterwards we were enabled to procure indifferent bear meat, we devoured it in that style of eagerness, which, on a review of our operations at this time, very forcibly reminds us of the table urbanity of a prairie wolf.

While at our winter camp we hunted when we could, and the remainder of the time attempted to sleep, so as to dream of the abundance of our own tables at home, and the dark rich *tenants* of our smoke houses.

In the vicinity of our encampment, I discovered old diggings,

and the remains of furnaces. There are also in this neighborhood the remains of many small stone houses, some of which have one story beneath the surface of the earth. There is likewise an abundance of broken pottery here, well baked and neatly painted. This was probably the scite [site] of a town where the ancient Mexican Indians resided, as the Spaniards, who seldom visit this part of the country, can give no account of it.

On our way back to the settlements, we halted at the encampment of a band of Indians, who shocked our feelings not a little by the disposition they were about to make of an infirm (and no longer useful) squaw. When the principal part of the band had left their camp, two of those remaining proceeded to lay the sick woman upon her face, by the side of some of her effects. They then covered her with a funeral pile of pine wood, to which they set fire, and thus made a Hindoo sacrifice of the patient old matron.

As the depth of the snow, and the immense cold of the season rendered trapping almost impracticable, we succeeded, on a third attempt, in making good our retreat from this inhospitable wilderness, and reached a Spanish village on the fifth of April, after an absence of five months.

It was reported in the Spanish settlements, by a man who had been employed by George Armstrong, of Franklin, who accompanied me to Santa Fe, that he had been murdered by the Indians; but I have good reason to believe, and I most sincerely hope, this may be only an idle fabrication.⁸

The trade to this province has been greatly injured by the reduction of prices—white domestics are only fifty cents per yard. An export duty of three per cent. is collected on all specie brought out of the province in this direction.⁹ Although my essays have been unfortunate speculations, I am disposed to make another experiment.

I travelled from the Spanish village of Taos, to Fort Osage, on the Missouri, in thirty-four days. I had supplied myself with provisions for the journey consisting of meat, beans & peas. By the route which I travelled on my return, I avoided the so much

dreaded sand hills, where adventurers have frequently been forced to drink the blood of their mules, to allay their thirst. Mr. Bailey Hardeman, of this county, was to have set out on his return, accompanied by a large party, on the first of the present month.

I cannot better conclude than by annexing this remark, that the toils endured, and the privations suffered in these enterprizes, very naturally give a tone and relish to the repose and plenty found at the civilized fire side.

WM. BECKNELL

NOTES

1. In a well-reasoned essay, *Opening the Santa Fe Trail* (Cerrillos, N.M., 1971), Marc Simmons argues that Becknell reached Santa Fe by design, rather than by accident—an interesting new interpretation that subsequent writers cannot ignore.

2. Max L. Moorhead, *New Mexico's Royal Road: Trade and Travel on the Chihuahua Trail* (Norman, 1958), p. 61.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 62. Weber, *The Taos Trappers: The Fur Trade in the Far Southwest, 1540-1846* (Norman, 1971), pp. 58, 66-78. Chapter V of *The Taos Trappers* places Becknell's expedition in a broader context.

4. Alphonso Wetmore to John Scott, Franklin, Missouri, August 19, 1824 in *Santa Fé Trail First Reports: 1825* (Houston, 1960), p. 68.

5. Ritch Papers (No. 80), Huntington Library, San Marino, California; published by permission. Part of the letter appeared in Robert Glass Cleland, *This Reckless Breed of Men: The Trappers and Fur Traders of the Southwest* (New York, 1950), pp. 45-46.

6. Josiah Gregg, *Commerce of the Prairies*, ed. by Max L. Moorhead (Norman, 1954), p. 160.

7. Becknell had written the letter at least a week earlier. On June 18 the *Intelligencer*, a weekly, had informed its readers: "We have received from Capt. Becknell, lately returned from a trapping expedition, in the New Mexico country, some interesting particulars relating to the privations & sufferings of his company. . . . We shall endeavor to find room for them in our next." Becknell's letter was also published in "The Journals of

Capt. Thomas Becknell From Boone's Lick to Santa Fe, and From Santa Fe to Green River," *Missouri Historical Review*, vol. 4 (1910), pp. 81-84. To the confusion of subsequent writers, the *Review* mistakenly ascribed these journals to "Thomas" Becknell. Archer Butler Hulbert repeated the error in his *Southwest on the Turquoise Trail: The First Diaries on the Road to Santa Fe* (Denver, 1933), pp. 55-68. Although Hulbert reprinted Becknell's Santa Fe Trail journals, he omitted the account of Becknell's trapping expedition. Part of the letter has also been reprinted in LeRoy R. and Ann W. Hafen, *Old Spanish Trail, Santa Fé to Los Angeles* (Glendale, 1954), pp. 96-97.

8. The report may have been false, for a George Armstrong was still trading in Santa Fe in 1828. See, for example, Weber, *The Extranjeros: Selected Documents from the Mexican Side of the Santa Fe Trail, 1825-1828* (Santa Fe, 1967), p. 34.

9. Becknell's comment that a three per cent export duty was collected on specie is interesting. Most accounts of this period mention only import duties. A tax on specie is generally thought to have been instituted in 1827, not as early as 1825. See Moorhead, p. 126.

from your over near ...
 abidante ...
 Oct 11 1828