

Early Days and Men of California

- 17 The excitement and worryment attendant upon this misfortune seriously affected my health, and, by the advice of a physician, I again started for the West in the hope of regaining it. "No pent-up" St. Louis confined my journey this time. My experience there was not calculated to make me infatuated with that place. I went there, however, as a starting-point of my journey towards the sunset regions. While there, in the early fall of 1843, I fell in with a party of Rocky Mountain
- 18 trappers, from Fort Laramie, now in Wyoming. They consented to my going to Fort Laramie with them. I procured ~~not~~ letters from Mr. Tharpee, the head of the American Fur Company, to Colonel Hamilton, then in charge of the company's affairs at Laramie.

We reached the fort in due time, without any untoward event. We killed many buffalo on our way up the Platte River. The exercise and invigorating atmosphere had a wonderful effect upon me, and when I reached Laramie I felt like a new man. My experiences thus far in life had been those of a much older and more matured manhood. I had already regained my natural buoyancy of spirits, and, in a great measure, my health, and I felt equal to almost any undertaking promising adventure. My disposition just at that time was too reckless to consider well the difficulties and dangers to be encountered in any mode of life that might open before me.

- At that time Fort Laramie was the rendezvous and base of supplies for the trappers, for hundreds of miles around. The trappers, sometimes alone, sometimes with Indian wives, would take their traps and a couple of ponies and go into the mountain fastnesses to trap for beaver, to be gone from four to six months, returning in the spring with their packs of furs. Acting upon the advice of Colonel Hamilton, I concluded to join a French Canadian trapper called Chaumie, upon one of these trips, in the winter of 1843-44. We started with a good outfit, with three ponies, an ample supply of jerked buffalo meat, coffee, and ammunition, and the necessary traps. We penetrated into the mountains, and it was some three weeks before Chau-
- 19 mie set his traps. We moved from stream to stream, and were very successful, and Chaumie had cached several packs of beaver. I will here observe that I had no more idea of where we were than a sailor in mid-ocean, without sextant, chart, or compass, but Chaumie seemed to know all about it, and I was content. It was a lonely life, but not by any means void of excitement and adventure, and the robust health I was then enjoying kept my spirits in an exhilarant condition that rendered me oblivious to recollections of life in the populous world.

- When we had been out some three months I noticed one day that Chaumie appeared anxious and worried. He concealed his traps with more than ordinary care, and would not let me make any fire up in the ravine where we had camped; I asked him what was the matter. Chaumie spoke broken English; he shook his head and laconically said, "Indians, I no like him." He was watchful and uneasy all night, and I slept but very little myself. The next morning just after day-break he took his rifle and went down to the stream to look at his traps; he had been gone about a half-hour when I heard the report of his rifle. I crawled to a clump of bushes at the crest of the ravine, and, looking down, I saw Chaumie surrounded by Indians. I hurried back to camp, cut off a few links of jerked buffalo meat from the tree where we hung it, and, with my rifle and buffalo robe, I struck into the mountain, with not the remotest idea which way I was traveling. Concealing myself in the bushes, I slept soundly that night until daylight. Making a hasty meal of jerked buffalo meat, I started; I struck over a
- 20 spur of the mountain and down into a valley below; I had hardly reached the valley when my ears were saluted with Indian yells, seemingly on every side of me. I was soon surrounded and found myself a prisoner of the same Indians who had Chaumie.

At that time the Sioux and Cheyennes were friendly to the whites, but the Arapahoes were hostile, and I knew it was that tribe who had captured us, and I knew that

they were cruel and pitiless, and we could expect no mercy at their hands. They took my rifle away from me, and would not allow me to communicate with Chaumie, although on our march he several times called out to me to keep up a good heart. We started on a long and weary march far into a mountainous country, that I have always understood to be the Black Hills; after several days we reached their village, composed of some seventy-five lodges. The Indians all turned out, and had a very excited time on our arrival.

I was placed in a lodge with some young bucks of about my own age. The next day they commenced holding powwows to decide what they would do with Chaumie and myself. I was allowed to wander around, but the young bucks always kept close by me. Chaumie and myself were kept apart, but we several times came within speaking distance, when he would call out to me, "Boy, keep up brave heart; don't be afraid; you all right; they keep you, they make you Indian," intimating at the same time that he was doomed to a different fate.

After a few days I was led, by two old squaws and the young bucks, into the center of the village. Here

21 I found that a small-sized tree had been set firmly in the ground, to which poor Chaumie was fastened. Brush was piled around him and preparations for burning him at the stake were completed. They did not set fire to the brush then but kept him there all through the afternoon, taunting and worrying him in every way they could, without committing, as yet, any bodily injury. Chaumie retorted in a ceaseless flow of curses and epithets, calling them squaws and cowards, in broken English, French, and some few words of their own language, at the same time mixing in words intended for me. He told me not to be afraid, that no harm would come to me if I appeared to be contented, and adopted their ways and habits; that I would get away from them some day, and to tell his friends at Laramie what had become of him, and that he had died as a brave man should die.

At night they set fire to the brush and then commenced a wild saturnalia of savage devilry and cruelty, such as no man has ever witnessed without the remembrance of it haunting him to his dying day, and such as fills me with horror as I write down the story of the horrible scene. As the flames arose and encircled the body of poor Chaumie, not a cry of agony escaped him, but he redoubled his defying words, telling them that their men were squaws and that there was not a brave among them. It was the squaws and young bucks who did all the torturing. They thrust burning brands into his burning flesh, made him a target for their arrows, and danced around him, in demoniac glee at the agonies he was evidently suffering. If I tried to turn my head away from the sickening scene; if I

22 shut my eyes, I was forced to open them again, by their threatening gestures. And so, with the glare of the fire lighting up the hideous scene, the defiant words of poor Chaumie growing fainter and fainter, the exulting yells of the copper-colored devils, and yet more fiend-like screechings of the female hags, more raving than the ravenous wolves which had surrounded me the year before in the forests of Missouri, I was heart-sick, desperate, and heedless of what might happen to me as I heard the last moan from the lips of my poor half-breed friend, and saw the flames shrivel up his tortured body and limbs into a crisp and roasted mass, that fell into ashes and cinders with the burning debris of the brush and wood that had been gathered together at once for this execution and funeral pyre.

I was taken back from the scene of horror to the lodge, and there, throughout the long and seemingly never-ending night, I suffered such wakeful torture as almost made me envy the lot of poor Chaumie, with whom all was, at last, rest and peace.

Youth, elastic and buoyant with health as I was then, does not readily yield to despair, even under situations as trying as that in which I found myself placed. I

had but one course to pursue, and that was to make the best of my surroundings; to appear seemingly cheerful and contented; to ingratiate myself into the confidence of my captors; to be, almost in reality, an Indian among Indians, a savage among savages, for as long a time as might be necessary to effect my escape, at some time, from them.

[He lived with the Indians until August when one morning he began the journey which led to his escape.]

26 That night, greatly refreshed by my delectable supper [rattlesnake meat], I slept well. I camped close to the plains. The next morning, as I turned my gaze to the prairies, I saw they were literally swarming with buffalo, and about the middle of the forenoon I saw a great commotion among them near the river and directly discovered a puff of smoke and heard the faint report of a gun, soon after followed by others, and I knew that they must be white hunters, as the Indians had no guns to hunt with in those days. I hastened eagerly and rapidly towards them. As I neared them, the firing became more frequent, and I was fully convinced that they were a party of white hunters making buffalo meat. As I approached nearer, I was at once recognized by old Joe Walker, the then renowned trapper and Rocky Mountain guide, whom I knew at Laramie. As he rode up to me, he exclaimed, "Great God! boy, where did you come from?"

27 I was soon surrounded by the whole party on horseback. The dead buffaloes they had killed lay scattered all around the plain. Sol. Sublette, another old friend, was one of the party. They all greeted me most kindly and welcomed me as one who had long been given up at Laramie as dead. They took me to their camp on the river, which was almost surrounded by buffalo meat drying in the sun, and with which, and the adjunct of splendid coffee and real bread, made of flour, the first I had tasted for long months, I almost surfeited myself.

That night, sitting around the camp fire, I told them my experience with the Arapahoes; I related in detail the sad fate of poor Chaumie. They eagerly listened, in emotional silence, to my recital. When I had finished, old Joe Walker exclaimed, "Boys, we must take some of that Rapaho har" in revenge of Chaumie.

I was in bounding health and overflowing with animal spirits, and the happy ending of this somewhat dramatic episode of my life left me as free as the air, with not a disturbing thought of either the past or future.

Of course I remained with the hunters until we returned to Fort Laramie, sometime in September, 1844.

28 I was a free lance once more, free to drift back again to civilization, or to plunge still farther into the magnetic Western wilds, as fancy or circumstances might dictate. I had no thought then of returning to Eastern civilization. To remain where I was had neither pleasure nor profit in prospective. My inclinations still pointed to the "fresh fields and pastures new" of the yet remote West, ere I should halt in my wanderings in that direction. I had no definite or fixed plan or purpose in my mind, but, with an insonciant feeling, trusted to providence to shape future events.

Early in October, 1844, a party of six or seven persons arrived at Fort Laramie, on their way from California to the Eastern States. Among them was a gentleman named Farwell. He was originally from my native State, Maine. His eyes were seriously affected and he was on his way to the States for the purpose of obtaining medical treatment. He had acquired a large land grant in California.

Mr. Farwell entertained me for hours with his glowing description of California, until my imagination pictured it to me as a veritable Atlantis, and I became imbued with an intense desire and determination to come hither. He also gave me a warm letter

of introduction to W. D. M. Howard.

In the following spring, 1845, I had fully determined to come to California as soon as I could persuade a sufficient number to join me to make the party self-protective. The emigration, at that time, was wholly toward Oregon. California was a remote, foreign, and practically unknown country, that had as yet attracted but few American settlers, and possessed, as far as then known, but few inducements for emigration.

29 As the emigration to Oregon began to arrive at Laramie, I commenced my interviewing. The first day I found among them an old friend from St. Louis, Dr. W. B. Gildea, a dentist. He quickly consented to join me. In the following week we succeeded in inducing ten others to go with us, making a party of twelve, consisting of J. R. Snyder, Wm. Blackburn, George McDougal, Dr. W. B. Gildea, Hiram Rhensaw, Francis Hoen, John Lewis, Harry Speel, W. L. Todd, William Scott, a man named Smith, and myself. Of that party I have been for several years the sole survivor.

Early in June, with pack animals, we left Fort Laramie for Fort Hall via Fort Bridger. Fort Hall, now in Idaho, was then the headquarters of the Hudson Bay Fur Company. Some one hundred and fifty miles east of Fort Hall I discovered a Durham bull, wandering alone on the banks of a stream along which we were traveling, that had evidently been foot-sore and abandoned by some Oregon emigrant that had passed there. I found him well and in fine condition, and drove him in among our few loose animals, and from there to Fort Hall, as a legitimate prize, where he became a prime factor in assisting us on our journey to California, as well as a source of what promised to result in a serious difficulty.

At Fort Hall I found a generous welcome from Captain Grant, then in charge there, to whom I had brought a warm letter of introduction from Colonel Hamilton, of Fort Laramie. When I informed him that we were going to California, he strenuously objected, saying that I was too young, and our party too small, to undertake it, and too little was known of the country intervening and the character of the different tribes of Indians that we would encounter. He urged his objections with almost paternal kindness, but I did not waver in my determination to proceed, and he finally gave up the contest.