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FRANCIS PARKMAN

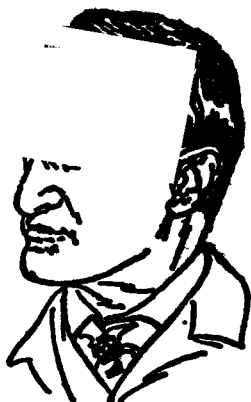
The Oregon Trail

with an introduction by JAMES K. SMITH

Complete and Unabridged



The Oregon Trail



FRANCIS PARKMAN

Introduction

In eighteen hundred and ~~forty-six~~, on April 28, to be exact, a twenty-three-year-old Harvard student, Francis Parkman, and his friend and relative, Quincy Adams Shaw, left St. Louis, Missouri, "on a tour of curiosity and amusement to the Rocky Mountains."

Eighteen hundred and forty-six was a momentous year in the history of the United States. The steady westward movement of the American people in search of land, a movement that had begun in the late eighteenth century on the Eastern seaboard and spilled through and around the Appalachian Mountains into the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys, was now moving across the great central plain of the continent. Some emigrants and settlers took the Santa Fé Trail into Mexican territory, but many more, lured by tales of the beauty and fertility of the verdant coastal valleys west of the Rocky Mountains, were journeying beyond the Missouri River and across the Great Plains. Their cumbersome, creaking wagons jolted along the Oregon Trail, the long route that began at Independence (or Westport), Missouri, followed the Platte River through the lands of the Pawnees

and the Sioux to Fort Laramie (a fur post) and came to a point north and east of Great Salt Lake where South Pass gives access to the plateau country west of the Rocky Mountains. The Trail then led to Fort Hall on the Snake River, which pointed the way into the heart of the Oregon Territory. (At Fort Hall a settler could change his mind and go southwest on the California Trail.)

In 1840, there were barely a hundred Americans living in Oregon south of the Columbia River, less than a hundred in California, a Mexican possession, and a mere handful of Americans in the Southwest, also Mexican territory. Six years later, these regions (except lands in the extreme Southwest) had become, by treaty or by force of arms, a part of the United States, and their American population had increased forty-fold. Indeed, the year that Parkman and Shaw rode up the great, barren valley of the Platte was a high-water mark of the Oregon immigration, nearly three thousand settlers making the arduous, dusty, dangerous trek along the Oregon Trail.

Not only did Francis Parkman, the self-dedicated historian, chance upon an eventful year to travel west; fate seemed to throw him into contact with many historic figures and to bring to his eyes eyewitness accounts of prime events. He met Pierre Chouteau, the cofounder of St. Louis, and a man who had known Chief Pontiac; Daniel Boone's grandsons; Louis Vasquez, partner of the fabulous Jim Bridger and a great hunter and scout in his own right; Colonel Stephen Kearney, who led the dragoons of the Army of the West south that summer to the Mexican War; and Thomas Fitzpatrick, or "Broken Hand," perhaps the greatest of the mountain men who trapped and traded on the Western plains and in the mountain ranges beyond them. Parkman heard of the exploits of the famous John C. Frémont, an Army surveyor, who was re-exploring the routes of the mountain men into Oregon, California, and Mexico. He was told the chilling story of the Donner party, the emigrant group that was trapped by winter in the high sierras of California and driven by cold and hunger to cannibalism. He had pointed out to him some of the adventurers and rogues who were going all the way to the Pacific to raise a

rebellion against Mexican authorities in California and claim that beautiful territory for the Stars and Stripes (which they did). He saw and spoke with officers of volunteer regiments on their way to the Mexican War. In addition, in a year in which the great Sioux nation, the fierce Arapahoes, and those great warriors, the Cheyennes, were still at peace with the white man and in a season when, for once, the Gros Ventres, the Crows, the Shoshones, the Blackfeet, and the deadly Comanches were not scourging the plains and the foothills of the Rockies, Parkman met and spoke (through his half-breed guide, Henry Chatillon) with many an Indian chief.

The title *The Oregon Trail* is as deceptive as the natural assumption that it must be history because it is written by an eminent historian. In the first place, Parkman's journeyings took him along the Oregon Trail only as far as Fort Laramie, on the eastern edge of what is now Wyoming. He then rode southwest with a band of Sioux seeking a war of retaliation with any "Snakes" (Shoshones) it could find in the Black Hills area (the Laramie Mountains of Wyoming). As it happened, the Sioux ended up killing buffalo, instead of taking Shoshone scalps. Later, Parkman rejoined Shaw at Fort Laramie, and the two went almost due south to the Arkansas River and then east to the Santa Fé Trail, which led them back to their starting point, Westport.

In the second place, it is something of a shock to discover that Parkman almost completely ignores the detail and significance of his encounters with great men and great movements in the West of the 1840's. This seems even more astonishing when one considers that the observations of a six-month, two-thousand-mile journey that filled three diaries were the source material of a book that was dictated by Parkman to Shaw two years *after* their so-called "tour of curiosity and amusement." Between 1846 and 1848 Parkman had plenty of time to reflect upon his brief Western venture because he had already begun what amounted to a life-long semi-convalescence. (Never robust, his health showed signs of breaking down as early as 1843. In 1846 on the plains, the glaring sun, the harsh alkali dust, and the frequent drenching rainstorms of the region left him, among

other things, with badly weakened eyesight and acute, crippling arthritis.) Even Parkman's numerous observations upon the Sioux, the "Dacotahs" as he called them, are superficial and trite; he made the mistake of judging them in terms of his own culture—that of a New England Puritan and an upper-class Bostonian. There is little hint in *The Oregon Trail* of the great historian who was to write with imagination and insight the several volumes under the general title *England and France in the New World* (1865-1892).*

Why then has *The Oregon Trail* been published in edition after edition and enjoyed by generation after generation? Why is Parkman's first book his best-known book? Simply because it enthralls the reader. The book does reflect the fact that by tradition, training and taste Parkman was an aristocrat and somewhat of a snob, but his actual powers of observation were rare in one so young, and he had attained a notable degree of mastery of the art of writing. The result is a record that brings the reader the sight, sound, and smell of the Great Plains of the mid-nineteenth century, a dry, treeless land of wild grasses and sagebrush, where wolves skulked, antelope raced, and buffalo lumbered. The book contains fascinating accounts of the traders, mountain men, French-Canadians, half-breeds, and full-blooded Indians who peopled the American West of that time, in particular, the Sioux. It has thrilling descriptions of buffalo hunts and of the hardships and dangers of prairie weather. In short, *The Oregon Trail* is excellent reading.

JAMES K. SMITH, M.A., A.L.A.

*The volumes describing the epic conflict of two powers for control of the North American continent are *Pioneers of France in The New World* (1865); *The Jesuits in North America* (1874); *Count Frontenac and New France Under Louis XIV* (1877); *Montcalm and Wolfe* (1884); *A Half-Century of Conflict* (1892).

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FRANCIS PARKMAN



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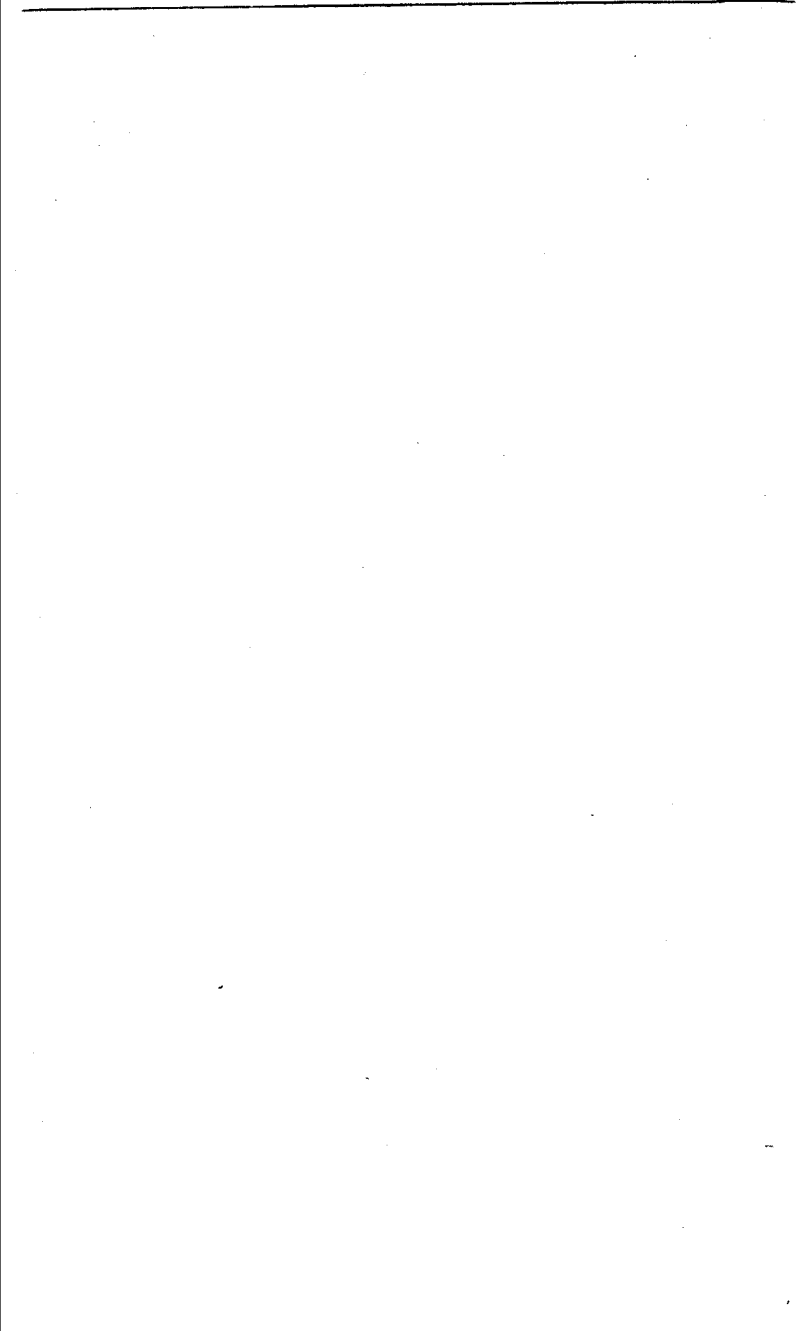
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THE SPECIAL CONTENTS OF THIS EDITION

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ISBN: 0-8049-0037-X THE OREGON TRAIL

To
The Comrade of a Summer
and
The Friend of a Lifetime
QUINCY ADAMS SHAW



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Preface to the Edition of 1892

IN the preface to the fourth edition of this book, printed in 1872, I spoke of the changes that had already come over the Far West. Since that time change has grown to metamorphosis. For Indian teepees, with their trophies of bow, lance, shield, and dangling scalp-locks, we have towns and cities, resorts of health and pleasure seekers, with an agreeable society, Paris fashions, the magazines, the latest poem, and the last new novel. The sons of civilization, drawn by the fascinations of a fresher and bolder life, thronged to the western wilds in multitudes which blighted the charm that had lured them.

The buffalo is gone, and of all his millions nothing is left but bones. Tame cattle and fences of barbed wire have supplanted his vast herds and boundless grazing grounds. Those discordant serenaders, the wolves that howled at evening about the traveler's camp-fire, have succumbed to arsenic and hushed their savage music. The wild Indian is turned into an ugly caricature of his conqueror; and that which made him romantic, terrible, and hateful, is in large measure scourged out of him. The slow cavalcade of horsemen armed to the teeth has disappeared before parlor cars and the effeminate comforts of modern travel.

The rattlesnakes have grown bashful and retiring. The mountain lion shrinks from the face of man, and even grim "Old Ephraim,"¹ the grizzly bear, seeks the seclusion of his dens and caverns. It is said that he is no longer his former self, having found, by an intelligence not hitherto set to his credit, that his ferocious strength is no match for a repeating rifle; with which discovery he is reported to have grown diffident, and abated the truculence of his more prosperous days. One may be permitted to doubt if the bloodthirsty old savage has really experienced a change of heart; and before inviting him to single combat, the ambitious tenderfoot, though the proud possessor of a Winchester with sixteen cartridges in the magazine, would do well to consider not only the quality of his weapon, but also that of his own nerves.

He who feared neither bear, Indian, nor devil, the all-daring

¹ Alias "Old Caleb" and "Old Enoch."

and all-enduring trapper, belongs to the past, or lives only in a few gray-bearded survivals. In his stead we have the cowboy, and even his star begins to wane.

The Wild West is tamed, and its savage charms have withered. If this book can help to keep their memory alive, it will have done its part. It has found a powerful helper in the pencil of Mr. Remington, whose pictures are as full of truth as of spirit, for they are the work of one who knew the prairies and the mountains before irresistible commonplace had subdued them.

Boston, 16 September, 1892.

Preface to the Fourth Edition

THE following sketches first appeared in 1847. A summer's adventures of two youths just out of college might well enough be allowed to fall into oblivion, were it not that a certain interest will always attach to the record of that which has passed away never to return. This book is the reflection of forms and conditions of life which have ceased, in great measure, to exist. It mirrors the image of an irrevocable past.

I remember that, as we rode by the foot of Pike's Peak, when for a fortnight we met no face of man, my companion remarked, in a tone anything but complacent, that a time would come when those plains would be a grazing country, the buffalo give place to tame cattle, farmhouses be scattered along the water-courses, and wolves, bears, and Indians be numbered among the things that were. We condoled with each other on so melancholy a prospect, but we little thought what the future had in store. We knew that there was more or less gold in the seams of those untrodden mountains; but we did not foresee that it would build cities in the waste and plant hotels and gambling-houses among the haunts of the grizzly bear. We knew that a few fanatical outcasts were groping their way across the plains to seek an asylum from Gentile persecution; but we did not imagine that the polygamous hordes of Mormons would rear a swarming Jerusalem in the bosom of solitude itself. We knew that, more and more, year after year, the trains of emigrant wagons would creep in slow procession towards barbarous Oregon or wild and distant California; but we did not dream how Commerce and Gold would breed nations along the Pacific, the disenchanting screech of the locomotive break the spell of weird mysterious mountains, woman's rights invade the fastnesses of the Arapahoes, and despairing savagery, assailed in front and rear, veil its scalp-locks and feathers before triumphant commonplace. We were no prophets to foresee all this; and, had we foreseen it, perhaps some perverse regrets might have tempered the ardor of our rejoicing.

The wild cavalcade that defiled with me down the gorges of the Black Hills, with its paint and war-plumes, fluttering trophies and

savage embroidery, bows, arrows, lances, and shields, will never be seen again. Those who formed it have found bloody graves, or a ghastlier burial in the maws of wolves. The Indian of to-day, armed with a revolver and crowned with an old hat; cased, possibly, in trousers or muffled in a tawdry shirt,—is an Indian still, but an Indian shorn of the picturesqueness which was his most conspicuous merit.

The mountain trapper is no more, and the grim romance of his wild, hard life is a memory of the past.

As regards the motives which sent us to the mountains, our liking for them would have sufficed; but, in my case, another incentive was added. I went in great measure as a student, to prepare for a literary undertaking of which the plan was already formed, but which, from the force of inexorable circumstances, is still but half accomplished. It was this that prompted some proceedings on my part, which, without a fixed purpose in view, might be charged with youthful rashness. My business was observation, and I was willing to pay dearly for the opportunity of exercising it.

Two or three years ago, I made a visit to our guide, the brave and true-hearted Henry Chatillon, at the town of Carondelet, near St. Louis. It was more than twenty years since we had met. Time hung heavy on his hands, as usual with old mountain-men married and established; his hair was touched with gray, and his face and figure showed tokens of early hardship; but the manly simplicity of his character was unchanged. He told me that the Indians with whom I had been domesticated, a band of the hated Sioux, had nearly all been killed in fights with the white men.

The faithful Deslauriers is, I believe, still living on the frontier of Missouri. The hunter Raymond perished in the snow during Frémont's disastrous passage of the mountains in the winter of 1848.

Boston, March 30, 1872.

1. The Frontier

LAST spring, 1846, was a busy season in the city of St. Louis. Not only were emigrants from every part of the country preparing for the journey to Oregon and California, but an unusual number of traders were making ready their wagons and outfits for Santa Fé. The hotels were crowded, and the gunsmiths and saddlers were kept constantly at work in providing arms and equipments for the different parties of travellers. Steamboats were leaving the levee and passing up the Missouri, crowded with passengers on their way to the frontier.

In one of these, the "Radnor," since snagged and lost, my friend and relative, Quincy Adams Shaw, and myself, left St. Louis on the twenty-eighth of April, on a tour of curiosity and amusement to the Rocky Mountains. The boat was loaded until the water broke alternately over her guards. Her upperdeck was covered with large wagons of a peculiar form, for the Santa Fé trade, and her hold was crammed with goods for the same destination. There were also the equipments and provisions of a party of Oregon emigrants, a band of mules and horses, piles of saddles and harness, and a multitude of nondescript articles, indispensable on the prairies. Almost hidden in this medley was a small French cart, of the sort very appropriately called a "mule-killer," beyond the frontiers, and not far distant a tent, together with a miscellaneous assortment of boxes and barrels. The whole equipage was far from prepossessing in its appearance; yet, such as it was, it was destined to a long and arduous journey on which the persevering reader will accompany it.

The passengers on board the "Radnor" corresponded with her freight. In her cabin were Santa Fé traders, gamblers, speculators, and adventurers of various descriptions, and her steerage was crowded with Oregon emigrants, "mountain men," negroes, and a party of Kansas Indians, who had been on a visit to St. Louis.

Thus laden, the boat struggled upward for seven or eight days against the rapid current of the Missouri, grating upon snags, and hanging for two or three hours at a time upon sand-bars. We entered the mouth of the Missouri in a drizzling rain, but the weather soon became clear, and showed distinctly the broad and turbid river, with its eddies, its sand-bars, its ragged islands and

forest-covered shores. The Missouri is constantly changing its course, wearing away its banks on one side, while it forms new ones on the other. Its channel is continually shifting. Islands are formed, and then washed away, and while the old forests on one side are undermined and swept off, a young growth springs up from the new soil upon the other. With all these changes, the water is so charged with mud and sand that, in spring, it is perfectly opaque, and in a few minutes deposits a sediment an inch thick in the bottom of a tumbler. The river was now high; but when we descended in the autumn it was fallen very low, and all the secrets of its treacherous shallows were exposed to view. It was frightful to see the dead and broken trees, thick-set as a military abatis, firmly imbedded in the sand, and all pointing down stream, ready to impale any unhappy steamboat that at high water should pass over them.

In five or six days we began to see signs of the great western movement that was taking place. Parties of emigrants, with their tents and wagons, were encamped on open spots near the bank, on their way to the common rendezvous at Independence. On a rainy day, near sunset, we reached the landing of this place, which is some miles from the river, on the extreme frontier of Missouri. The scene was characteristic, for here were represented at one view the most remarkable features of this wild and enterprising region. On the muddy shore stood thirty or forty dark slavish-looking Spaniards, gazing stupidly out from beneath their broad hats. They were attached to one of the Santa Fé companies, whose wagons were crowded together on the banks above. In the midst of these, crouching over a smouldering fire, was a group of Indians, belonging to a remote Mexican tribe. One or two French hunters from the mountains, with their long hair and buckskin dresses, were looking at the boat; and seated on a log close at hand were three men, with rifles lying across their knees. The foremost of these, a tall, strong figure, with a clear blue eye and an open intelligent face, might very well represent that race of restless and intrepid pioneers whose axes and rifles have opened a path from the Alleghenies to the western prairies. He was on his way to Oregon, probably a more congenial field to him than any that now remained on this side of the great plains.

Early on the next morning we reached Kansas, about five hundred miles from the mouth of the Missouri. Here we landed, and leaving our equipments in charge of Colonel Chick, whose log-house was the substitute for a tavern, we set out in a wagon for Westport, where we hoped to procure mules and horses for the journey.

It was a remarkably fresh and beautiful May morning. The woods, through which the miserable road conducted us, were