Fremont and His Explorations in Utah

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John Charles Fremont, explorer, soldier and aspirant to the Presidency of the United States, was born January 21, 1813, in Savannah, Georgia. He was the son of Anne Whiting of Tidewater Virginia Society and a French emigrant, Charles Fremont. The marriage was a turbulent affair and the father died young, leaving John Charles with little guidance. The life of young Fremont was tempestuous. Though he showed in his youth an aptitude for business, his mind was possessed with the desire of becoming a soldier.

In 1832 the family moved to St. Louis where Fremont was educated. He was about twenty-five when he was offered a commission as an officer in the United States army, at the suggestion of Senator Benton of Missouri. Fremont accepted and in June of the same year joined the military service. His first appointment was with the expedition of Sibley, a French explorer, to the Missouri River. Fremont became intimately acquainted with the Siouxs as well as with Sibley, pioneer of Minnesota and Etienne Provot. He was famous as a Rocky Mountain fur trader. A second journey in 1839 took them into north Dakota and the buffalo country and here they enjoyed the hospitality of the Siouxs.

Fremont’s great contribution to western expansion did not consist of exploration so much as a scientific mapping of the country. The report of Fremont was to be published in the Mormon Millennial Star in Liverpool before Brigham Young left for the Far West and the Mormon pioneers used Fremont’s report on the way to the Great Salt Lake. The fur men had preceded Fremont to the Far West but they left no detailed account of the west and its trails as did Fremont.

Fremont’s first Far Western expedition was in 1842. In his memoirs the leader described the object of the expedition as “ordened by the Topographical Bureau with the sanction of the Secretary of War,” was simply to explore the country between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains, but its real purpose, the objects which were had in view in designing it, were known only to the circle of its friends. It was not long after that it was avowed to be “in aid of and auxiliary to the Oregon emigration.”

Fremont selected Kit Carson as guide of the expedition and the party consisted of about twenty-five men. They left their camp on the Kansas River just west of the Missouri boundary May 10, 1842. They then crossed country to the Platte River. They followed the Platte River to the Rocky Mountains by the famous Oregon Trail. They crossed the Rockies by the gently ascending South Pass to the waters of the Green River, whose waters came from the Wind River Mountains. Fremont climbed the Wind River Peak which he believed was the highest peak in the Rockies. It is now known as Fremont Peak. Fremont wrote: “We have climbed the loftiest peak of the Rocky Mountains, and looked down upon the snow a thousand feet below, and, standing where never human foot had stood before, felt the exultation of first explorers.”

From the top of the peak Fremont described the surrounding country as follows: “On one side we overlooked innumerable lakes and streams, the spring of the Colorado of the Gulf of California, and on the other was the Wind River valley, where were the heads of the Yellowstone branch of the Missouri, far to the north, we could just discover the snowy heads of the Trois Tetons (Three Tetons), where were the sources of the Missouri and Columbia rivers, and at the southern extremity of the ridge, the peaks were plainly visible among which were some of the springs of the Nebraska or Platte River.” This was the northern and western extremity of the exploring expedition. They returned reaching Washington October 29, 1842.

Fremont’s Explorations of the Far West

Fremont had scarcely returned from the first expedition before he sought the second. Concerning its purpose he wrote, “The second expedition was to connect with the first expedition at the South Pass, but to approach the mountains on a different line. It was intended to examine the broad region south of the Columbia River lying between the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific Ocean. In this way the two expeditions would give a connected survey of the interior and western half of the continent.”

The party consisted of Creoles and Canadian French and Americans numbering thirty-nine men and included Thomas Fitzpatrick, noted mountain man as guide. The company possessed “a brass twelve pound howitzer” to frighten the Indians or defend the party if necessary. The 31st. of May 1843 the party reached Elm Grove on the Santa Fe Trail, having crossed the Platte River. Fremont crossed to the Arkansas River which they followed to St. Vrain’s Fort. Kit Carson joined the party and upon his advice the party returned to Bent’s Fort for supplies. At St. Vrain’s Fort the party divided. Fitzpatrick, in charge of the main body was to go by the emigrant road by way of Fort Laramie to Fort Hall on the Snake River while Fremont, Carson and a smaller party was to pass through the mountains to South Pass. Fremont
reached the Oregon Trail on the Sweetwater, traveled through the South Pass, crossed the Green River and pushed to the Bear River which he was to follow to the Great Salt Lake. Traveling along the Bear River Fremont was impressed by the springs which he called Bees Spring (Soda Springs).

Fremont in Utah

August 27 the party reached the borders of present Utah. They called their stopping place "Gate of the Pass" August 29th Fremont's diary recorded (we) "ascended different neighboring peaks, in the hope of seeing some indications of the lake but though our elevation afforded magnificent view, the eye ranging over a long extent of Bear River, with the broad fertile Cache Valley in the direction of our search, was only to be seen a bed of apparently impracticable mountains."

From the northern part of Cache Valley the expedition followed a trail over the mountains to small stream which they called the Roseaux (Malad) River. During their journey they met Shoshone Indians, who appeared poorly fed. Fremont records, "A great portion of the region inhabited by this nation (Shoshoneans) formerly abounded in game, the buffalo ranging about it in herds, as we had found them on the eastern waters, and the plains dotted with antelope, but so rapidly have they disappeared within a few years, that now, as we journeyed along, an occasional buffalo skull and a few wild antelope were all that remained of the abundance which had covered the country with animal life " This information he obtained from the famous fur trader Thomas Fitzpatrick. They camped on the Malad River due west of where the Bear River cuts through the mountains west of Cache Valley and September 1st, paddled down the Bear River to the marshes that barred the entrance to the Great Salt Lake. They returned up river and followed an Indian trail along the east shore of the Great Salt Lake past the site of Brigham City to the Weber River. September 5th Fremont wrote: "At this place the trail that we had been following turned to the left apparently with the view of entering a gorge in the mountains from which issued the principal fork of a large and comparatively well timbered stream, called Weber's Fork. We accordingly turned off towards the lake, and encamped on this river, which was 100 to 150 feet wide, with high banks, and very clear pure water, without the slightest indication of salt." From a high bute probably just south of Ogden Fremont saw the Great Salt Lake which he described as follows: (We) beheld the object of our anxious search - the waters of the Inland Sea, stretching in still and solitary grandeur far beyond the limit of our vision. It was one of the great points of the exploration, and as we looked eagerly over the lake in the first emotions of excited pleasure, I am doubtful if the followers of Balboa felt more enthusiasm when, from the heights of the Andes, they saw for the first time the great western ocean --- Several large islands raised their high rocky heads out of the waves." September 9th they began their voyage on the Great Salt Lake and visited several islands. They left the Great Salt Lake and traveled northward where they reached the Oregon Trail.

Fremont in the Northwest and California. Fremont's party moved northward to the vicinity of the Snake River south of Fort Hall. They deviated somewhat from the Oregon Trail but turned southward before the Columbia River cut through the gorges near the site of the Dalles. They followed the mountains to Pyramind Lake then down to Carson Valley up the Walker River then north and through the Sierra Nevadas to Sacramento and March 8, 1844 they camped near Sutter's Fort (now Sacramento). They had followed a course which is now virtually the road from Carson City to Sacramento. Leaving Sutter's Fort they continued down the Great Valley of California traveling southward between the Sierra Nevadas and the San Joaquin River and crossed the mountains again to the headwaters of the Madrean. From here they traveled northeastward following quite closely the Old Spanish Trail to Utah.

Fremont in Utah Again. May 1, 1844 they reached the Muddy River in Southeastern Nevada and the next day they came to the Virgin being followed by Indians and May 12 they camped on the banks of the Santa Clara near the Utah State line. They camp of May 12 was on the ridge separating the waters of the Sevier and the Colorado and pitched their camp at Mountain Meadows where the coolness of the meadows was in sharp contrast with the rugged hot dry country through which they had traveled. May 12 they had completed an immense circuit of twelve degrees diameter north and south, and ten degrees east and west... The circuit which we had made, and which had cost us eight months of time, and 3500 miles of travelling, had given us a view of Oregon and of north California from the Rocky mountains to the Pacific Ocean, and of the two principal streams which form bays or harbors of the coast of that seas."

Fremont further records, "Turning our faces once more eastward, on the morning of the 27th (May) we left the Utah Lake, and continued for two days to ascend the Spanish Fork, which is dispersed in numerous branches among the very rugged mountains. From the waters of the Utah Lake we followed the Duchesne River and on June 1st, they arrived at Roubidoux's post on the principal fork of the Uintah River and on the 7th arrived in Brown's Hole and the Green River."
From the Green River Fremont and his party traveled east crossing into the north Park, the middle Park and the South Park of the Colorado Rockies to the Arkansas River, near the site of Pueblo and returned to St. Louis in August 1844.

References:
Fremont, John C. Memoirs of My Life.
Fremont, John C. Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the year 1842 and to Oregon and North California in the year 1843 - 44.
Nevins, Allen; Fremont, Pathmarker of the West.
Dellenbaugh F. S. Fremont and '49.

This outline should follow the one on the Fur Traders and can be fitted to each camp by reading from Fremont's Journal, the portion dealing with your locality.