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Fur Trapper / Trader: Pedro Jose' de Tevis

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"I defy the annals of chivalry to furnish the record of a life more wild and perilous than that of a Rocky Mountain trapper."

- Frances Parker

Mountain Men

Known as beaver-hunters, fur traders, trappers or mountain men, they were a distinctive product of the American frontier. Their calling had no counterpart and in its demise left no successor. It was only for about twenty years that the industry flourished in the West; from 1820 - 1840. However, it was started in the New World by the French when they permanently colonized the town of Quebec in 1608. They trapped, hunted and traded with Natives for animal furs highly prized in Europe.

In the Far West trade, it was beaver pelts that were the primary basis for the short-lived industry. American pursued beaver in rivers and streams throughout the southwest and up into the States of now Oregon and Washington.

A steel trap with a chain of about five feet attached was the common mode for getting beaver. The trap was set in shallow water near the bank with the chain fastened to a stick driven into the bottom of the stream. Over the trap, a small twig was set with the top end about four inches above the water. On this twig was placed the bait which was supplied by the beaver itself. It is castor, or musk, which gives an odor very attractive to the animal. To reach the bait, the beaver would raise his head. His rear legs would come in contact with the trap. Trying to escape, he would dive underwater but is held by the chain. After a short struggle, he would sink to the bottom and drown.

There were two organizational modes thru which trappers plied their trade. Those who worked entirely on their own were known as Free Trappers or Freemen. Each furnished his own equipment, answered to no one and sold his furs to the highest bidder. The sale transactions usually took place at a trading post where furs were sold or traded for various goods. Sales and trading at posts were conducted throughout the year.

Other trappers contracted with organized partnerships or companies. All necessary equipment and other supplies were provided by the company. The trappers then sold their annual catch directly to these business organizations.

Typically, a Free Trapper would join with others like himself to form a large group. Such groupings provided some security from the well-known dangers of Indian / wild animal attacks. Commonly, a leader was selected and a set of rules governing the conduct of the men and of the expedition were adopted. Penalties for those breaking regulations were also adopted but rarely enforced.

In 1825 General W.H. Ashley, a well-known fur trader from St. Louis, revolutionized the Rocky Mountain trade by introducing the "rendezvous." Unlike the fixed location of a trading post, the rendezvous was held at various sites. This change provided easier access to trading centers for the trappers and Natives.

The location of the annual rendezvous was selected well in advance of when it was to be held. Its location and date were widely circulated through word-of-mouth.

Although short-lived, the rendezvous was a distinct American institution. Not only did it provide a relatively convenient location for the trading of furs but was also a wild earthy gathering. Liquor, raw and crude, from Turley's distillery in New Mexico fueled the gambling, fighting and carousing that took place. After trading their annual catch for another year of supplies, the majority of trappers squandered whatever remained recklessly.

As tracker, hunter and scout, the mountain man had to be the equal of an Indian to survive. Any discussion of the life of a trapper must include a note on the dangers he faced daily. Wherever he found himself trapping, the local Natives were a great menace. Responsibility for the lethal feud between the trappers and the Indians probably falls equally to both. Encounters between the two were usually grim. If the Natives inflicted cruelties on wounded or captured trappers, the trappers were also guilty of killing wounded Indians, burning villages and shooting fleeing men, women and children without discrimination. Yet, wherever the fault lay, danger was a fact in the daily life of a trapper.

Not commonly known, is the fact that the grizzly bear was more of a threat than the Natives. The grizzly was large, fearless and crafty. In many areas popular for trapping, the grizzly lived in numbers that now appear unbelievable. George C. Yount reported seeing them everywhere; in the valleys, on the plains and, of course, in the mountains. He said that he killed six in one day and noted that it was not unusual to see 50 in one day. Although prone to exaggeration, Mountain Man James Ohio Pattie said he saw over two hundred in one 24 hour period.

Attesting to the toll of the hazards - Natives, grizzlies, quarrels, accidents and disease - faced by the Mountain Men, in 1856 Antoine Rubidoux declared that he could account for only three survivors out of over two hundred who were in the Rocky Mountains 30 years before.

Pedro Jose' and Antonio Jose' de Tevis

It was not until I read Marc Simmons' "Kit Carson and his Three Wives" that I first discovered that Pedro Jose' had been using "Peter Joseph" as his name. This finding opened the window in what had been a two-year search for my de Tevis antepasados.

Pedro Jose' and his brother Antonio were born on the island of Sao Miguel in the Azores of Portuguese parents. Both were teenagers when they arrived in New Orleans about 1830. They soon moved north to St. Louis. The 1840 U.S. Census lists "Peter Joseph" as the head-of-household with an adult male also living with him. There is little doubt that the other male was his brother Antonio.

While another branch of my paternal ancestry, Antoine Anacleto and Abraham Menard LeDoux, was active in the fur trapping / trading business during the early years of American involvement, Pedro Jose' came into the fur trade in its closing years. Although I have found no documentation noting the employment of Pedro and Antonio while in St. Louis, it was there that they became acquainted with some of the principal fur traders in the west. At the time, St. Louis was the gateway to the west and the headquarters of the major fur trading companies. What is clear, is that the de Tevis brothers soon met Kit Carson, Charles Bent and Ceran St. Vrain who were well-known throughout the Far West. Their far-reaching trapping / trading operations were located in Taos and at Bent's Fort on the north bank of the Arkansas River*.

While under Spanish Colonial rule, New Mexico settlers were not legally permitted to trade directly with American businessmen. This changed when Mexico won its independence from Spain in 1821. Mexican officials encouraged trade. Manufactured goods were purchased in St. Louis and shipped on mule- or oxen-drawn wagons over the Santa Fe Trail. In Santa Fe and in Taos, goods were exchanged for beaver pelts, buffalo hides, wool and livestock. Gold and silver was also commonly used to purchase the manufactured goods.

It was in the early 1840's that Pedro acquired a common-law wife. Mary Ann Wilson was a mulatta slave. He probably purchased her in St. Louis. Little is known of her except her saying that she was born in Mobile, Alabama in about 1829. In 1843 Mary Ann gave birth to a son they named Antonio Jose'.

Pedro was successful in St. Louis because when he moved to Taos, in about 1844, he opened a trading post on the northeast corner of the plaza. Like other businessmen in Taos, he made trips to St. Louis to purchase goods to sell or trade in Taos and Santa Fe. He would also make occasional trips to the Rocky Mountains to buy furs from Free Trappers and Natives and did some beaver trapping.

Mary Ann was with Pedro when he moved to Taos. Her legal status would have changed once she was in New Mexico because slavery was banned under Mexican law. She gave birth to their second child, Maria de la Luz, in 1845. On October 16, 1846, their first-born, Antonio Jose' and their daughter Maria de la Luz were baptised in Taos. Antonio's baptismal name is entered in the church records as "Francisco Antonio Portuge." He was already three years old when baptised. Maria de la Luz was a one-year-old and also entered with the surname "Portuge" (meaning Portugese in the spanish language).

A second son was born to Pedro and Mary Ann in 1847. He was baptised in Taos on January 27, 1847 and given the name Jose', Juan Ceran. No surname is entered in the church records. In January 1850, Pedro married Mary Ann and legitimized their relationship and their children within the Catholic Church.

It would appear that Pedro was very successful with his trading post because he soon started purchasing real estate within the Taos community. He became well- known among the foreign merchants who made their home in Taos.

Following the United States' occupation of the New Mexico Territory in 1846, Colonel Stephen W. Kearny appointed Charles Bent as the civilian governor of the territorial government. Colonel Kearny then continued on to California leaving only a few soldiers in Santa Fe. There were no soldiers stationed in Taos. In January 1847 Govenor Bent left Santa Fe to visit his family in Taos. At the same time, Pedro was in Santa Fe on a business trip while his pregnant wife and 4-year-old son stayed in Taos.

On the morning of January 19, 1847, an anti-American rebellion erupted in Taos. Govenor Bent was murdered at his home. Two other Americans and three pro-American New Mexicans were soon killed. North of Taos, seven Americans and foreigners were killed with two more in Mora. Pedro was still in Santa Fe while the rebels controlled Taos. His wife, Mary Ann, was advised to go to the home of Fray Jose' Antonio Martinez for protection. She went there and no harm was done to her or son Antonio.

Word of the rebellion soon reached Santa Fe. There, volunteers were immediately recruited by Ceran St. Vrain and served as a company under Colonel Sterling Price who was now in command of the regular military troops stationed in Santa Fe. What is now known in history as the Battle of Taos ended the rebellion. The rebels made their last stand in the Taos Pueblo's mission church. On the final assault, many

of the insurgents attempted to flee on foot into the nearby mountains. St. Vrain's men, which included Pedro, had been positioned to prevent their escape. In a controversial action, fifty-one of the fleeing rebels were killed. Women and children were among those slain.

Pedro, together with other foreigners, was lucky to have been away when the rebellion started. Surely, he would have been targeted as a result of his close relationships with prosperous Americans. As it turned out, his trading post was looted and burned down. Pedro served on the jury for at least 15 of the men charged with leading the insurrection. Because many of the jurors had been directly affected by the rebellion, some losing family members and others having their homes or businesses burned down, one is left to wonder about how just the trials were.

On the very day that son Juan Ceran was baptised, Pedro was on his way to Missouri to purchase trade goods. Near what is now southwestern Kansas, he encountered a military supply train and a caravan of merchants who were returning from St. Louis. They had been attacked by Camanches. Six of the Army escorts were killed and five wounded. The Camanches took the oxen used to pull the loaded wagons thus leaving the parties stranded. Quickly realizing that an opportunity was at hand, Pedro bargained for the goods and wagons. An agreement was reached and Pedro returned home from a relatively short trip with merchandise to trade.

Just a little over a year later, Pedro was involved in an event that nearly took his life. Historians have named it the "Manco Burro Pass Massacre." I will leave to those of you who are interested to look up this terrible event. Janet Lecompte details this tragedy in the Spring 1968 issue of the *New Mexico Historical Review*.

Pedro, brother of my g-g-grandpo Antonio Jose' de Tevis, passed away in January 1862. His will was filed in the Taos Probate Court in February 1862. Known as "Peter Joseph," the store and real estate property located on the northwest corner of the Taos plaza was willed to his son Antonio Joseph. The remainder of his estate was divided equally among his widow Mary Ann and his two sons, Antonio Joseph and Juan Ceran. Any disputes were to be settled by friends Ceran St. Vrain and Fray Antonio Jose' Martinez. Pedro's will stipulated that older son Antonio could not inherit until he had reached the age of 21. Mary Ann was named as the guardian. The executors of his will were Juan Santistevan and Kit Carson. Pedro is buried in the Kit Carson Cemetery in Taos. His plot is next to the Carson family plot.

Son Antonio ("Anthony Joseph"), became involved in politics. He served as a judge for Taos County from 1878 to 1880. He then served in the lower house of the territorial legislature from 1882 to 1884. In 1884, Antonio was elected as a non-voting delegate to the U.S. House of Representatives. He held the seat until 1895. During his tenure, he fought unsuccessfully to have New Mexico declared a state.

As reminders of the presence of father and son, there is currently a De Teves Lane and a Joseph Street in Taos.

* Bent's Fort is now a designated National Historic Site. It is located just east of La Junta, Colorado.

Sources

1. Taos Marriages, LDS Film #0017017
2. NM Genealogy Society, Taos Baptisms Vol. 4; 1847-1850; Albuquerque, NM
3. Extractions by Margaret Windham and Patricia Sanchez Rau, Taos Baptisms Vol. 3; 1837-1844

Recommended Readings

1. "Land as Far as the Eye can See, Portugese in the Old West," Authors Geoffery L. Gomes & Donald Warren
2. "This Reckless breed of Men," Robert Glass Cleland
3. "Kit Carson and His Three Wives," Marc Simmons
4. "The Little Lion of the Southwest," Marc Simmons
5. "A Llife Wild and Perilous: Mountain Men and the Paths to the Pacific," Robert M. Utlely

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