



Journal of Alexander Ross ~ Snake Country Expedition, 1824 (Quarterly of the Oregon Historical Society Book 14)

Alexander Ross

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From inside the book:

Alexander Ross, whose day-to-day experiences in 1824 appear in this journal, did service in many parts of the Old Oregon country. As a member of the Pacific Fur Company he arrived on the Columbia in March, 1811, and assisted in the building of Fort Astoria, and in the fall of the same year assisted in the building of the first Fort Okanogan., at which post he was stationed for several years; from there he made trips south to the Yakima country, west to the summit of the Cascades, north to Thompson river and beyond, and east to the Spokane country. Later, while staff clerk of the Northwest Company at Fort George, he ascended the Willamette, and in 1818 assisted Donald McKenzie in the building of Fort Nez Perce at the mouth of the Walla Walla river, of which fort he was in charge until 1823. That summer he started to cross the mountains and quit the service, the Hudson's Bay Company having succeeded the Northwest Company, but was stopped at Boat Encampment by a letter from Deputy Governor George Simpson, asking him to take charge of the Snake Country Expedition that fall. This appointment he accepted and returned to Spokane House and thence proceeded to the Flathead Post in what is now Montana, where this journal begins. Returning from this expedition he spent the winter at the Flathead Post and in April, 1825, joined Governor Simpson at the mouth of the Spokane river on the way east to the Red River settlements, where he resided until his death in 1856.

Mr. Ross is one of the four writers upon whom we depend for much that is known about the early exploration of and fur trade in this vast Columbia river basin. In 1849, more than twenty years after his active experiences here, he published a book entitled "Adventures of the First Settlers on the Oregon or Columbia River," and in 1855 he put out another book entitled, "Fur Hunters of the Far West." It is related that Mr. Ross first left his paternal home in Scotland in 1804, from which it may be estimated that he was more than sixty years of age when completing these books, which, from their context, evidently were based upon some journal or memoranda then at hand. There has been and probably always will be a question as to how closely he followed any such original memoranda and how much he drew from memory. The publication of this journal is therefore valuable to the extent that it assists in answering that question, and it should be read in immediate comparison with the first 160 pages of Vol. II. of "Fur Hunters of the Far West," Smith, Elder & Co., London, 1855. It may be noted also that the preface of Mr. Ross' first book was dated in 1846 and that pages 154-5 of Vol. II. of his "Fur Hunters," contains a footnote suggesting that at least a part of it had been written much earlier.

Referring to the journal itself it will be found that from Eddy, in Montana, Mr. Ross' party followed very closely the present- route of the Northern Pacific Railway as far as Missoula, which is at the mouth of Hell Gate Canyon and River (Porte d'Infer, as the French half-breeds first named it) ; thence he proceeded south up the Bitter Root Valley, along the stream which is the original Clark's Fork of the Columbia named by Captain Lewis when at its source in 1805. On a small mountain prairie of the easterly fork of this stream he was snowbound for a month, and that prairie has very properly been known ever since as Ross' Hole. Finally he succeeded in forcing a way across the continental divide by what is now known as the Gibbon Pass (but which Olin D. Wheeler rightly says should be called Clark's Pass), over to Big Hole Prairie, where a monument now stands commemorating the battle between General Gibbon and Chief Joseph during that memorable Nez Perce retreat in 1877.

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