

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Old Mountain Trader

Captain Joseph Reddeford Walker was perhaps one of the best known of the early trappers, trail blazers and mountain traders of the early days in California.

Washington Irving characterized him as "one of the bravest and most skillful of the mountain men." When I ran across an item in the Monterey Sentinel of April 12, 1856, I immediately became interested in learning more about this former resident of Monterey County.

The newspaper article of 1856 will bear repetition here: "It is not generally known that Captain Joseph Walker, celebrated old trapper and mountain trader is a resident of our county, and has been for the past two years. He has a cattle rancho in a valley of the coast range about twenty-five miles nearly direct east of the Mission of Soledad. The Captain is now old; his eyesight has become unfortunately affected by the hardships of his mountain campaigns, but his ordinary health is good.

"Captain Walker is one of the original band of bold mountain traders, who arrived in our state from over the Rocky Mountains and Sierra Nevada in 1829. By the old foreigners and American settlers he is esteemed as a man of unblemished integrity; and great bravery and enterprise, as likewise is cherished the memory of that noble old hunter, Captain Jedediah Smith; they both in the Mexican times, took outfits and ventures into Oregon and Indian Country from Monterey merchants, and were never known to fail in payment.

"Smith was killed on the head water of the Arkansas in 1829 we believe; Walker is now over sixty years of age, but still fond of hunting and exploring the frontier country.

"If the life of Walker could be written what a book of adventure, enterprise and peril it would make. From 1825-1855, a space of thirty years he has tramped, trapped, hunted and explored strange and outlandish Indian countries from the Mississippi to the Pacific Coast, and from Frazier's river in the Straits of San Juan de Fuca to the Gulf of California and New Mexico. Thirty years of a man's life spent in travel and danger is something to talk about."

From another source we found that Joseph Reddeford Walker was, in the summer of 1833 placed by Captain

Benjamin Bonneville, in charge of about sixty trappers and instructed to reconnoiter west of Great Salt Lake. Walker put a very liberal construction upon this order. Beyond the lake he traveled to a river which he called "Barren." In later years it was renamed "Mary's," "Ogden" and the "Humboldt."

Walker followed this river to its sink, crossed the forty miles of desert that lay beyond, came to the lake which bears his name, and made his way with great difficulty across the Sierra Nevada and into the San Joaquin. That pass now bears his name. It was the first entrance into California by that route.

Writers are still in doubt as to the exact route followed by Walker and his trappers but it was probably along the headwaters of the East Walker from which he crossed over to those of the Tuolumne. It is clear that Walker's men looked down upon Yosemite Valley from the precipitous heights surrounding it, the first white men to gaze upon its grandeur. According to their writings they were no overly impressed with Yosemite but were more enthused about the size of the redwoods which they saw.

Walker proceeded on to San Francisco and then on to Mission San Juan Bautista, where he left most of his men and came on to Monterey, where he secured permission to winter in California. Half a dozen of his men preferred to remain in California, including George Nidever, of subsequent fame as a grizzly bear hunter, a crack shot and a longtime resident of Santa Barbara. Nidever was the grandfather of Mrs. Evelyn Nidever Hildebrand of Carmel.

With remaining fifty-two men Walker started up the San Joaquin Valley in the Spring of 1834. Crossing the Sierra Nevada's by the wide and easy pass that has carried his name very since, he came out in Owens's Valley, which along with Yosemite, the Sequoias, and the pass were his discoveries on this expedition.

We hope someday to complete this story with more information concerning his ranch in Southern Monterey County and where he spent his last years.