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Article Summary: A bluff, a county, a city, and a national monument in western Nebraska memorialize Hiram Scott. Mattes considers the many legends about the "phantom-like fur trader" and provides references to contemporary accounts that mention Scott.

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Photographs / Images: orientation map of Scotts Bluff Region; fur traders at Scotts Bluff (from an sketch by Paul Rockwood); two views of Scottsbluff; historic base map, Scotts Bluff National Monument

Hiram Scott, Fur Trader

MERRILL J. MATTES

In the North Platte Valley of Western Nebraska there is a great castellated sandstone bluff, dominating the countryside, which has become a shrine of American history. This is Scotts Bluff, an inspiring setting for the modern cities of Scottsbluff and Gering. Once one of the celebrated landmarks of the Oregon-California Trail, it is now the salient feature of Scotts Bluff National Monument, an area of over 3,000 acres set aside by Presidential Proclamation to commemorate the famous westward migrations of the mid-nineteenth century.

The "covered wagon" phase of Scotts Bluff history has been well publicized. Less well known is its association with the earlier advent of the fur trappers and traders, the first white men to discover and use the natural highway of the Platte between the Rocky Mountains and the settlements of the Lower Missouri. They were the first to behold the great bluff, with its tortuous badlands, sheer walls, frowning battlements and towering crags, looming abruptly eight hundred feet above the river. They gave this bluff its name in the memory of one of their number who died here, over one hundred years ago.

The tragedy of "Scott's Bluff" is a curious tale of desertion and suffering and death in the wilderness. It does not rank in dramatic intensity, certainly not in popular acclaim with the immortal sagas of Custer, Billy the Kid, Chief Joseph and Geronimo. Yet, in its elements of intangible sorrow, stark desolation and impenetrable mystery, it is a unique and imperishable tradition of the American frontier.

In the year of 1830 Warren Ferris journeyed up the North Platte with a caravan of the American Fur Company. In his journal entry of the twenty-seventh of May he wrote:

"We encamped opposite to 'Scott's Bluffs,' so called in respect to the memory of a young man who was left here

alone to die a few years previous. He was a clerk in a company returning from the mountains, the leader of which found it necessary to leave him behind at a place some distance above this point, in consequence of a severe illness which rendered him unable to ride. He was consequently placed in a bullhide boat, in charge of two men, who had orders to convey him by water down to these bluffs, where the leader of the party promised to await their coming. After a weary and hazardous voyage, they reached the appointed rendezvous, and found to their surprise and bitter disappointment, that the company had continued on down the river without stopping for them to overtake and join it.

"Left thus in the heart of a wide wilderness, hundreds of miles from any point where assistance or succour could be obtained, and surrounded by predatory bands of savages thirsting for blood and plunder, could any condition be deemed more hopeless or deplorable? They had, moreover, in descending the river, met with some accident, either the loss of the means of procuring sustenance or defending their lives in case of discovery and attack. This unhappy circumstance, added to the fact that the river was filled with innumerable shoals and sand-bars, by which its navigation was rendered almost impracticable, determined them to forsake their charge and boat together, and push on night and day until they should overtake the company, which they did on the second or third day afterward.

"The reason given by the leader of the company for not fulfilling his promise, was that his men were starving, no game could be found, and he was compelled to proceed in quest of buffalo.

"Poor Scott! We will not attempt to picture what his thoughts must have been after his cruel abandonment, nor harrow up the feelings of the reader, by a recital of what agonies he must have suffered before death put an end to his misery.

"The bones of a human being were found the spring following, on the opposite side of the river, which were supposed to be the remains of Scott. It was conjectured that in the energy of despair, he had found strength to carry him across the stream, and then had staggered about the prairie, till God in pity took him to Himself.

"Such are the sad chances to which the life of the Rocky Mountain adventurer is exposed."¹

¹ Warren A. Ferris, *Life in the Rocky Mountains*, ed by Paul C. Phillips, (Denver, 1940), pp. 30-31.



In 1832 Capt. B. L. E. Bonneville took leave of the United States Army and conducted an expedition to the Rocky Mountains to serve the joint purposes of exploration and fur-hunting. Washington Irving's story of his travels contains the following:

"On the 21st (June) they encamped amid high and beetling cliffs of indurated clay and sandstone, bearing the semblance of towers, castles, churches and fortified cities. At a distance it was scarcely possible to persuade one's self that the works of art were not mingled with these fantastic freaks of nature. They have received the name of Scott's Bluffs from a melancholy circumstance. A number of years since, a party were descending the upper part of the river in canoes, when their frail barks were overturned and all their powder spoiled. Their rifles being thus rendered useless, they were unable to procure food by hunting and had to depend upon roots and wild fruits for subsistence. After suffering extremely from hunger, they arrived at Laramie's Fork, a small tributary of the north branch of the Nebraska, about sixty miles above the cliffs just mentioned. Here one of the party, by the name of Scott, was taken ill; and his companions came to a halt, until he should recover health and strength sufficient to proceed. While they were searching round in quest of edible roots they discovered a fresh trail of white men, who had evidently but recently preceded them. What was to be done? By a forced march they might overtake this party, and thus be able to reach the settlements in safety. Should they linger they might all perish of famine and exhaustion. Scott, however, was incapable of moving; they were too feeble to aid him forward, and dreaded that such a clog would prevent their coming up with the advance party. They determined, therefore, to abandon him to his fate. Accordingly, under pretense of seeking food, and such simples as might be efficacious in his malady, they deserted him and hastened forward upon the trail. They succeeded in overtaking the party of which they were in quest, but concealed their faithless desertion of Scott; alleging that he had died of disease.

"On the ensuing summer, these very individuals visiting these parts in company with others, came suddenly upon the bleached bones and grinning skull of a human skeleton, which by certain signs they recognized for the remains of Scott. This was sixty long miles from the place where they had abandoned him; and it appeared that the wretched man had crawled that immense distance before death put an end

to his miseries. The wild and picturesque bluffs in the neighborhood of his lonely grave have ever since borne his name."²

Ferris' diary was polished up in manuscript form in 1836, and published in an obscure periodical, the *Western Literary Messenger*, in 1843. In 1835 Irving found Bonneville with his diary, which he reworked into the famous *Adventures*, first published in 1837. It is conceivable that either or both of these travelers inserted the Scott story subsequent to their original notes, having learned of it from some later source; but with no evidence to the contrary we must assume that we have here the two very earliest accounts of the Scott tragedy. Both Ferris and Bonneville undoubtedly heard the story from the lips of one of their grizzled associates, who was a veteran of the mountains and who may have been personally acquainted with Scott. But it is disconcerting to find these two earliest versions differing in important respects. Ferris has Scott placed in a boat and taken to the bluff by two men who abandoned him there, where he died after staggering about the prairie; while the Bonneville boat is abandoned an indefinite distance upstream, and Scott is abandoned sixty miles upstream at Laramie's Fork, from which point he crawled to the bluff, there to die from exhaustion, etc.

There seems to be a common weakness here, for in both versions the deserters, who were starving and on foot, managed to catch up with the advance party, which was presumably in better condition, and which was undoubtedly mounted since no fur-trappers, particularly a large band of them returning to the settlements, would travel on foot by choice. Ferris had the edge since in his version Scott and his companions originally belonged to the advance party, and the leader might be expected to slow his pace and give the stragglers a chance to catch up; whereas in Bonneville the inference is that the advance party was in no way associated with Scott and company, entirely ignorant of their plight, and therefore would be traveling at a pace which it would be very difficult for starving men on foot to match, much less improve upon. We can only say that on this one point Bonneville stretches

² Washington Irving, *Adventures of Captain Bonneville*, (Chicago, 1843), pp. 34-35.

our credulity more than Ferris. Otherwise one version is as good as another, and there is unfortunately no sound reason to accept either one as the most probable approximation of the true picture, unless we are willing to give Ferris another advantage for having appeared on the scene two years earlier. It is difficult to construct a plausible hybrid from the two legends, so both must be kept in mind as we search the records.

It is quite probable that many subsequent diarists got their original inspiration for their Scott stories from Ferris or Bonneville, more likely from the latter who was made immediately popular by Irving, and had first publication. However no two of the innumerable printed versions are exactly alike, while every possible contradiction prevails, testifying to the manner in which human beings love to adopt a good yarn and embellish it with their own fanciwork. Some of the more interesting versions are herewith quoted, to illustrate this tendency and the resultant problems confronting the historian who rashly proposes to determine "the truth" about the nebulous Scott.

One of the more temperate writers was John K. Townsend, a naturalist who accompanied young Nathaniel Wyeth on his second fur trading expedition of 1834. He relates simply,

"These are called 'Scott's Bluffs'; so named from an unfortunate trader, who perished here from disease and hunger, many years ago. He was deserted by his companions; and the year following, his crumbling bones were found in this spot."³

Townsend is unique in being the only authority who might be said to be in entire agreement with both Ferris and Bonneville, through the elimination of debatable details. Johnson, who followed the Platte route in 1843, leans toward Ferris by eliminating the long crawl of the abandoned man, and citing the Indian menace; but he leaves out the boat ride:

"They (the bluffs) receive their name from a melancholy circumstance, which happened at them, several years ago. A small party of Trappers were returning from the

³ John K. Townsend, *Narrative of a Journey Across the Rocky Mountains*, ed. by Reuben Gold Thwaites (Cleveland, 1905), p. 179

mountains to their homes in Missouri. Owing to the hostility of the Indians who inhabited the country, (the Sioux) it was necessary for their safety, that they should not be seen. To prevent this, required the greatest precaution in their movements. A few days before they reached this place, one of their number, named Scott, was taken sick and continued to grow worse, until he was unable to proceed. His companions carried him to these bluffs, and supposing that he could not recover, they left him. Others passing that way, some years later, found his bones a short distance from where he had been left. From this circumstance, these hills have been called, since that time, after the name of that unfortunate adventurer."⁴

Palmer, who passed Scotts Bluff in 1845, includes both the crawl and the Indians; but agrees with Johnson in not mentioning any boats:

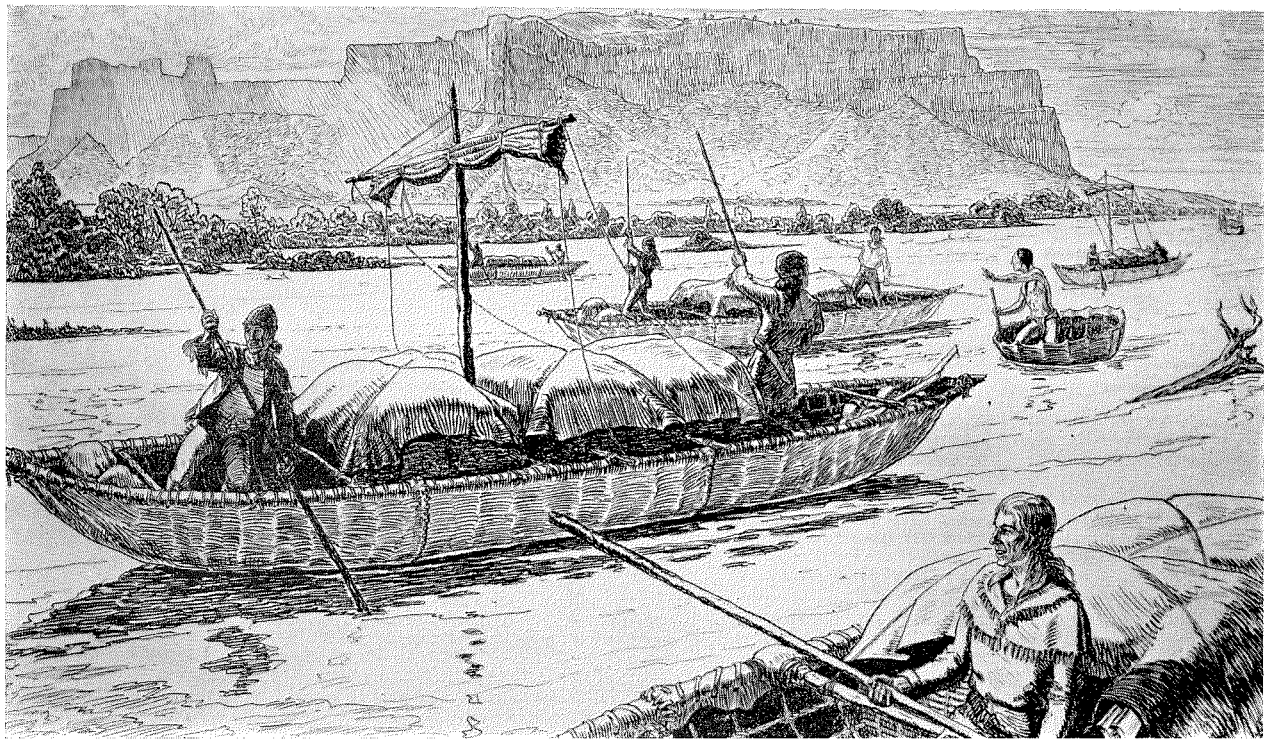
"A melancholy tradition accounts for the name of this spot. A party who had been trading with the Indians were returning to the States and encountering a band of hostile savages, were robbed of their peltries and food. As they struggled homeward, one of their number, named Scott, fell sick and could not travel. The others remained with him, until the sufferer, despairing of ever beholding his home, prevailed on his companions to abandon him. They left him alone in the wilderness, several miles from this spot. Here human bones were afterwards found; and, supposing he had crawled here and died, the subsequent travelers have given his name to the neighboring bluff."⁵

Bryant, on his way to California in 1846, has boats all the way, but no Indians in sight and not much of a crawl:

"A party of some five or six trappers, in the employment of the American Fur Company, were returning to the 'settlements,' under the command of a man--a noted mountaineer--named Scott. They attempted to perform the journey in boats, down the Platte. The current of the river became so shallow that they could not navigate it. Scott was

⁴ Overton Johnson and William Winter, *Route Across the Rocky Mountains*, ed. by Carl L. Cannon from edition of 1846 (Princeton, 1932), p. 13

⁵ Joel Palmer, *Travels Over the Rocky Mountains*, ed. by Reuben Gold Thwaites (Cleveland, 1906), p. 57.



FUR TRADERS AT SCOTTS BLUFF

Taking beaver hides down the North Platte River in bull-boats. From a pen and ink sketch by Paul Rockwood in the Scotts Bluff National Monument museum.

seized with a disease, which rendered him helpless. The men with him left him in the boat, and when they returned to their employers, reported that Scott had died on the journey, and that they had buried him on the banks of the Platte. The next year a party of hunters, in traversing this region, discovered a human skeleton wrapped in blankets which from the clothing and papers found upon it, was immediately recognized as being the remains of Scott. He had been deserted by his men, but afterwards recovering his strength sufficiently to leave the boat, he had wandered into the bluffs where he died, where his bones were found, and which now bear his name.”⁶

While a good many of the Scott stories show a flair for romantic invention, perhaps the most fanciful version is that of Rufus B. Sage, who passed the bluff in 1841. He writes,

“This lovely valley had before this witnessed the death-scene of one who left his bones to bleach within its limits. His name was Scott, from whom the neighboring eminences derive their present appellation.

“Attracted by the enchanting beauty of the place, and the great abundance of game the vicinity afforded, he wandered hither alone and made it his temporary residence. While thus enjoying the varied sweets of solitude, he became the prey of sickness and gasped his life away; --none were there to watch over him, but the sun by day and the stars by night; or fan his fevered brow, save the kindly breezes; or bemoan his hapless fate, other than the gurgling stream that sighed its passing sympathy beside the couch of death!”⁷

One of Sage’s fellow travellers died at Scotts Bluff of tuberculosis. This sad event, coupled with the gloomy sensations aroused by the contemplation of Scott’s lonely death, inspired him to a paroxysm of poetry. The result, while not strictly a classic, is the only known verse dedicated to this haunting tragedy of death in the wilderness, long, long ago. It is in the best melancholy manner of the later “cowboy ballads,” and it deserves recitation here:

⁶ Edwin Bryant, *What I Saw in California*, 4th edition (New York, 1849), pp. 104-105.

⁷ Rufus B. Sage, *Rocky Mountain Life* (Boston, 1857) pp. 93.

The Wanderer's Grave

Away from friends, away from home,
And all the heart holds dear,
A weary wand'rer laid him down, --
Nor kindly aid was near. --

And sickness prey'd upon his frame
And told its tale of woe,
While sorrow mark'd his pallid cheeks
And sank his spirit low.

Nor waiting friends stood round his couch
A healing to import, --
Nor human voice spoke sympathy,
To soothe his aching heart.

The stars of night his watchers were, --
His fan the rude wind's breath,
And while they sig'd their hollow moans,
He closed his eyes in death.

Upon the prairie's vast expanse
This weary wand'rer lay;
And far from friends, and far from home,
He breath'd his life away!

A lonely valley marks the spot
That claims his lowly bed;
But o'er the wand'rer's hapless fate
No friendly tear was shed.

No willing grave received the corpse
Of this poor lonely one; --
His bones, alas, were left to bleach
And moulder 'neath the sun!

The night-wolf howl'd his requiem, --
The rude winds danced his dirge;
And e'er anon, in mournful chime,
Sigh'd forth the mellow surge!

The spring shall teach the rising grass
To twine for him a tomb;
And, o'er the spot where he doth lie,
Shall bid the wild flowers bloom.

But, far from friends, and far from home,
Ah, dismal thought, to die!
Oh, let me 'mid my friends expire,
And with my fathers lie.

For the purpose of this introduction it would be profitless to quote verbatim all the known versions of the tragedy which are to be found in the journals of the Oregon Trail. In the subsequent study it will be seen into what chaotic state the Scott tradition has fallen for not only are there differences of opinion as to the distance the poor fellow crawled, if any; whether his original party travelled on foot or by horseback, muleback, bull-boat, raft or canoe; and whether he was a victim of Indians, exposure, drowning, freezing, smallpox, measles, starvation or acute indigestion. There are also differences as to his identity, his origin, his business connections, the location of his skeleton, the number of his companions, if any, the direction in which they were going and on which side of the river, whether their desertion was premeditated or on the spur of the moment, whether it was justified, how their perfidy was exposed, and whether the whole thing might not have been a grisly hoax.

II

Who was this man whose death is beclouded with such confusion and contradiction? Most writers vaguely refer to "a man named Scott." He is variously described as "an unfortunate trader" or "an old Indian trader" or "an enterprising trapper" or "a noted mountaineer." Bonneville merely refers to "one of the party by the name of Scott." Ferris appears to have more of an inkling to his identity, for he tells of a "young man. . .a clerk." Robinson and Shumway⁸ seem to be among the first to entertain the belief, now generally accepted, that the man for whom the bluff was named was Hiram Scott, an employee of the Rocky

⁸ Doane Robinson, ed., "Official Correspondence of the Leavenworth Expedition into South Dakota in 1823," *South Dakota Historical Society, Collections*, 1 (1902), p. 255;

Grant L. Shumway, *History of Western Nebraska and Its People* (Lincoln, 1921), pp. 14-15.

Mountain Fur Company. In the contemporary documents of the fur trade there are only three known references to *Hiram* Scott, two specific and one plainly inferred. In addition, there are two suggestive references to "Scott" and one to "J. Scott." These we will investigate in turn.

The first reference concerns an episode in the early history of the "Rocky Mountain Fur Company," this being the popular designation for the successive business interests of Gen. Wm. H. Ashley, William Sublette, James Bridger and others. This famous enterprise was launched by the following "want ad" which appeared in the *Missouri Republican* of March 20, 1822, published at St. Louis:

"TO ENTERPRISING YOUNG MEN

The subscriber wishes to engage one hundred men to ascend the river Missouri to its source, there to be employed for one, two or three years. For particulars enquire of Major Andrew Henry, near the lead mines in the county of Washington, (who will ascend with, and command the party) or to the subscriber at St. Louis.

Wm. H. Ashley"⁹

The spirit of the times is evident in the fact that more than the required number of young men responded enthusiastically, and it appears that many relinquished the most respectable employments and circle of society for the enticement of the wilderness. The expedition of this year, under the veteran Andrew Henry, ascended the Missouri to the mouth of the Yellowstone. In 1823 General Ashley advertised at St. Louis for another one hundred men, and organized his expedition of that year. This nearly ended in disaster, in which a certain Hiram Scott figured prominently.

Ashley lost several men in a treacherous attack by the Aricara Indians on the upper Missouri. A call for aid was promptly responded to by Col. Henry Leavenworth, stationed at Fort Atkinson (north of the present Omaha), who went upriver with 220 men. The eighty men under General Ashley were accepted as auxiliaries, and divided into two companies. In Leavenworth's

⁹ Hiram Martin Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, 2 vol., ed. by Stallo Vinton, Revised Edition, (New York, 1935), p. 261.

final report on the affair from Headquarters, 6th Regiment, Fort Atkinson, October 20, 1823, we read:

"Gen. Ashley here made a tender of his services and that of his party, amounting to eighty men. They were divided into two companies--Gen. Ashley nominated his officers, and their appointments were confirmed in orders. They were as follows:

"Jedediah Smith, for Captain. --Hiram Scott, do--Hiram Allen, Lieut. --George C. Jackson, do.--Charles Cunningham, Ensign, --Edw. Rose, do.-- -- Fleming, Surgeon. --T. Fitzpatrick, Quarter Master-- William Sublett, Sergeant Major."¹⁰

Concerning the ensuing battle, we need only note that it was an inglorious fiasco, for the Aricara were not properly punished, being let off after some skirmishing with empty promises of future good behavior. We are told, however, that Ashley's volunteers acquitted themselves with valor. Between the Aricara and the Blackfeet, Ashley soon gave up trying to make any headway in the Missouri country, and moved with his men into the unexplored but somewhat less hostile Rocky Mountain region, which became his stronghold.

The only other specific reference to *Hiram* Scott is in the following payroll excerpt contained in the Ashley records:

"Compensation made to the men employed in the service of Wm. H. Ashley, Inc., on an expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the year 1827.

	Whole Amt.	Bal. due Oct. 1st and paid by Wm. Ashley
James B. Bruffe	800.00	1.00
Hiram Scott 140 days at \$2.00	280.00	152.90

I do hereby certify that the foregoing accounts and above statements are correct.

James B. Bruffe"¹¹
St. Louis, 16th October, 1827

¹⁰ Franklin-Fayette--Columbia *Missouri Intelligencer*, December 2, 1823; Chittenden, *op. cit.*, p. 586; Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

¹¹ *Ashley Papers*, MS, The Pierre Chouteau Collection, Missouri Historical Society.

Because of the association with Bruffe and Ashley, and the proximity of time, *Hiram Scott* is undoubtedly referred to in the following letter of General Ashley to Messrs. Bernard Pratt & Co., St. Louis, written from Lexington, Missouri, April 11, 1827:

"I arrived there with my party on Saturday last and have been since waiting the arrival of the boat - she (after much detention by wind) reached Jack's Ferry two hours ago. Then I am preparing to pack my mules and will depart therefrom tomorrow morning. My party is in fine condition and will in my opinion so remain, which is truly a fortunate circumstance as my very bad health prevents much exertion on my part. Messrs. Bruffe and Scott appear alive to our interest. The latter is entirely efficient and if properly supported by the former will keep all things in their proper channel. Should my health continue as it is at present I shall proceed but a few days with them after leaving this place.

Your obt sv't.

Wm. H. Ashley"¹²

The other three Scott references are to be found in the contemporary records of the United States Superintendency of Indian Affairs, St. Louis, variously referred to as the *General William Clark Papers* or *Letter Book*. In volume 32, "Record Book containing copies of letters from Indian Agents and others, to the Superintendent of Indian Affairs at St. Louis, from Sept. 10, 1830, to April 1, 1832," there are two lists of fur traders and citizens murdered by Indians. On page 299-300, in a table labeled: "Names of Persons Killed belonging to the parties of Wm. H. Ashley and Smith, Jackson & Sublette &c..&c.," is the following: "Name of leader: J. S. Smith; Names of men killed: Bell, Logan, J. Scott and J. O'Hara; Place where killed: Snake Country; Year: 1827 or 1828; By whom killed: Snakes (supposed)." A note at the bottom of the page says: "The fate of these men is not known, but the conclusion is hardly doubtful."¹³

John Dougherty, Indian Agent, makes this entry on page 383 of *The Letter Book, Superintendent of Indian Affairs, 1830-32*: "Statement of number of Americans killed by Indians in the

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Collection, U.S. Superintendency of Indian Affairs, Archives and Manuscripts Department Kansas State Historical Society.*

Fur Trade and Inland Trade to Mexico -- Year: 1827; Names: Logan, Bell, Scott, Godain, Rijot; Indian tribe: Blackfeet; Place: Rocky Mountains; Employer: Smith, Jackson, & Sublette." Below we find: "Statement of robberies committed against Fur Traders -- Year, 1827; Persons robbed: Sublette, Scott, Logan, Bell & Rijot; Value: \$8,000; By whom: Blackfeet; Place: Rocky Mountains; Nature of losses: Beaver & horses."¹⁴

We will examine these sources, together with the several versions of his death, to determine what grains of truth may yet remain concerning the phantom-like fur trader who is memorialized by a bluff, a county, a city and a national monument in Western Nebraska.

First, was Ashley's man *Hiram* Scott the same "Scott" or "J. Scott" whose robbery and death are separately referred to in General Clark's Letter Book? There is no positive evidence to connect these three, but there is strong probability that they were one and the same. All three were in the field serving the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, and all three disappeared mysteriously at the same time. There is no actual record of *Hiram* Scott's death, but he appears to have been doing all right in 1827, and then we never hear from him again. He is probably the same "Scott" who is listed as "killed by Indians," and "Scott" is probably likewise "J.Scott" in view of the close similarity of circumstances and associations.

What about the initial "J"? In the three places Scott is mentioned above this initial appears only once. It could easily have been a careless "H" or an error in transcription. In those days of handwritten records such errors were not uncommon, particularly errors in orthography. With no evidence to the contrary, it is more reasonable to believe that this was *Hiram* Scott, than to believe it was a different Scott altogether. At the time there were only a few hundred white men in the Rocky Mountain country. Of this small number it would be a rare coincidence indeed if there were two men by the name of Scott who at the same time died mysteriously in the wilderness.

A note of confusion is here introduced by M. S. Sullivan, who has edited the Jediah Smith documents.¹⁵ In July of 1828

¹⁴ *General William Clark Papers*, MS, Missouri Historical Society.

¹⁵ Maurice S. Sullivan, *Travels of Jedediah Smith, a Documentary Outline* (Santa Ana, 1934).

Smith, perhaps the foremost of western explorers, was wending his way north along the Pacific Coast, when fifteen of his men were ambushed and slain by Indians. Smith, a man named Black, and two others escaped. Learning of the disaster, the factor at Fort Vancouver, Doctor McLoughlin, dispatched a force of Hudson's Bay Company men under Alex R. McCleod to salvage what was left of Smith's property. In the McCleod Journal an entry of Wednesday, October 15 (1828) reads:

"Mr. Smith is of Opinion that (Ephraim) Logan & three other Men (James Scott, Jacob O'Hara and William Bell) have not vissited their Deposit last Season, and were proceeding towards his route, and possibly fell on his track and have come forward till their progress was arrested by the Natives. The probability of the Conjecture having some foundation, an Indian acquainted with the route through the Interior, was hired to convey the information of our endeavors to afford them every assistance in our power. . ."¹⁶

Here is the same group referred to above by the Indian agent as having been killed in the "Rocky Mountains" by Snake Indians in the year 1827 or 1828. If this Scott and the other three evanescent characters had "their progress arrested by Natives" near the scene of the massacre on the Umpquah River, this means that they were killed by Indians native to that distant Oregon region. This would eliminate any of the Rocky Mountain tribes, such as the Snakes, and certainly the Scott involved could not have been the one who was deserted on the North Platte. But the whole thing is conjectural, the names being inserted by the editor, and there being no substantiation available for "James, Jacob and William." Of course Mr. Sullivan is entitled to use the four names available in the *Letter Book* in an attempt to account for the four mysterious men referred to in the McCleod Journal; but aside from the discrepancy in the location of the Indian tribes supposedly involved, we are again up against the awkward hypothesis that there were two (or possibly three) different Scotts in the wilderness who disappeared simultaneously, one in Oregon and/or the "Rocky Mountains" and one in western Nebraska.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 126; Harrison C. Dale, *Ashley-Smith Explorations* (rev-ed., Glendale, 1941), p. 291, also identifies four men lost in 1828 in Southern Oregon as Logan, O'Harra, Bell and Scott.

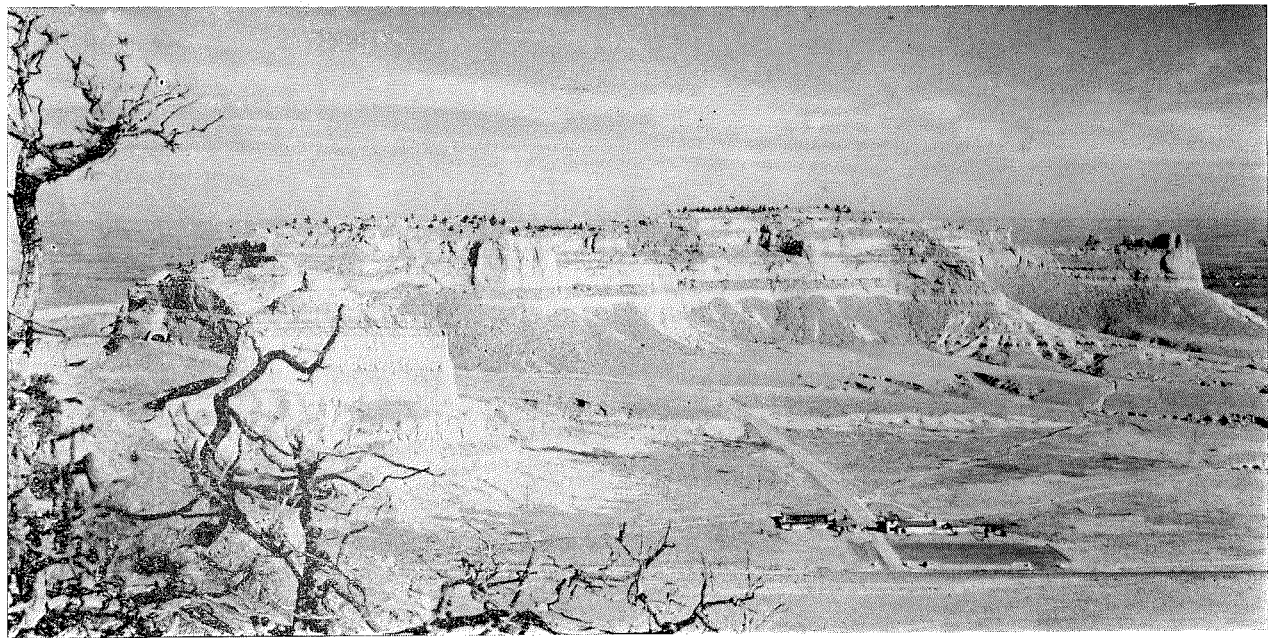


Photo by C. E. Humberger, National Park Service

SCOTTS BLUFF, LANDMARK ON THE OREGON-CALIFORNIA TRAIL

View from the summit of South Bluff, showing Mitchell Pass and Monument headquarters in the foreground.

We are inclined to accept the theory that the three Scotts--blank, "J.," and Hiram--were one and the same, since it is reasonable, and to suppose otherwise would involve some rather amazing coincidences. Having "pegged" Hiram as nearly as possible in view of the skimpy records, the next immediate question is whether he was the same Scott who was deserted on the North Platte, leaving his bones to moulder near the bluff.

Aside from the fact that there is no other Scott of whom we have definite record in the western fur trade, it seems clear that Hiram Scott, employee of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, is the one who has been so signally honored. The character of this man was a leader in the Aricara campaign is not inconsistent with the importance attached to him on the fatal trip down the Platte. Ashley mustered eighty men for the battle at the Aricara villages, all of them reckless frontiersmen. To be the leader of such a crew was no mean distinction. To be on an equal footing as an officer of volunteers with such notable figures as Jedediah Smith, Thomas Fitzpatrick and William Sublette indicates that Hiram Scott was a man of exceptional ability and integrity, and his renown would probably have been much greater than that of lending his name to a Nebraska bluff, if his life had not been forfeited by treachery.

But was he an important figure when he died? Was he perhaps the leader of the group returning from the mountains? Most writers are non-committal on this point; but Bryant notes that the party of "five or six" returning from the mountains was under Scott's command. Chittenden tells us that "it is quite probable that he was a man of some standing in the mountains."¹⁷ Most significantly he is referred to as a "clerk" by Ferris, Shumway, Robinson and Reading.¹⁸ A "clerk" in the western fur trade was not the subordinate person that the name implies today. Chittenden tells us that the "clerk" was second only in importance to the "bourgeois" (manager of a trading post) and "partisan" (commander of a trading expedition.) The clerk was first in line for promotion.

¹⁷ Chittenden, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

¹⁸ Major B. P. Reading's First Trip to California, 1843. MS, Library of Congress.

" . . . He was entitled to the same social rank as the bourgeois, and in the latter's absence succeeded to his duties. He was frequently in command of posts, and his work on the whole was the most exacting of any that pertained to the trade. He was often required to take an outfit of merchandise and proceed to some Indian village, there to reside in the lodge of a chief until the trade of the band had been exhausted. . . The most trusted of them were frequently stockholders or partners in the companies for which they were working. . ." ¹⁹

The Ashley correspondence definitely indicates that Scott was a clerk on the expedition of 1827, a lieutenant in charge of the traders' caravan, though probably not its actual commander.

There seems to be a discrepancy between the two Ashley papers quoted, with reference to Scott's rank. The letter of April 11 reads as if Scott were superior to Bruffe: ". . . The latter (Scott) is entirely efficient and if properly supported by the former (Bruffe) will keep all things in their proper channel." But according to the "payroll" of October 16 Bruffe drew \$800 for his work on the expedition while Scott received the munificent sum of \$280. It will be noted also that Bruffe's signature appears but not Scott's. This reward does not seem commensurate with the position of an "entirely efficient" clerk. It may be that Scott was to draw a share of the profits as a stockholder, in addition to nominal wages, a practice which Chittenden shows to be common.

In any case Scott, as an officer of volunteers and as a trusted lieutenant of Ashley's, was undoubtedly held in high esteem by his contemporaries and it would be fitting that a conspicuous landmark perpetuate his memory. Dozens of other men died prematurely in the fierce struggle for existence which characterized the fur trade. They all died violently, and when they died that was usually the end of it. To be given a kind of immortality by having his name affixed to a prominent feature of western landscape bears out the belief that Scott was a man of some distinction, in the eyes of his subordinates, as well as those of his superiors.

Ferris speaks of the Scott for whom the bluff was named as a "young man." Hiram Scott, the captain of volunteers, was in

¹⁹ Chittenden, *op. cit.*, p. 55

all probability one of the enterprising young men" hired by Ashley in 1822 and 1823, and he would still be a young man at the time of his death in the late 1820's. This furnishes another bit of evidence, if more were needed, to identify the Scott in question as *Hiram Scott*.

Probably the most interesting and significant method of identifying the namesake of Scotts Bluff lies in the time element. Ferris, writing in 1830, says that Scott's death occurred "a few years previous." Bonneville in 1832 says "a number of years since." Townsend in 1834 writes "many years since." Robinson suggests six or seven years after 1823. Chittenden has "probably as early as 1830." Brackett suggests 1825,²⁰ while Shumway definitely pins it at 1828. The variation in these dates is 1825 to 1830. During these years the so-called Rocky Mountain Fur Company had almost exclusive sway in the Rocky Mountain region, an ill-defined area which at that time could be interpreted to include Western Nebraska. Any man who died in this region then would probably be a "Rocky Mountain" man. Hiram Scott was certainly associated with this outfit in 1823 and 1827, and undoubtedly still was so associated at the time of his disappearance shortly thereafter. It is therefore logical to conclude that it was he who died near the bluff and for whom it was named.

It will be worthwhile to follow briefly the journeys of the Rocky Mountain men past Scotts Bluff, and to speculate on the extent of Scott's participation in them.

In the summer of 1824 Thomas Fitzpatrick, together with two companions identified as Stone and Branch, traveled the Platte route on foot from Independence Rock, at the junction of the Sweetwater and the North Platte (central Wyoming) to Fort Atkinson, on the Missouri. Procuring horses, he returned to his cache on the Sweetwater to pick up his furs, and again made the trip to Fort Atkinson before snow fell.²¹ James Clyman may have passed along the Platte about the same time.²² These were the first

²⁰ W. S. Brackett, "Bonneville and Bridger," *Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana*, III (1900), p. 180.

²¹ L. R. Hafen and W. J. Ghent, *Broken Hand, the Life Story of Thomas Fitzpatrick* (Denver, 1931), p. 46.

²² Charles L. Camp, "James Clyman, His Diaries and Reminiscences," *California Historical Society Quarterly* IV (1925), p. 139.

employees of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company to see Scotts Bluff. In this same year Ashley himself left Council Bluffs, on the Missouri, to go to the mountains by the Platte route, but he appears to have used the South fork on this occasion, rather than the North fork or Scotts Bluff route.

In 1825 the fur crop of the first annual rendezvous of the Rocky Mountain men (at Henry's Fork of the Green) was taken by Ashley to St. Louis by the Bighorn-Yellowstone-Missouri route; but in October of that year Ashley sent seventy men to the mountains via the North fork of the Platte. In the spring of 1826 Ashley followed this route to the rendezvous near the site of present Ogden, Utah, and returned to St. Louis by September with 123 packs of beaver. From now on the north fork of the Platte, by Scotts Bluff, became the established route to the settlements. Ashley, having sold his interests to the partners, Jedediah Smith, David Jackson and William Sublette, never reached the mountains again; but he contracted for the expedition of 1827, which took in supplies for the rendezvous of that year at Salt Lake, including a four-pounder cannon on wheels, the first wheels over the Oregon Trail. The return caravan, bringing back 130 packs of beaver arrived in St. Louis October 15. It seems probable that William Sublette made the return journey in 1827, to wind up his affairs with Ashley; and we know that he commanded the expeditions of 1828 and 1829.²³

As a trusted clerk or lieutenant Hiram Scott may have figured in the second Fitzpatrick expedition of 1824 and seen the bluff then for the first time. He could likewise have been among the seventy men who passed the bluff headed west in the fall of 1825. He was probably with Ashley on the 1826 expedition. We know that he was one of the leaders of the caravan of 1827. It was undoubtedly on the return trip of 1828 that he met his doom; and his bones were found in the spring of 1829, apparently by members of Sublette's westbound caravan. It could not have been any later for Ferris in 1830 tells of the event "a few years previous." If it had happened in 1829 the bones would not have been

²³ Carl P. Russell, "Wilderness Rendezvous Period of the American Fur Trade," *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, XLII (1941), pp. 4-14; Chittenden, *op. cit.*, pp. 269-277.

found until the spring of 1830, and the tradition could not possibly have been established by May 27 of that year when Ferris camped in the neighborhood.

The data in Clark's Letter Book suggests 1827 more strongly than 1828 as the time of Scott's death; but the payroll of 1827 seems to show he completed the 1827 trip successfully, and in sound health, for on the day after the caravan's arrival at St. Louis he received the balance of \$152.90 due him; unless we are to suppose that Bruffe received Scott's wages in trust, which hardly seems plausible. The reasons for Shumway placing the date at 1828 are not explained by him, but this date now seems acceptable.

It would seem conclusive that Hiram Scott was an employee of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, but we will take this opportunity to examine all other claims.

It might be suggested that Scott was one of the forty-five men who accompanied Joshua Pilcher of the Missouri Fur Company in 1827, from Council Bluffs to Green River, where they wintered. The following year Pilcher and nine men set out upon a tour of the Northwest, but most of the original party returned to Council Bluffs.²⁴ Both coming and going the Platte route was used, and it was about this time that Scott disappeared. This connection with Pilcher would be entirely logical if it were not for the evidence above cited that Scott was a "Rocky Mountain" man.

In the literature of the fur trade we find that there are two other assumptions to be disposed of. Shumway's book, *The History of Western Nebraska*, has been very influential on popular thought, and it would seem prudent to examine his version of the Scott episode. He agrees that Scott was one of Ashley's men originally, but relates that Scott and a Narcisse Le Clerc organized a new fur company about 1827, styled the "Northwest Fur Company," in imitation of the great British concern lately merged with the Hudson's Bay outfit. With LeClerc as leader and Hiram Scott as clerk, the band set out for St. Louis in 1828, to dispose of their first collection of peltries (says Shumway). Scott was taken ill and left behind with Roi and Bissonette, who later abandoned him.²⁵

²⁴ Chittenden, *op. cit.*, pp. 151-152.

²⁵ Shumway, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

Shumway is apparently in error concerning the Le Clerc association. Chittenden gives 1831 as the date for the incorporation of Le Clerc's Northwest Fur Company, and it was not until 1832 that he set out on his first expedition, at which time he went up the Missouri river by keelboat. Previous to this time Le Clerc was an American Fur Company employee, associated with McKenzie on the upper Missouri. There is no evidence that he was ever in the Platte country, at least until long after Scott's disappearance.²⁶ Of the man named Roi nothing is known, but Shumway states that Bissonette was the son of Antoine Bissonette, who deserted Manuel Lisa on a Missouri River expedition in 1807, and was killed by George Drouillard, Lisa's lieutenant.²⁷ He is likewise identified with the Bissonette who was encountered by Parkman in 1846, living with a Sioux squaw and subsisting on wild cherries. (Shumway says that he had several squaws, and that his diet included huge, wingless grasshoppers)²⁸ As his source for this information on Le Clerc, Roi, and Bissonette, Shumway mentions only "notes garnered from other brave men of the mountains." No sources found by the present writer substantiate the Le Clerc partnership, or the connection of a Roi or a Bissonette with Hiram Scott.

If we dare to name anyone who might have been associated with Scott at the time of his demise we would name William Sublette, who is known to have been frequently a leader of the expeditions to the settlements. Other probable associates were Moses Harris, James Beckwourth, Robert Campbell, Etienne Provot and David E. Jackson, for whom in 1829 the name "Jackson Hole" was given to the Snake River Valley east of the famous Teton mountains. James Bridger, another Rocky Mountain man, later a partner in the enterprise, seems to have passed Scotts Bluff eastbound in 1828, and could very well have been one of Scott's companions.²⁹ It is curious to note that his name has been vaguely linked with another famous case of desertion, that of old Hugh Glass, who was mangled by a grizzly bear in 1823,

²⁶ Chittenden, *op. cit.*, pp. 348-350.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

²⁸ Francis Parkman, *The Oregon Trail*, modern edition (New York, 1927) pp. 246-247.

²⁹ J. Cecil Alter, *James Bridger* (Salt Lake City, 1925) p. 105.

and left to die by two companions. Here the parallel breaks down, for old Hugh, in spite of his frightful wounds, survived and made strenuous efforts to track down and punish his deserters.³⁰

Major Reading, in describing Scotts Bluff, tells of "a Mr. Scott, clerk of the American Fur Company." Edwin Bryant links Scott with this same outfit. Chittenden in his *American Fur Trade* and Brand in *The History of Scotts Bluff, Nebraska*³¹ quote Ferris as saying that Scott was an employee of the American Fur Company, but it appears that these gentlemen did not read Ferris correctly, for he does not actually name the company with whom Scott was supposed to be associated. A relationship with the great "American" fur monopoly has been inferred by other writers, but there appears to be no foundation for it. Aside from the positive evidence of Scott's association with the Rocky Mountain Fur Company thus far cited, we know that up till 1828 the American Fur Company had largely confined its operations to the upper Missouri country, and certainly had not engaged in any expeditions along the Platte River. In 1829 Vanderburg of the American Fur Company did enter the mountain trade, but he used the Missouri River route. The earliest expedition of this company into the Platte country was in 1830 under the partisans Drips and Robidoux.³² This included Ferris, whose journal proves that by this time Scott had been dead for at least two years. Thus we return again full circle to the only possible conclusion, that Scott was a "Rocky Mountain" man.

As to the possible origin or antecedents of Hiram Scott, but one substantial clue has been revealed. The census of St. Charles County, Missouri, for 1817 and 1819 reveals a Hiram Scott as living in Dardenne township. This is quite likely the same one who is the subject of this study, for it is known that many of Ashley's "young men" of 1822 and 1823 were recruited from St. Charles.³³ However, this name is apparently to be found in no other contem-

³⁰ Joseph G. Masters, *Stories of the Far West* (Boston, 1935, p. 205; Chittenden, *op. cit.*, pp. 689-697.

³¹ Donald D. Brand, *The History of Scotts Bluff, Nebraska* (Berkeley, 1934), p. 19; Chittenden, *op. cit.*, p. 481.

³² Ferris, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-7; Chittenden, *op. cit.*, p. 330.

³³ Date supplied from photostatic records of the Missouri Historical Society.

porary civic records of St. Louis or its environs, such as census, civilian or army directories, or the files of the Probate Court and County Recorder. The only newspaper reference discovered is that previously noted, a reprint of Colonel Leavenworth's report on the Aricara campaign, to be found in the *Missouri Intelligencer* of December 2, 1823. Though he appears to have been a man of some prominence in the fur trade, Scott must not have been conspicuous in Missouri social circles, to judge from the paucity of information. Of course if he was a young man when he entered the wilderness he would never have had an opportunity to become conspicuous back home, since he must have spent most of his few remaining years in the wilderness.

Of the numerous Oregon Trail diarists who comment on the bluff, only one has been found to suggest Scott's origin. This was Major Reading who, in passing the bluff in 1843, speaks of "a Mr. Scott. . .originally from Philadelphia." This was probably as much a bit of fancy as Reading's assertion that Scott was an employee of the American Fur Company.

We must content ourselves with the realization that our knowledge of Hiram Scott, skimpy as it may be, is greater than most of his associates in the fur trade for even the names of those have been swallowed up in oblivion.^{33a}

III

If Scott's identity is to some extent speculative, it may be said that the circumstances of his death are entirely so, since every "authority" on the subject has his own special version of just what happened. As noted, Ferris and Bonneville have set the two main patterns, which we will briefly review. In Ferris, Scott (one of a large party mounted) became ill, was placed in charge of two

^{33a} In the preparation of this chapter the writer wishes to acknowledge valued research assistance from the following: Miss Louise Barry, Curator of Manuscripts, Kansas State Historical Society; Julian C. Spotts, Charles E. Peterson and Mrs. Adele P. Harrison of the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, St. Louis; Floyd C. Shoemaker, Secretary of the State Historical Society of Missouri; Miss Stella Drumm, librarian of the Missouri Historical Society; Wm. T. Archelpohl, Judge of the Probate Court, and Harry C. Sullentrop, Recorder of Deeds, both of St. Charles County, Missouri.

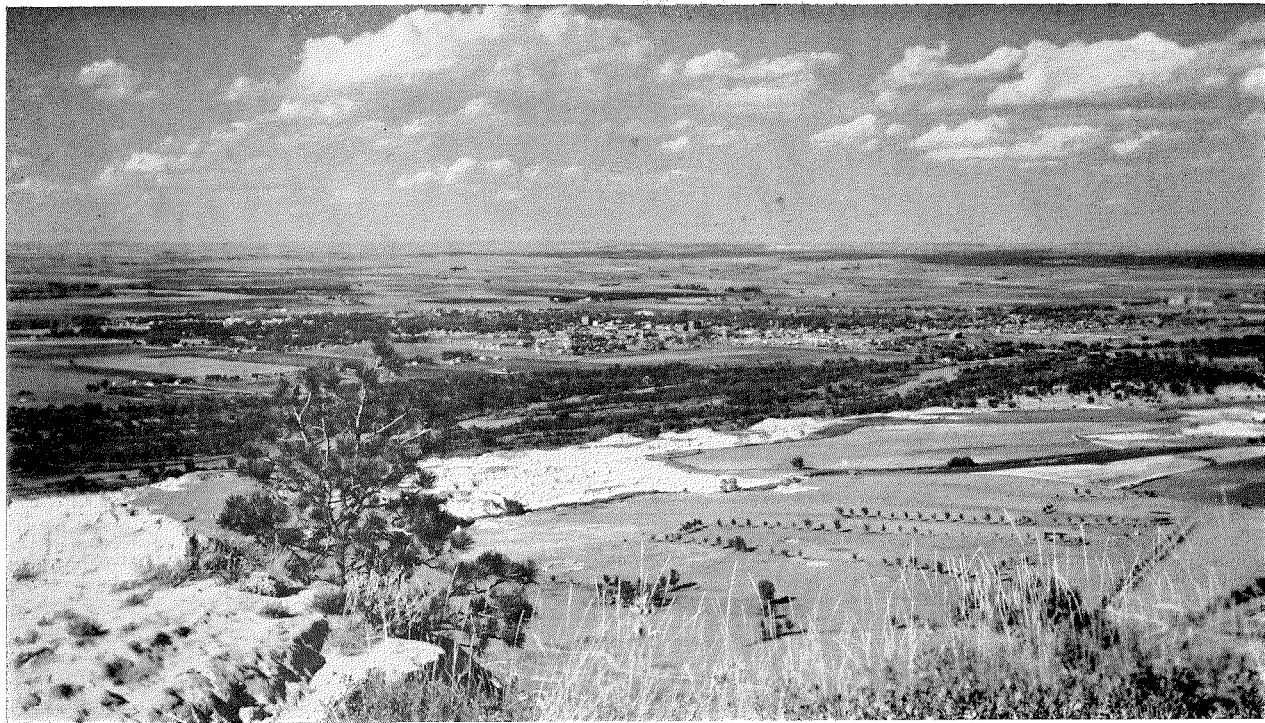


Photo by Downey's Midwest Studio, Scottsbluff

VIEW OF SCOTTSBLUFF, NEBRASKA

Hiram Scott is memorialized, not only by the great bluff, but by the naming of Scotts Bluff County and the city of Scottsbluff, the metropolis of western Nebraska. This view of the city is from the summit of the bluff.

men, transported to Scott's Bluff in a bull-boat, and there abandoned by these men, so they could catch up with the main party. According to Bonneville, Scott's party was descending the Platte in canoes, which overturned and put them on foot, devoid of provisions. Scott became ill and was deserted by his companions (an indeterminate number) when they discovered the trail of other white men. Scott crawled overland from Laramie's fork to Scott's Bluff, where he died.

Except for discrepancies previously examined, Shumway follows the Bonneville story, which has been adopted verbatim by most modern writers, including Chittenden, Bancroft and Mokler.³⁴ The Ferris version is most nearly approximated by Bryant, previously quoted, though his influence is evident in certain others who eliminate the "long crawl." Among early writers, it can be said, however, that there are hardly two alike, and most offer rather sharp variations.

Scott is generally conceded to be with a "party" or "company," which could mean that it was a good-sized outfit. The regular caravans sometimes were comprised of more than 300 pack-mules and the personnel might be seventy-five or a hundred.³⁵ Johnson has "a small party of trappers," and Bryant "a party of some five or six trappers." According to Kelly³⁶ and Sage, Scott was all by himself to start with, a solitary hunter. Of course the probability rests with a large number, since it would only be common sense for homeward bound caravaneers to keep together for purposes of mutual defense against Indians, if not for the sake of companionship. This would be particularly true of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, which would have a valuable fur cargo to protect.

The question of boats versus some form of land transportation has been noted. Although the Platte was commonly navigated in later years, as will be seen, it is likely that the bulk of travel in the 1820's was by mule or horseback. It is possible that

³⁴ Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of Nevada, Colorado and Wyoming* (San Francisco, 1890), p. 693; Alfred James Mokler, *Transition of the West*, (Chicago, 1927) p. 153.

³⁵ Brand, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

³⁶ William Kelly, *An Excursion to California in 1849* (London, 1851), p. 151.

the main party was mounted, while the secondary group used the water. At least the almost equal distribution between "boat" and "no boat" schools of thought suggests some kind of a compromise.

It is generally agreed that Scott and party were descending the Platte, going from mountains to settlements, but at least one writer--Brackett--has them going the other way, "ascending the Sweetwater."

The majority of historians make out Scott's companions to be a bunch of scoundrels, to have deserted him in the wilderness in a callous eagerness to save their own hides. Contrary to this prevailing sentiment, Brackett, Palmer and Langworthy³⁷ deny that Scott was deliberately deserted, but assert that, in fact, when he realized the hopelessness of his condition, he persuaded his companions that they should go ahead and save themselves, since his fate was sealed. Considering the morals and manners of the frontier, not to mention the universal and overwhelming motive of self-preservation, we find it difficult to accept the picture of Scott in the role of a languishing hero, surrounded by friends protesting their loyalty. It is easier to agree with the cynics who believe that Scott's fellow travellers, feeling their own lives hung in the balance, left him deliberately, against his knowledge or wishes, and without any serious pangs of conscience.

What caused Scott's death? To judge from most writers it was simply a case of starvation, perhaps complicated by exhaustion and exposure. Some have made rather quaint suggestions to account for his untimely end. Burton says that "he was put on shore by his boat's crew, who had a grudge against him," after which he succumbed from a "mortal sickness."³⁸ If this sickness wasn't starvation it is difficult to see how it could be anything but a fatal blow inflicted during the mutiny. Withers says that Scott froze to death.³⁹ According to one local tradition, he was captured by Indians and burned alive. The masterpiece of imaginative ingenuity consists of the following story which has had

³⁷ Franklin Langworthy, *Scenery of the Plains, Mountains and Mines*, ed by P. C. Phillips from the edition of 1855 (Princeton, 1932), p. 42; Brackett and Palmer, *op cit*s.

³⁸ Richard F. Burton, *The City of the Saints* (New York, 1862), p. 78.

³⁹ Ethel M. Withers, "Experiences of Lewis B. Dougherty on the Oregon Trail" *The Missouri Historical Review*, XXIV (1930), p. 376.

some circulation in recent years: Near Scotts Bluff some fur traders upset on a raft. Pawnees rescued them and put them on horses. Scott was sick (injured?) and when the Sioux Indians appeared on the horizon, he was abandoned to his fate. But the bloodthirsty Sioux did not molest him because he told them he had small-pox. To cap the climax, this story has it that his remains were identified later by the gold and silver fillings in his teeth!⁴⁰

The "illness" or "sickness" explanation commonly used raises more questions than it answers. Ferris speaks of "a severe illness which rendered him unable to ride." He was then placed in a bull-boat, which may have been subsequently upset. According to Bonneville, Scott was not taken ill until after the party had been upset in canoes, and suffered much from hunger. In the latter case it could have been pneumonia induced by the ducking in the North Platte, complicated by starvation and its attendant evils. But it is difficult to understand why Scott, a hardened mountaineer, would succumb while others managed to survive. It is even more difficult to fathom the nature of the illness mentioned by Ferris and others, which had no apparent cause. If it was some kind of disease, such as typhoid or appendicitis, it was indeed a rare phenomenon, for the mountain men were notoriously healthy, able to withstand for long periods every kind of hardship, including dearth of nourishment. William Sublette is on record as stating that "among our partisans in the mountains sickness and natural deaths are almost unknown."⁴¹ It could hardly have been smallpox or other contagious diseases, for none were rampant at that time; and if they had been, Scott likely would not have been the only victim.

This brings us to the Indians. According to the Clark Letter Book, Scott and others were killed in 1827 or 1829 by Snake or Blackfeet Indians in the Rocky Mountains; and at or about this same time this same party was robbed by Blackfeet. We will examine the Letter Book entries more closely. We have previously demonstrated why "Scott" and J. Scott" were probably identical

⁴⁰ The sponsor of this story was Tom Rivington, who died at Gering in 1938, age 86. He claimed Scott was his uncle, and died in 1844;

⁴¹ Chittenden, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

with Hiram Scott, why the "Rocky Mountains" or Snake country" could be interpreted to include western Nebraska, and why the date of 1828 is more probable than 1827.

The factual discrepancies between the entries on pages 299 and 341 are not irreconcilable. The first entry may have been made by someone other than Dougherty, who heard differently, or they may both have been Dougherty's, the second entry being later and more reliable information. The consistent factor is that Scott, Bell and Logan were killed and robbed at about the same time. J. S. Smith and Sublette (presumably William) are both mentioned as leaders. But in 1828 Smith was in the wilds of California, and Scott could not have been with him despite the previously noted assertion of Mr. Sullivan. Sublette was undoubtedly the leader, and the three entries concern the same party.

Just how O'Hara, Godain and Rijot fit into the picture is not clear, but it will be noted that they come last in each case, as if their names or their connection with the case were uncertain. They may well have been killed individually, on separate occasions, and their names added to the others for the convenience of the recorder. Godain sounds suspiciously like "Godin," who is reported to have acquired some lustre by his exploits in the Battle of Pierre's Hole.⁴² This was in 1832, and if Godain were truly Godin, this would tend to discredit the reliability of the death list contained in the Letter Book.

Was the "Indian killing" a guess by Dougherty, or a fabrication by someone else, or was it the actual truth?

In support of the first alternative is the admission under the first entry that "the fate of these men is not known." This, coupled with the confusion of names and dates in all the entries, makes it seem that Dougherty may merely have conjectured that Scott, among others, was killed by Indians. In those turbulent times, when a man "turned up missing", this was always a good guess.

In support of the second alternative, it is conceivable that the Indian agent got the story from the men who deserted Scott on the North Platte after he became incapacitated. It would cer-

⁴² C. G. Coutant, *History of Wyoming*, Vol. I (Laramie, 1899), p. 200.

tainly be to their best interests to report something that sounded probable, rather than reveal the true circumstances of their desertion.

As to the third alternative, it might be supposed that Scott's employers knew what had happened to him and would faithfully report it to the Indian agent. According to the record, Sublette was a fellow victim of Scott, Logan and Bell in the robbery, but not in the "murder." It might seem reasonable that the robbery and murder occurred at the same time, and that Sublette was a survivor, possibly the sole survivor. If this was the case, then Sublette must have reported the affair, and his report certainly could be considered trustworthy. Then we would have to conclude that Scott really was killed by Indians, or died as the result of their machinations, rather than as the result of "sickness." In support of this are at least two emigrant writers. Johnson says that Indians were trailing the party and when Scott "took sick" his companions left him for fear of their own scalps. Palmer states that Indians robbed the party of all supplies, and Scott succumbed from resulting hardships. Palmer is the only emigrant who mentions a robbery, but this does suggest a line of thought. The "sickness" which afflicted Scott, which so impaired his efficiency as to make him a burden to his companions, could possibly have been a bang on the head from an Indian club, or a gangrened arrow wound, resulting from a skirmish with the savages.

The many conflicting versions of Scott's death have prompted some to express a doubt that such an event ever did transpire, and they point out that the story may have been cooked up by a yarn-loving trapper for the edification of some green newcomer to the mountains. As a matter of fact one writer, explaining in 1863 how Scotts Bluff got its name, says that, according to Jim Bridger, "a man named Scott had *saved his life* from pursuing Indians by taking refuge in the eroding cliffs of this bluff."⁴³ This sounds like Bridger who, by 1863, had guided parties past Scotts Bluff at least a dozen times and may have been tired of telling his clients the same old story. Either he was thus giving vent to one of his notorious fabrications for the purpose of producing as-

⁴³ Lewis F. Crawford, *Rekindling Camp Fires* (Bismarch, 1926), p. 53.

tonishment among his listeners or, having actually been one of Hiram Scott's associates, he may have had an excellent motive for "covering up" the true story.

Skeptics of the Scott tradition ask why Scott's desertion came to be known, since it would surely be to the best interest of those who abandoned him to keep the matter hushed up. Of course the clue lies in the phrase, "his remains were found the following spring." The culprits would not likely make an open admission, but the leader of the expedition could easily put two and two together. He had been told that Scott died at one place and his grinning skull was found at another place, the two places being from a few miles to seventy miles apart, according to various estimates. The erstwhile "companions" were obviously liars and deserters, and the story of their guilt rapidly became a frontier tradition. Even after they were exposed it cannot be assumed that they would reveal any of the details of their perfidy; and thus it remained for every story-teller to supply his own details, which he would certainly be inclined to embellish to suit his individual fancy.

A headline account of Scott's death, if it had appeared in the autumn of 1828, might have read something like this:

Death of Hiram Scott, employee of Rocky Mountain Fur Company; Pals report Scott succumbs at Laramie Fork, Indian Territory, from starvation and/or wounds following boat wreck and/or Indian attack.

Sometime in 1829 a rather sensational news story might have appeared, with the following banner:

Captain Sublette, Rocky Mountain tycoon, reports Hiram Scott skeleton found at bluff on North Platte, many miles from scene of death agony reported last year; lengthy crawl held probable; Scott's pals held for questioning.

IV

It is interesting to examine the geographical aspect of the Scott tradition. First we must look at "Scott's Bluff" itself. Today the term is properly applied to the dominant elevation in the present National Monument, the hill between Mitchell Pass and the river, on which the Summit Road has been constructed. South of this is Dome Rock and South Bluff, while to the west a high

ridge extends for eight miles, connecting at Roubidoux Pass with the long parallel ridge set back about ten miles from the river, today called Wildcat Hills. In historic times the term "Scotts Bluffs" or "Scotts bluff" was applied occasionally to all these hills, the two extensive parallel ridges as well as the present day Scotts Bluff itself (see map). Thus, when such reference is made in an early journal it is not always certain just what specific locality is being considered. The confusion is further heightened by the fact that "Scotts Bluff" is sometimes found to apply to all of the hills in question, while in another instance the plural form, "Scotts Bluffs" might mean only the one main bluff.

The Rev. Samuel Parker in 1835 refers unmistakably to the present Scotts Bluff, as does the explorer Capt. Howard Stansbury in 1849:

"These (Scott's bluffs) are the termination of a high range of land running from south to north. They are very near the river, high and abrupt. . ."⁴⁴

" . . . Scott's Bluff, a point where a spur from the main ridge comes so close to the river as to leave no room for the passage of teams."⁴⁵

Bryant could only refer to this one particular bluff when he says of Scott:

" . . . but afterwards recovering his strength sufficiently to leave the boat, he had wandered into the bluffs, where he died, where his bones were found, and which now bear his name."⁴⁶

Likewise Rollins, a modern writer, means this particular bluff when he writes that Hiram Scott "died of starvation either here or else at so short a distance upstream as to allow the waters to float the body hither."⁴⁷

The present Scotts Bluff itself is undoubtedly referred to by Kelly, a "forty-niner," for he accurately describes the topography in this way:

" . . . we could see that the bluffs took a curve like the tail of a shepherd's crook, a prominent eminence forming

⁴⁴ Samuel Parker, *Journal of an Exploring Tour* (Ithaca, 1844), p. 66.

⁴⁵ Howard Stansbury, *Exploration and Survey of the Valley of the Great Salt Lake of Utah* (Washington, 1953, p. 52.

⁴⁶ Bryant, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

⁴⁷ Philip Ashton Rollins, *The Discovery of the Oregon Trail. Robert Stuart's Narratives* (New York, 1935), p. 205.

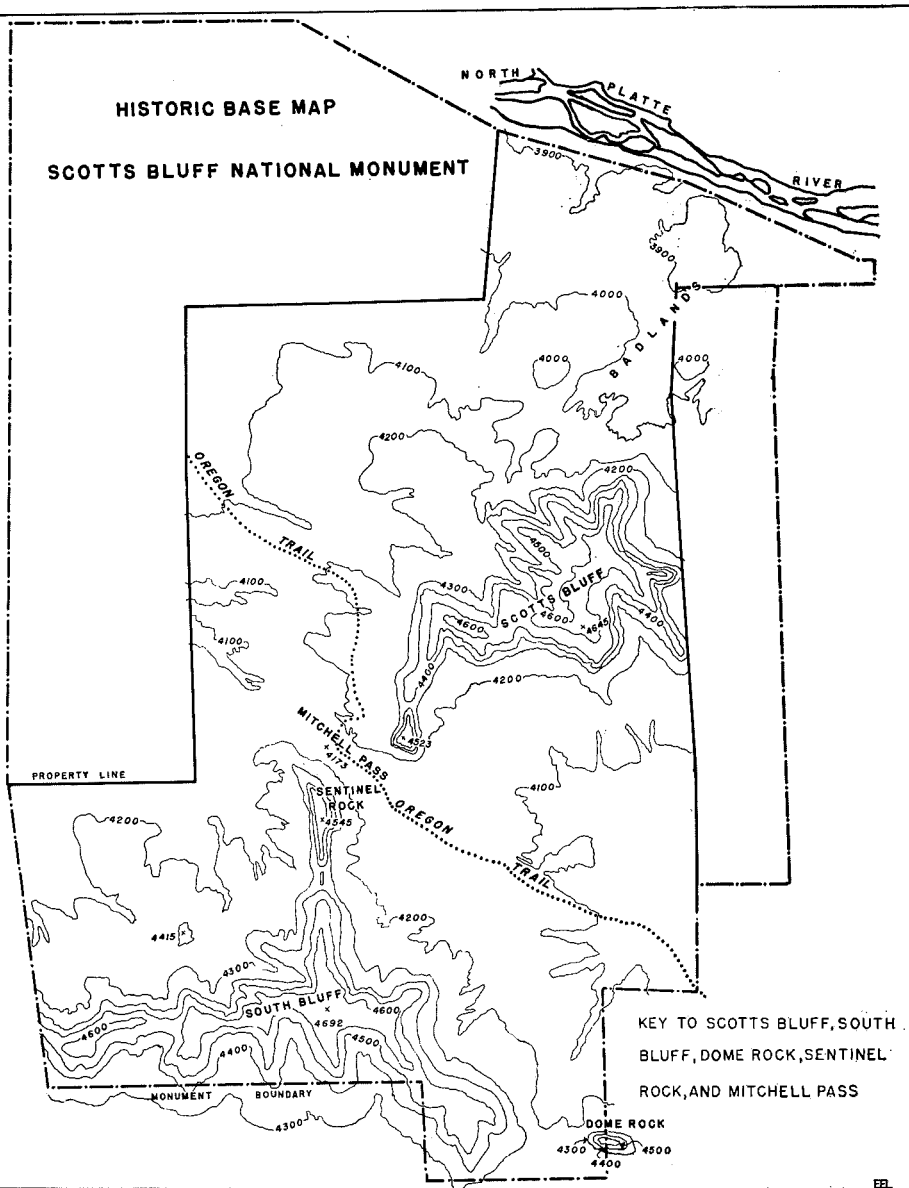
the curl at the end. This is called Scott's Bluff. . . from the body of a trapper being found upon it."⁴⁸

Burton specifically and accurately describes this particular bluff and agrees with Kelly that the skeleton was found on its summit: "The wretch in mortal sickness crawled on its mound to die." Shumway is apparently responsible for the belief that prevails locally that the skeleton was found at the spring which flows at the foot of the present Scotts Bluff, at its eastern slope, and that he was here buried.

If these writers who define Scotts Bluff as the one and only hill are correct, then we can believe that Hiram Scott died within the boundaries of the present National Monument, or at least in its immediate vicinity; but it is not possible to determine the exact spot on which his skeleton was discovered, or where he was buried, for there has never been a scrap of reliable physical evidence of his burial here or at any other place. We are free to assume that his bleaching bones were decently interred by those who stumbled across them, yet as a matter of fact no contemporary writer even mentions a burial. For all we know he was finally disposed of by the wolves and the elements. It has been suggested that the chance excavation might turn up the unmarked grave of Hiram Scott; yet any white man's bones that are unearthed in the vicinity of Scotts Bluff are much more apt to be those of some unfortunate Oregon Trail emigrant, than those of the mysterious fur-trader who has been missing for over 100 years.

Kelly, Burton and others would have us believe that Scott, or what was left of him, was found on the summit of the bluff. Anyone with a knowledge of Scotts Bluff topography will find this hypothesis difficult to support, and it seems probable that Kelly and Burton never got close enough to Scotts Bluff themselves to appreciate its formidableness. Until modern improvements were made, this bluff was buttressed around by sheer cliffs, being scalable at two or three points only, and these offered the hazard of a broken neck to even the most sanguine and healthy climbers. In his dying condition, it is highly improbable that Scott could reach the summit even if he made the attempt. But supposing that by dint of superhuman exertion he did reach the

⁴⁸ Kelly, *op. cit.*, p. 151.



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 Professor E. E. Lackey of the Geography Department,
 University of Nebraska

top of the bluff, how would this contribute to his salvation? And if he died on the summit, his remains might not have been discovered for decades. Indians may have used the bluff for a lookout or signal tower, but there is no evidence that fur-traders or emigrants made a habit of clambering up its sheer walls.^{48a} As a matter of fact, it is known that they invariably made a deliberate detour around it.

We can thus, with a fair degree of assurance eliminate the summit from our conjectures as to Scott's last resting place. If he was abandoned on the river, or north of the river adjoining the bluff, it is likely that he died on the river bank. If he managed to negotiate the saw-toothed badlands between the bluff and the river, he may have reached the spring site suggested by Shumway; or he could have reached it via Mitchell Pass if he approached the bluff landward from the west. Without any evidence to the contrary, this guess is as plausible as any, if we accept the story of those who hold that the term "Scotts Bluff" or "Scotts Bluffs" properly belongs to the one great elevation which now comprises Scotts Bluff National Monument.

By "Scotts Bluff(s)" some writers apparently mean the entire range of hills from Roubidoux Pass to Mitchell Pass, but not the other range which constitutes the Wildcat Hills. This is probably the case with Reading (1843) who speaks of "a high range of bluffs, called Scott's Bluffs." This is definitely the case with Alex Ramsey (1849):

"Passed Scotts Bluffs. As we approached them we began to bear off to the left, leaving the bluffs between us and the river."⁴⁹

And George Gibbs (1849):

"...the road leaves the river and turns to the south of the high range known as Scotts' bluffs."⁵⁰

Most other early writers, in speaking of "Scotts Bluff(s)" refer to all of the hills in the region, including the Wildcat Hills,

^{48a} That Scotts Bluff was ascended very rarely, and then only with great difficulty, in early historic times is revealed by Major Alson B. Ostrander in *An Army Boy of the Sixties* (New York, 1924). See Chapter twelve, pp. 87-95, entitled "A Scramble Up Scott's Bluff." This climb was made in 1866.

⁵⁰ Raymond W. Settle, "George Gibb's Diary," *March of the Mounted Riflemen* (Glendale, 1940), p. 321.

or they are so ambiguous that one could freely choose any part of the region as the scene of Scott's downfall. This is the case with Bonneville who refers to "the wild and picturesque bluffs in the neighborhood of his lonely grave." So it is with Joseph Hackney (1849): "We struck for the bluffs. There are two ranges of bluffs here, and the road runs between them."⁵¹ And in 1849 the American Fur Company built their new Fort John at "Scott's Bluffs," the location being eight miles south of the present Scotts Bluff National Monument.⁵² Thus, our efforts to determine where Scott died are complicated by the careless and miserable habit which people have of scrambling their geography.

The theory has been entertained by some that Scott died at Roubidoux Pass, eight miles west of the present Scotts Bluff in the Naional Monument.⁵³ This was a part of the generalized "Scotts Bluff(s)," in fact was frequently called "Scotts Bluffs Pass." Here was one of the great campsites of the later Oregon Trail, with an excellent spring and pasturage. It is known that until the early 1850's the emigrants used Roubidoux Pass rather than Mitchell Pass, to avoid the badlands near the latter.⁵⁴

Thus the trappers may have customarily gone this way and this may have been the rendezvous site for the Scott party. This theory is not implausible.

If we use the Bonneville tradition that Scott crawled upwards of sixty miles (Shumway, "seventy miles"; Chittenden, "forty miles"; Reading, "twenty miles"; Palmer, "several miles"; Johnson, "a short distance," etc.) it is quite likely that the dying man used the Roubidoux Pass route; that is, if it is to be assumed that this detour away from the river was the "standard" route for the buffalo and the Indians, who were the real trail-blazers. This is a reasonable assumption, since the alternative route along the river, with the barrier imposed by Scotts Bluff and its badlands, must have presented just as great an obstacle to the buffalo herds and the Indians with their travois caravans as it did to the white

⁵¹ Elizabeth Page, "Journal of Joseph Hackney," *Wagons West* (New York, 1930), p. 142.

⁵² T. L. Green, "Scotts Bulffs, Fort John," *Nebraska History* XIX (1938), pp. 175-189.

⁵³ George Mark (ed.), *Mitchell Index*, May 21, 1928.

⁵⁴ Stansbury, *op. cit.*, p. 288.

emigrants. We are told that, in fact, the Sioux word for Scotts Bluff was Ma-e-a-pa-te or "hill-that-is-hard-to-go-around,"⁵⁵ which alone would lend credence to the theory that the Indians themselves, when traveling along the south bank of the North Platte, used the Roubidoux Pass "detour"; hence the earliest white men, the trappers, would avail themselves of this route, which represented the Indian's topographical wisdom.

Thus, if we use the Bonneville version, Scott could quite possibly have crawled to Roubidoux Pass and there expired, rather than to the bluff eight miles farther east, now known as Scotts Bluff. Yet this conclusion is by no means imperative, for there is evidence that there was some early non-wagon travel along the south bank of the river through Mitchell Pass. In 1834 Townsend's party (on horseback) used the Mitchell Pass route, as did Samuel Parker in 1835, if we interpret his journal correctly.⁵⁶ To the more adventuresome among the earlier Indians and trappers, when they were not hampered with wagons, travois, women, children and excess baggage, the badlands would offer no insuperable obstacle. At the same time they did offer the lure of a "short cut" along the river.

Of course the Ferris tradition is entirely incompatible with the Roubidoux Pass theory. The rendezvous was to be at that point where the bluffs touched the river, which could only be *the* Scotts Bluff, and Scott was abandoned at this point. He might have then tried to follow the deserters east, but he surely would not have headed west of Roubidoux Pass, unless he was entirely out of his mind. Even so, it is more likely that he "staggered about the prairie" as Ferris puts it than that he would select a course most surely calculated to seal his doom.

Ferris suggests an angle which has been little considered, namely, that the north side of the North Platte, later called the "Mormon Trail," was used by trappers generally, rather than the south side, the "Oregon Trail" later used mainly by emigrants. Stuart's party in 1812-13 used the north shore.⁵⁷ It is certain that Ferris and his party used the north side, having "jumped off"

⁵⁵ Mark, *op. cit.*, May 21, 1928.

⁵⁶ Townsend, *op. cit.*; Parker, *op. cit.*

⁵⁷ Rollins, *op. cit.*, maps opposite pp. 127, 209.

at Council Bluffs, above the mouth of the Platte river. This was done likewise by Fitzpatrick, Pilcher, Sublette and others who conducted fur trading expeditions at this early time, for it was then considered preferable to voyage by steamboat from St. Louis to Council Bluffs, and vice versa, thereby saving a lot of difficult overland travel.⁵⁶ There is no certainty that the south bank was used until 1830, at which time the partners, Smith, Jackson and Sublette took wagons for the first time to the Rocky Mountains. (Having started overland from St. Louis it would be necessary for them to follow the south bank of the Platte). It is therefore not unreasonable to suppose that Scott's party in 1828 used the north bank route, since it appears possible that this was the route most commonly used by the trapping fraternity up to that time. Ferris assumes this, for he tells that "the bones of a human being. . .were found on the *opposite* side of the river." From Ferris' viewpoint, this was the Scotts Bluff side. This bears out still further the theory that Scott's bones were found at or very near *the* Scotts Bluff in the National Monument; because this is the only bluff in the region which touches the river, and it would be the point most likely to be visited or examined or otherwise brought to the attention of the wayfarer on the north bank. If this north bank were the true trappers' route, the Roubidoux Pass theory would be entirely eliminated, for then no dying man in 1828 would have any motive even if he had the strength, for swimming the river and crawling to an unfrequented point eight miles away from it.

At the end of this labyrinthine investigation we find ourselves in a dilemma. It is intolerable not to construct some coherent picture, yet it has been amply demonstrated that it is not possible to tell exactly what happened to Scott on the basis of available historical evidence. Therefore, as a concession to the bewildered reader who has loyally stayed with us to the end, we hereby bravely attempt a reconstruction of the tragedy, borrowing elements of the picture from several of the more credible sources. The composite result follows:

⁵⁸ Chittenden, *op. cit.* pp. 151, 276-277; Brand *op. cit.*, p. 12; Ferris, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-34; Hafen and Ghent, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

Late in the summer of 1828, Captain William Sublette of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company leaves the fur trader's rendezvous at Great Salt Lake with a mule-train loaded with peltries, and seventy-five mounted men. Hostile Indians trail them from around Independence Rock to Laramie Fork, where they raid the caravan while it is fording the North Platte, making off with a substantial quantity of furs, killing several men, and seriously wounding Hiram Scott, one of the leaders, a clerk employed by Gen. William H. Ashley to protect his interests.

Scott's injuries make it impossible for him to continue the journey by horseback, yet Captain Sublette realizes the urgency of getting the valuable fur cargo out of the hostile Indian country, and safely to St. Louis. Furthermore, game is scarce, and it is imperative that they push on in quest of buffalo. To meet this emergency, Sublette has a bull-boat constructed, and details two of his mountaineers to accompany Scott in this craft to the great bluff near the river, where he promises to have help waiting.

The caravan heads east, while Scott floats downstream with his two companions, hovering between life and death. Sand-bars and snags make navigation difficult. While not yet in sight of the great bluff the Scott party meets disaster. The bull-boat is punctured, swamped and overturned, and all their supplies lost, including their precious powder. The two mountaineers are barely able to save their rifles and drag the wretched invalid to shore.

Their plight is now desperate. To stay with Scott till he might recover would practically guarantee the death of all three of them by starvation, if not torture by Indians. To leave him might brand them with the stigma of deserters. Yet these men are not accustomed to indecision, and their choice is shortly made. Under the pretense of seeking food for the wounded man, and assuring themselves that in any case his end is mercifully near, the two faithless ones leave him, to hasten downstream. By dint of strenuous exertions they manage to overtake the main party, reporting that Scott died below Laramie Fork.

In the spring of 1829 Sublette takes another pack train to the mountains. In the vicinity of the great bluff near the river his hunters report a human skeleton. Upon examination it is determined to be the remains of Scott. It is now known that he had been deliberately abandoned by his two companions, but had suf-

ficiently recovered from his wounds to reach the great bluff, only to die there from fatigue and starvation.

The deserters are disgraced, but their names are mercifully sheltered by oblivion. Hiram Scott's remains rest at peace near the foot of the great bluff, which is by tacit agreement named for him, and thenceforward becomes a monument to his memory.

The National Park Service plans to erect a memorial to Hiram Scott on the summit of Scotts Bluff, near the Summit Road parking area. A bronze plaque has been donated by the Katahdin Chapter, D.A.R.