Thomas (Broken Hand) Fitzpatrick

(1799 – 7 Feb 1854)

Fitzpatrick. On the 7th instant, after a brief illness, Maj. Thomas Fitzpatrick, U.S. Agent for the Indians on the Upper Platte and Arkansas. His friends and acquaintances are invited to attend his funeral from Brown's Hotel this morning at 10 o'clock.

The Evening Star, February 8, 1854

Death of An Aged Indian Agent

The Intelligencer of this morning has the following:

"The veteran and venerable Thomas Fitzpatrick, Indian Agent for the Upper Arkansas, Platte Indians, who has been some weeks in Washington on business connected with his agency, died yesterday morning at Brown's hotel of pneumonia. We presume his age must have been approaching seventy years. Mr. Fitzpatrick was a valued servant of the Indian Department and possessed more influence with the wild denizens of the great plains than perhaps any other white man."

The National Intelligencer, February 15, 1854

Major Tomas Fitzpatrick

The late Major Thomas Fitzpatrick, whose death was announced a few days since, had been for many years in the employment of the Government as Indian agent in the remote West, and one of the most active, faithful, and competent persons engaged in that arduous service. He went first to the Rocky Mountains in 1823, attached to the expedition of Gen. Ashley, and ever since that time has been occupied in the Indian country, either as trader, explorer, or agent. In 1843, on account of his knowledge of the West and acquaintance and influence with the Indian tribes, he was engaged by Mr. Fremont to accompany him in the capacity of guide in his second great expedition. This long and perilous exploration extended from the frontiers of Missouri, by way of the Great Salt Lakes, to the Great Forks of the Columbia, and hence to Fort Vancouver, connecting with the surveys of the sea expedition under Capt. Wilkes; thence, by the Klamath Lake, in Oregon, and skirting the eastern side of the Sierra Nevada, or great Californian Snowy Mountains, down to latitude 38*, solving the problem of a vast interior basin, unconnected by water with either ocean; thence across the mountains to Sutter's Fort, in the valley of the Sacramento; thence up the valley of San Joaquin and the Tulares, turning the "point" of the Sierra, to the head of the Mohave River; thence, skirting the southern rim of the Great Basin and the southern shores of the Great Salt Lake, back to Saint Louis. Mr. Fitzpatrick continued with the expedition through the whole route. In the course of so long a travel it frequently became necessary to divide the party, sometimes for the purpose of pursuing different routes, sometimes for an advance to push forward and reconnoiter. In such cases the command of that portion from which the leader of the expedition was separated was always assigned to Fitzpatrick. Thus he led a portion of the party in charge of the heavier baggage and provisions from a point above the mouth of the Kansas to St. Vrain's Fort, and thence to the Great Salt Lake; justifying then, as on still more trying occasions, the confidence in his high qualities which led to his selection for the purpose. The junctions of the two divisions at these points respectively are thus noticed, under the proper dates, in the sententious memoir of Mr. Fremont:

"Reaching St. Vrain's Fort on the morning of the 23d, (July, 1843,) we found Mr. Fitzpatrick and his party in good order and excellent health, and my true and reliable friend Kit Carson, who had brought

with him ten good mules, with the necessary pack-saddles. Mr. Fitzpatrick, who had often endured every extremity of want during the course of his mountain life, and knew well the value of provisions in this country, had watched over our stock with jealous vigilance, and there was an abundance of flour, rice, sugar, and coffee in the camp, and again we fared luxuriously. Mr. Fitzpatrick had been here a week, during which time his men had been occupied in refitting the camp."

At Salt Lake the other branch of the party had arrived first and his coming was looked for with much anxiety. Says Mr. Fremont's report, under date of September 13, 1843:

"The people to-day were rather low-spirited, hunger making them very quiet and peaceable. It was time for the men with an expected supply of provisions to be in the neighborhood, and the gun was fired at evening to give them notice of our locality, but met with no response."

The next day, however, after an early encampment--

"Tabeau galloped into camp with the news that Mr. Fitzpatrick was encamped close by us with a good supply of provisions--flour, rice, dried meat, and even a little butter. Excitement to-night made us all wakeful; and, after a breakfast before sunrise the next morning, we were again on the road."

It was not always, however, with visions of plenty that Fitzpatrick's command was looked for by those travel-worn, and often nearly famished pioneers in the desolate regions which they penetrated. In the terrible passage of the Snowy Mountains, in mid-winter, when the whole party so nearly perished of cold and hunger, Fitzpatrick was one of the most active, useful, and intrepid of the party; at the commencement of the passage aiding Mr. Fremont in the advance reconnaissance's, and afterwards entrusted with the bringing up the rear and passing the remaining horses and mules of the expedition.

The ascent of the out-spurs of the mountains commenced on the 25th of January, 1844. On the night of the 26th the advance party, with Fremont and Fitzpatrick, encamped at an elevation above the sea 6,310 feet.

"January 27--Leaving the camp (says Fremont) to follow slowly, with directions to Carson to encamp at the place agreed on, Mr. Fitzpatrick and myself continued the reconnaissance's. . . . On either side rose the mountains, forming on the left a rugged nucleus, wholly covered with deep snow, presenting a glittering and icy surface. . . . . Towards the summit of the peak the fields of snow were four or five feet deep on the northern side. The winter day is short in the mountains, the sun having but a short space of sky to travel over in the visible part above our horizon; and the moment his rays are gone the air is keenly cold. The interest of our work had detained us long, and it was after nightfall when we reached the camp."

The next day the party went through the pass with much difficulty, and often compelled to make large circuits, and ascend the highest and most exposed ridges, in order to avoid snow, which in other places was banked up to a great depth. On the 29th the way became so full of difficulties that they were compelled to leave their only piece of ordnance--a mountain howitzer which had made the whole journey with them to that point, but which it was found impossible to drag further up the rugged and snow-covered acclivities. The following day the advance division met a small party of Indians.

"We explained to them (says the report) that we were endeavoring to find a passage across the mountains, and told them that we wished them to bring us a guide, to whom we would give presents of scarlet cloth and other articles which we showed to them. They looked at the reward we offered, and conferred with each other, but pointed to the snow on the mountain, and drew their hand across their necks, and raised them above their heads, to show the depth; and signified that it was impossible for us to get through."

The melancholy prospect did not, however, prevent the intrepid expedition from turning their faces determinably westward, and on the 31st they came full in view of the great central ridge which they were to cross, the "lower parts steep, and dark with pines, while above it was hidden in clouds of snow." At the camp that evening a council was held again with the Indians, who made like representations of the impossibility of the party scaling the snowy heights before them; but finally consented to furnish a

young man for a guide who had once been to the other side. The provisions were very low--neither tallow nor grease of any kind nor salt remaining. In this condition the party silently and thoughtfully set their faces toward the main chain in the beginning of February. The snow deepened rapidly, and it soon became necessary to break a road. For this purpose a party of ten was formed mounted on the strongest horses; each man in succession opening the road on foot or on horseback until himself and his horse became fatigued, when he stepped aside; and, the remaining number passing ahead, he took his station in the rear. In this laborious manner they made sixteen miles on the 2d of February and only seven miles on the 3d. On the 4th they were obliged to abandon the hollows altogether, and work along the steep mountain side, where the snow was covered with an icy crust. In the afternoon, endeavoring to break a road through a pass which the guide indicated, their best horses gave out. Only a few of the strongest had been able to draw themselves up the hill without their packs; and all the line of the road from the camp of the previous night was strewed with camp stores and equipage and horses foundering in the snow. That night they camped without shelter, and a strong wind springing up at sundown made it too intensely cold to permit sleep. The following morning their Indian guide deserted, after receiving a further donation of a blanket from their scanty store. It was then determined by Mr. Fremont to explore the country ahead; and on the morning of the 6th he set out, accompanied with Fitzpatrick and a small reconnoitering party on snow shoes. They marched in single-file, trampling the snow as heavily as they could, and at a distance of ten miles reached the top of one of the peaks, whence they could see the coast range, which was immediately recognized by Carson, and they knew that between them and that range lay the valley which was the paradise of repose and plenty which they had in view. But they were at a great height above the valley, and between it and the plains stretched "miles of snowy fields and broken ridges of pine-covered mountains." Late in the day they turned toward the camp. One of the men became fatigued and his feet began to freeze. Fitzpatrick remained with him till his clothes could be dried and he was in a condition to go on. After a toilsome march of twenty miles the party straggled into camp one after another at nightfall. Here it was determined to draw the baggage over the trail which had thus been made in sleighs, which the men during the day had been making; and it was thought that after the men and sleighs had passed the path would be hard enough to bear the animals. With one party drawing sleighs Fremont advanced that night four miles along the trail, Fitzpatrick remaining behind to form an intermediate station between the advance camp and the animals, which were still in the rear. The night was bitter cold, and provisions were getting "fearfully scant." The advance made but, a mile and a half that day; and a snow-storm threatening, which would destroy the road made through so much population, the men were sent back to Fitzpatrick, with directions to bring on the animals in the morning. February 9 the snow kept them in camp, and four sleighs came up with the bedding of the men. They suffered much from want of salt, and all were getting weak from insufficient food. February 10 and 11 they made a few miles, but high wind continued, with drifts of snow, and the trail had become nearly invisible; and in the evening a message was received from Fitzpatrick of the failure of the attempt to get the horses over the snow. The half-hidden trail had proved too weak to support them, and they had broken through, and were plunging about or lying half-buried in the snow. Here, then, was the point where the last degree of resolution and courage were necessary to save the desperate fortunes of the party. The instructions sent back to Fitzpatrick were to return the horses to their last pasture grounds, and then, with all the force of the party, after having made shovels and mauls, to open and beat a road through the snow, strengthening it with the boughs of the pines. Fremont's journal continues:

"February 12--We made mauls, and worked hard at our end of the road all the day. We worked down the face of the hill to meet the people at the other end. Towards sundown it began to grow cold, and we shouldered our mauls and trudged back to camp."

In this manner the parties worked at either end till a solid road was made for the animals to pass to the summit. The subsistence of the party during these days consisted of a small portion of dried peas, with mule and horse meat, obtained by killing those animals when too much exhausted and famished to travel further.

The descent and passage through the deep fields of snow and long intervening space of rough mountains promised to be scarcely less laborious and hazardous than the ascent. They labored down the mountain in much the same manner as they had ascended, and on the 25th of February, believing that the difficulties of the way were passed, Fremont, with a party of eight, started ahead to proceed as rapidly as possible to Sutter's land returning to his famishing companions with a supply of provisions and fresh animals; Fitzpatrick remaining with the body of the party to follow slowly. This part of the journey proved more difficult than was expected, and it was not till the evening of the 6th of March that the little band found themselves in the hospitable precincts of Capt. Sutter. Here they were received with the frank and cordial reception that so many emigrant parties have since received at the hands of that gentleman, and they enjoyed a night of rest, enjoyment, and refreshment. But the party left in the mountains with Fitzpatrick were to be attended to; and the next morning, supplied with fresh horses and provisions, they hurried off to meet them. Fremont relates their encounter:

"On the second day we met, a few miles below the Rio de los Americanos; and a more forlorn and pitiable-looking sight than they presented cannot well be imagined. They were all on foot; each man weak and emaciated, leading a horse as weak and emaciated as themselves. They had experienced great difficulties in descending the mountains, made slippery by rains and descending snows, and many horses fell over precipices and were killed, and with some of them were lost the packs they carried. Among them was a mule with the plants we had gathered since leaving Fort Hall, along a line of two thousand miles travel. Out of sixty-seven horses and mules with which we commenced crossing the Sierra, only thirty-three reached the valley of the Sacramento, and they only in a condition to be led along. Mr. Fitzpatrick and his party, travelling more slowly, had been able to make some exertion at hunting, and had killed a few deer. This scanty supply was a great relief to them; for several of them had been made sick by the strange and unwholesome food which the preservations of life compelled them to use. We stopped and encamped as soon as we met; and a repast of good beef, excellent bread, and delicious salmon which I had brought along were their first relief from the sufferings of the Sierra, and their first introduction to the luxuries of the Sacramento.

After the return of Fitzpatrick from his expedition, he received the appointment of Indian Agent in the far West from President Polk, and continued in the same employment, to the entire satisfaction of the Government, through each succeeding Administration till the time of his sudden death. A letter written to a friend a few days before his decease concludes with this sentence: "Ever since I had the honor of belonging to the Indian Department I have done my utmost endeavor to serve it faithfully and honestly." He was known throughout the Indian country by the name of the "Broken Hand," from the circumstance of one of his hands having been wounded by the explosion of a powder flask.

Fitzpatrick was born in the county of Careen, Ireland. He came to the United States in 1818, and since 1823 has been known and famed as a "Rocky Mountain man." He died at the age of fifty-six. His memory is worthy of that respect and honor which belongs to one who has fulfilled all the duties to which he was called with an intelligent mind, and a courageous, intrepid, and loyal spirit.

"Fleet foot on the corral,
Sage head in the cumber,
Red hand in the foray,

How sound is thy slumber!"

Website: Old West Gravesites

Thomas Fitzpatick
(1799 - February 7, 1854)

Born in Ireland in 1799, Fitzpatrick became a sailor in 1816, arrived in the United States, jumped ship and headed to St. Louis, Missouri. Here he answered an advertisement for adventurous young men to explore the Missouri River. Fitzpatrick's career as a mountain man began.

On this trapping expedition, Thomas noticed a movement among the rocks. His gunfire alerted the others in the party of an impending attack. Although four trappers were killed, the result could have been much worse. Another Blackfoot attack was averted when Fitzpatrick gathered 10 fur trappers and headed to an Indian encampment. The volleys from the 11 men seemed like an army. The Indians scattered and broke camp.

On his way to the Pierre's Hole Rendezvous with packhorses in tow, Fitzpatrick was ambushed by 30 Gros Ventres. Leaving the packhorses behind, Thomas forced his horse up a steep slope. The resulting falling rocks falling rocks slowed the pursuit of his attackers. When his horse gave out, Thomas found refuge in a hole, covered it with brush. This disguise foiled the pursuit. Without horses, Fitzpatrick walked to Pierre's Hole living only on roots and berries. The hardship of the journey turned his hair white.