

James Beckwourth: Frontiersman and scout

by Martha Anderson

As has been said previously the Atkinson-O'Fallon Treaty was a lively, exciting occasion bringing together two famous scouts, Ed Rose and James Beckwourth, but also Yankton Sioux, Arikaras, and Crows. After the signing of the Treaty with the Arikaras, a problem still remained with the Crows. They showed up with a half breed woman and child in tow. These two persons acquired from their enemies the Blackfeet, had been taken captive somewhere on the Columbia River. They now became a focal point in the Treaty settlement. The Crows insisted that custom allowed the prisoners to remain with them. But General Atkinson, backed up by General O'Fallon and his Militia, insisted otherwise. At this time General Ashley arrived with his party of trappers. It was a tense, dramatic situation as the Army stood firm on its demand and the Crow Chief Long Hair assured the army that the Crows could and would whip it if it made one move. To prove their point, while the discussions were going on the Indians managed to spike Atkinson's guns with wooden spikes and stuff the muzzles with grass.

A bloody battle was averted only when the Crows learned through Rose, who acted as interpreter, that the white was related to the Red-Haired Chief, meaning Clark of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, who was respected by all Indians.

This encounter led Beckwourth to believe that as a member of General Ashley's expedition he was well on the way to becoming a first rate frontiersman. Life in the mountains and on the open plains was in his blood. There was nothing in his background that forced him to accept the hardships and misery he'd encounter following these trappers to the far West. Born in 1798 at Fredericksburg, Virginia he was the third child of thirteen born to the union of a French father and a mulatto mother. His father had been an officer in the Revolutionary War and was a man of considerable means. When Beckwourth was about seven years of age his father purchased a section of land near St. Louis moving the family and twenty-two Negroes, whom he employed or owned, to the plantation 12 miles below St. Charles between the forks of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. The place became known as Beckwourth's Settlement.

Young Beckwourth attended school until 1812 when he was apprenticed to a blacksmith. And the blacksmith proved to be the turning point in his life. It was not because Beckwourth wasn't a good worker or that his work was not good. Like all young men he began "keeping company" and that kept him out late at night. This angered the blacksmith and led to a fight, after which Beckwourth told his father he would never work for the man again and that he wanted to strike out on his own. Although this saddened his father he provided Beckwourth with a good horse, saddle, bridle and five hundred dollars. James P. Beckwourth left home on the journey that would make him a legend in Western History.

He joined General William Ashley's Rocky Mountain Fur Company Expedition as a black-

smith and hunter. For Beckwourth it marked the beginning of a great adventure with a man with whom he would form a most enduring friendship, although once it became strained to the point Beckwourth considered leaving the expedition. However, better judgement overruled a hot head. Together they encountered all sorts of danger and hardships crossing the plains. Three times Beckwourth saved General Ashley's life and Ashley never forgot it.

The Expedition had a successful season trapping throughout the Cache Valley of Utah, remaining for awhile on good terms with their old enemy the Blackfeet. But treaties meant little to them. They knew what the white man was doing and missed no opportunity to steal his horses, scalp him if possible, or steal his ammunition and supplies.

One afternoon the Expedition spotted a party of about five hundred Indians coming toward them across the open prairie. The Indians called out that they were Flatheads. Beckwourth and two others rode ahead to meet them knowing that the Flatheads were friendly. But on approaching closer they saw they were Blackfeet. A bloody battle was fought and the trappers won. But never again would they trust a Blackfeet. Friendship was out of the question.

However, through the efforts of the Flatheads a truce of sorts was enacted with the Blackfeet which proved fruitful for the trappers. A trading post was established and they acquired a number of pelts. Relations improved to the extent that Beckwourth was given the daughter of the chief as a wife. The union did not work out too well. They had an altercation over Indian rites and Beckwourth knocked her in the head. The chief sided with Beckwourth so there was no ill feeling. He gave him another daughter who, he claimed, would mind Beckwourth better. But Beckwourth had no intention of remaining with the tribe. One day he explained to the chief that he must return to the main trading post.

The old Indian gave him a powerful escort composed of both Flathead and Blackfeet warriors. At the main trading post Beckwourth gave the Indians presents and sent back dress goods to his Indian wives, whom he never intended to see again, as he was in love with his childhood sweetheart, Eliza. He still hoped to return to St. Louis someday with enough money for them to live comfortably, but that was a long ways off.

On leaving the trading post this time, the Expedition divided into small parties. Beckwourth's group included the famous old scout Jim Bridger and William Sublett who had purchased General Ashley's interests in the Company. Their destination was the Snake River country.

On the Powder River, near Yellowstone, the party ran into several hundred Crow and a white man named Greenwood, who had an Indian wife. The Indians carried all the trappers to their camp. Realizing his white brothers were in serious trouble Greenwood concocted a fanciful tale. He told the Indians that Beckwourth was a lost child of the Crows taken in battle by the

Cheyennes and sold to whites, who had taken and raised him as their own. Many children had been lost in this battle with the Cheyennes and it remained a great sorrow among the Crows. So now all the women who had lost children came to examine Beckwourth, including even the Chief's wife as she too had lost her son. Finally, she spoke up saying, "If he is my son he will have a mole on his left eyelid." For Beckwourth this was the acid test. But, sure enough, when Beckwourth's eyelid was examined there was the mole. The Crows were overjoyed as Beckwourth was, with relief.

The mole proved the best thing that ever happened to Beckwourth. He was brought into the tribe, initiated in all the secret rites, and given a Crow wife. He was now the son of a chief. And among them he became a renowned war chief whose name, the Antelope, brought trembling even to the Blackfeet. The years passed and when the old Chief died Beckwourth became Chief of the Crows, leading them in many victorious battles. But he grew weary of all the fighting. To him it seemed that Indians spent all their time stealing each others horses or fighting one another. It was a life of violence and he longed for the time when he could return to Eliza.

Finally the urge to see his true family grew so strong that he called his people together and told them he must make the trip. Promising to return when the cherries grew ripe. The main trading post issued him a draft to be cashed in St. Louis for seven thousand eight hundred dollars for the pelts he had accumulated, and he left for St. Louis.

His sisters, believing him dead, were overjoyed at his return. Where was Eliza? She had married just one month before his return also believing him dead. His father had returned to Virginia and died there. His brothers were scattered across the country. All this saddened Beckwourth. Nothing was the same. His life had been so active the time had passed swiftly. Now he would go back West as soon as he visited his old friend General Ashley.

But fate drew him to another part of the country, Florida. Here he joined General Gaines in a skirmish against the Seminoles.

He also acted as scout on numerous occasions. After they were beaten he left the country. It was not to his liking — especially the mosquitoes.

Once again in St. Louis he joined William Sublett. This time it would not be as a trapper but as a post trader. He had seen enormous sums reaped from barter with the Indians. A butcher knife could buy a buffalo robe and a few beads, musquash fur. And thousands of dollars were being made in selling liquor. Sublett placed him in charge of the post because he was losing money and it was urgent that he straighten affairs elsewhere strengthen his resources.

This post was in Cheyenne country whose people Beckwourth had fought many times but to him it made little difference. In fact it was this courage which attracted the Cheyennes to his post as all

remembered him. They became friends and soon Beckwourth cornered all the Cheyenne trade, which was considerable.

A string of posts, was set up, adding one where most traders dared not go. It was run by Chief Mo-he-ne-to and known as the Outlaws Camp. Here were congregated all the outlaws from all tribes of the West. Needless to say they had many stolen horses, buffalo robes and pelts to trade. Beckwourth moved in and did a thriving business. He made enough for Sublett to recover his financial losses and return to St. Louis for good.

On his own now, Beckwourth decided to do some trading in New Mexico, which proved a poor choice as at this time the area was hostile to outsiders — and especially to black outsiders.

Beckwourth turned his eyes toward California. It was 1844 and the country was seething with unrest. He joined General Kearney's forces at Santa Fe carrying dispatches to Fort Leavenworth, a distance of nine hundred and thirteen miles one way. Always he travelled alone as he felt white soldiers would attract hostile Indians. He took an active part in the battle for Los Angeles and when it was won moved onto prospect on the Pitt River in American Valley. It was during this stretch of his career that he discovered the low pass in the Sierra Madres known to this day as Beckwourth's Pass.

In the valley near the pass he established a hotel and store the first commercial buildings ever erected in the area. Later, in the Spring of 1853 Beckwourth moved to his ranch in Beckwourth Valley which comprised 1100 acres of choice hay land. He also had a fine herd of cattle. Many emigrant trains stopped at his hotel, broke, hungry and hired from the long journey. Having journeyed all over the country himself Beckwourth turned no one away. Soon he was giving away more than he'd ever take in. So he sold out and went to Kansas City where he met an old friend, Louis Valquez, who was going to Denver to open a trading store.

Beckwourth joined him and on arriving in Denver went to work for him as a storekeeper. He saved enough money to buy several lots in north Denver. The trading store became a popular trading post for Indians and the business thrived.

Despite the fact that Beckwourth was now around sixty-two years of age he married Elizabeth Ledbetter, daughter of Denver's first laundress. Together they worked in the store

and also managed the Company's farm two and a half miles south of Denver. Many influential people came to their lovely home. Among them were William Byers, owner of the Rocky Mountain News and General William Larimer. Later Beckwourth bought a 160 acre place of his own near Denver. In general, he prospered living a quiet life with his wife and two children.

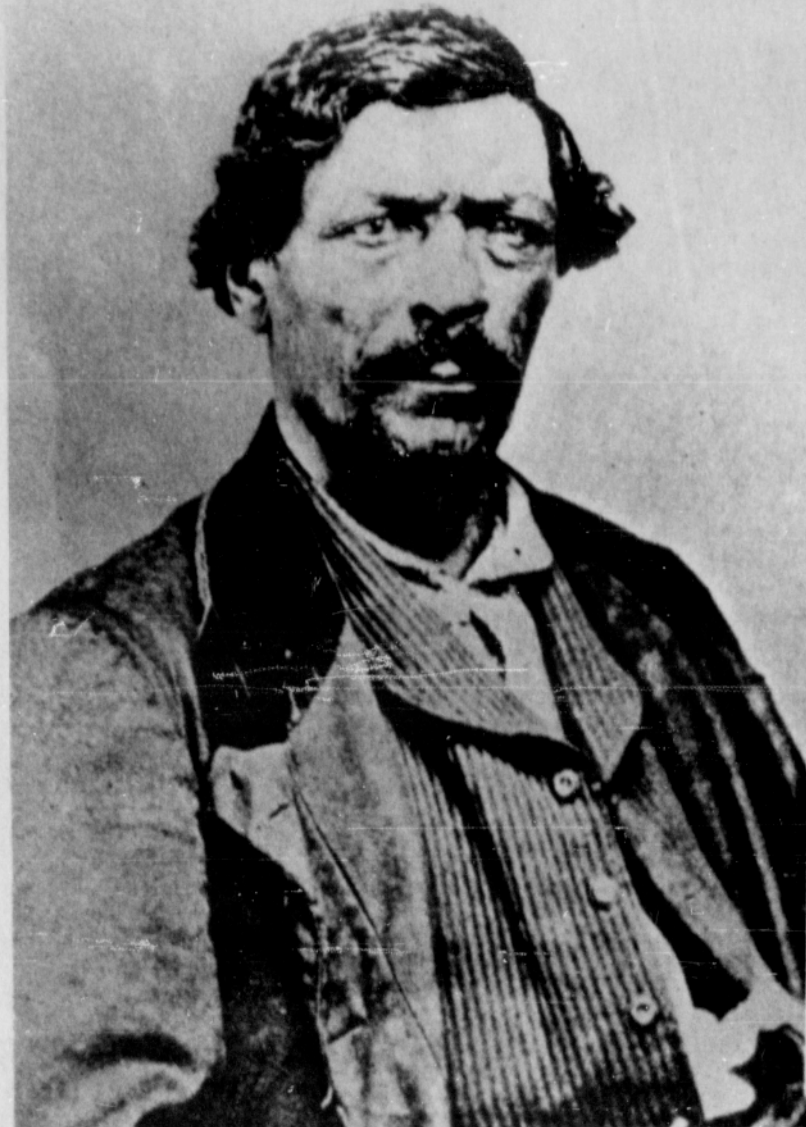
Then the Civil War brought out. Beckwourth begged for a commission in the Second Colorado Regiment, but they wouldn't accept him. This was ironic since Generals had previously looked him up to use when fighting Indians. But this time he would be with a white regiment and to give him a commission was unthinkable. Turned down, Beckwourth served in 1862 as army guide for E.L. Berthoud and for the Colorado Second Infantry.

Faily trouble erupted for Beckwourth, causing his parting from Elizabeth. Beckwourth took an Indian girl, "Sue" as his common-law wife and they moved from the ranch to a tent on Monument Creek about two miles south of present Monument, Colorado.

At this time Indian tribes of the area were causing a great deal of trouble in the area for whites. The Army was anxious to establish Fort C.F. Smith as a good base of operations on Crow land. Some tentative negotiations had passed back and forth, but now Colonel Carrington deemed it urgent to establish firm communications with the Crows.

When the Crows learned Beckwourth was in the area, they asked that he be sent as an intermediary. Escorted by only one man, James W. Thompson, of Company D, 27th Infantry, James Beckwourth set out for the Crow village on Pryor's Creek. It was late September with plenty of deep snow already in the Rockies. Beckwourth became so ill he was unable to travel. Beckwourth urged Thompson to provide him with fuel and water and go on alone to the Indian village. So the Indian name Etsedscarsha, which means antelope. Thompson reached the village and induced some Indians to return with them. When they arrived they found Beckwourth dead.

There was great sorrow among the Crow Nation. Lovingly they wrapped their Antelope in a buffalo robe, hoisting him on a platform high in the branches of a tree. Now, this truly great scout and Chief was a part of winter and summer. Only the Great Spirit could waken him from his peace.



JAMES BECKWOURTH



Sue, last wife of James Beckwourth

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