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Letter of fur traders Jedediah S. Smith, David E. Jackson, and Wm. L. Sublette – 1830.

Gives an account of the taking of the first wagons to the Rocky Mountains and of the Hudson's Bay Company post, Fort Vancouver, and its operations in the Oregon Country. An argument for the termination of the convention of 1818.

The letter of Smith, Jackson, and Sublette forms part of Senate Executive Documents 39, 21st Congress, 2d session, pp. 21-23. The whole document is taken up with a consideration of "the state of the British establishments in the valley of the Columbia, and the state of the fur trade, as carried on by the citizens of the United States and the Hudson's Bay Company," as shown in the communications of Gen. W. H. Ashley, Joshua Pilcher, J. D. Smith, David B. Jackson,

and W. L. Sublette, and William Clark and Lewis Cass.

St. Louis, October 29, 1830.

SiE : The business commenced by General Ashley some years ago, of taking furs from the United States territory beyond the Rocky Mountains has since been continued by Jedediah S. Smith, David E. Jackson, and William L. Sublette, under the firm of Smith, Jackson, and Sublette. They commenced business in 1826, and have since continued it, and have made observations and gained information which they think it important to communicate to the government. The number of men they have employed has usually been from eighty to one hundred and eighty; and with these, divided into parties, they have traversed every part of the country west of the Rocky Mountains, from the peninsula of California to the mouth of the Columbia River. Pack horses, or rather mules, were at first used, but in the beginning of the present year, it was determined to try wagons, and in the month of April last, on the 10th day of the month, a caravan of ten wagons, drawn by five mules each, and two dearborns, drawn by one mule each, set out from St. Louis. We have eighty-one men in company, all mounted on mules, and these were exclusive of a party left in the mountains. Our route from St. Louis was nearly due west to the western limits of the state and thence along the Santa Fe trail about forty miles, from which the course was some degrees north of west, across the waters of the Kansas, and up the Great Platte River, to the Rocky Mountains, and to the head of Wind River, where it issues from the mountains. This took us until the 16th of July, and was as far as we

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wished the wagons to go, as the furs to be brought in were to be collected at this place, which is, or was this year, the great rendezvous of the persons engaged in that business. Here the wagons could easily have crossed the Rocky Mountains, it being what is called the Southern [South] Pass, had it been desirable for them to do so, which it was not for the reason stated. For our support, at leaving the Missouri settlements, until we should get into the buffalo country, we drove twelve head of cattle, beside a milk cow. Eight of these only being required for use before we got to the buffaloes, the others went on to the head of Wind River. We began to fall in with the buffaloes on the Platte, about three hundred and fifty miles from the white settlements, and from that time lived on buffaloes, the quantity being infinitely beyond what we needed. On the fourth of August, the wagons being in the meantime loaded with furs which had been previously taken, we set out on the return to St. Louis. All the high points of the mountains then in view were white with snow, but the passes and valleys, and all the level country, were green with grass. Our route back was over the same ground nearly as in going out, and we arrived at St. Louis on the 10th of October, bringing back the ten wagons, the dearborns

being left behind : four of the the oxen and the milk cow were also brought back to the settlements in Missouri, as we did not need them for provision. Our men were all healthy during the whole time, we suffered nothing by the Indians, and had no accident but the death of one man, being buried under a bank of earth that fell in upon him, and another being crippled at the same time. Of tht mules, we lost but one by fatigue, and two horses stolen by the Kansas Indians ; the grass being, along the whole route going and coming, sufficient for the support of the horses and mules. The usual weight in the wagons was about one thousand eight hundred pounds. The usual progress of the wagons was from fifteen to twenty-five miles per day. The country being almost all open, level, and prairie, the chief obstructions were ravines and creeks, the banks of which required cutting down, and for this purpose a few pioneers were generally kept ahead of the caravan. This is the first time that wagons ever went to the Rocky Mountains, and the ease and safety with which it was done prove the facility of communicating overland with the Pacific Ocean. The route from the Southern Pass, where the wagons stopped, to the Great Falls of the Columbia, being easier and better than on this side of the mountains, with grass enough for horses and mules, but a scarcity of game for the support of men. One of the undersigned, to wit, Jedediah S. Smith, in his excursion west of the mountains, arrived at the post of the Hudson's Bay Company, called Fort Vancouver, near the mouth of Multnomah River. He arrived there in August, 1828, and left the 12th of March, 1829, and made observations which he deems it material to communicate to the government. Fort Vancouver is situated on the

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north side of the Columbia, five miles above the mouth of the Multnomah, in a handsome prairie, and on a second bank about three quarters of a mile from the river. This is the fort as it stood when he arrived there ; but a large one, three hundred feet square about three quarters of a mile lower down, and within two hundred yards of the river, was commenced the spring he came away. Twelve pounders were the heaviest cannon which he saw. The crop of 1828 was seven hundred bushels of wheat, the grain full and plump, and making good flour, fourteen acres of corn, the same number of acres in peas, eight acres of oats, four or five acres of barley, a fine garden, some small apple trees, and grape vines. The ensuing spring eighty bushels of seed wheat were sown. About two hundred head of cattle, fifty horses and breeding mares, three hundred head of hogs, fourteen goats, the usual domestic fowls. They have mechanics of various kinds, to wit, blacksmiths, gunsmiths, carpenters, coopers, tinner, and baker. A good saw mill on the bank of the river five miles above, a grist mill worked by hand, but intended to work by water. They had built two coasting vessels, one of which was then on a voyage to the Sandwich Islands. No English or white woman was at the fort, but a great number of

mixed blood Indian extraction, such as belong to the British fur trading establishments, who were treated as wives, and the families of children taken care of accordingly. So that everything seemed to combine to prove that this fort was to be a permanent establishment. At Fort Vancouver the goods for the Indian trade are imported from London, and enter the territories of the United States paying no duties, and from the same point the furs taken on the other side of the mountains are shipped. The annual quantity of these furs could not be exactly ascertained, but Mr. Smith was informed indirectly that they amounted to about thirty thousand beaver skins, besides otter skins and small furs. The beaver skins alone, at New York prices, would be worth above two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. To obtain these furs, both trapping and trading are resorted to. Various parties, provided with traps, spread over the country south of the Columbia to the neighborhood of the Mexican territory, and in 1824 and 1825 they crossed the Rocky Mountains and trapped on the waters of the Missouri River. They do not trap north of latitude 49 degrees, but confine that business to the territory of the United States. Thus this territory, being trapped by both parties, is nearly exhausted of beavers, and unless the British can be stopped, will soon be entirely exhausted, and no place left within the United States where beaver fur in any quantity can be obtained.

The inequality of the convention with Great Britain in 1818 is most glaring and apparent, and its continuance is a great and manifest injury to the United States. The privileges granted by it have enabled the British to take possession of the Columbia River, and spread over

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the country south of it ; while no Americans have ever gone, or can venture to go on the British side. The interest of the United States and her citizens engaged in the fur trade requires that the convention of 1818 should be terminated, and each nation confined to its own territories. By this commercial interest there are other considerations requiring the same result. These are, the influence which the British have already acquired over the Indians in that quarter, and the prospect of a British colony, and a military and naval station on the Columbia. Their influence over the Indians is now decisive. Of this the Americans have constant and striking proofs, in the preference which they give to the British in every particular.

In saying this, it is an act of justice to say, also, that the treatment received by Mr. Smith at Fort Vancouver was kind and hospitable ; that, personally, he owes thanks to Governor Simpson and the gentlemen of the Hudson's Bay Company, for the hospitable entertainment which he received from them, and for the efficient and successful aid which they gave him in recovering from the Umquah Indians a quan-

tity of fur and many horses, of which these Indians had robbed him in 1828.

As to the injury which must happen to the United States from the British getting the control of all the Indians beyond the mountains, building and repairing ships in the tide water region of the Columbia, and having a station there for their privateers and vessels of war, is too obvious to need a recapitulation. The object of this communication being to state facts to the Government, and to show the facility of crossing the continent to the Great Falls of the Columbia with wagons, the ease of supporting any number of men by driving cattle to supply them where there was no buffalo, and also to show the true nature of the British establishments on the Columbia, and the unequal operation of the convention of 1818.

These facts being communicated to the Government, they consider that they have complied with their duty, and rendered an acceptable service to the administration; and respectfully request you, sir, to lay it before President Jackson.

We have the honor to be sir, yours, respectfully,

JEDEDIAH S. Smith,
David E. Jackson,
W. L. Sublette.

To the Hon. John H. Eaton, Secretary of War.