

The Old Trappers' Trail Through Eastern Utah

by James H. Knipmeyer

BEGINNINGS

The fur trade era in what is now the American Southwest began soon after Mexico's independence from Spain in 1821. The resulting influx of American traders and adventurers into New Mexico that followed the pioneer trading trips of William Becknell opened up the region. Fur trading, and especially trapping of beaver, was a nearly dormant activity among the Spanish and Mexican population. During 1822 and 1823, however, bands of trappers, predominantly Americans and French-Canadians, thoroughly worked the entire basin of the Rio Grande River for pelts. By the next year, 1824, no less than eight parties spread to the northwest, crossed the Continental Divide, and descended into the various drainages of the great Colorado River of the West. This was the beginning of the era of the mountain man, which lasted until the mid-1840s.

In the spring of 1824, William Wolfskill, Ewing Young, and Isaac Slover traveled to the San Juan River in southwestern Colorado and spent until June trapping westwards along the river. It is possible that they followed the river as far as its canyons in southeastern Utah. The success of this venture produced a veritable onslaught of trapping parties. In the early fall two men named Hopper and Marlow, plus three Mexicans, went off westwards from the Gunnison heading for Green River. At the same time, Thomas L. Smith and a companion, Maurice LeDuc, continued on down the Gunnison, but then turned south to the San Juan River and Navajo country. It has been suggested that they may have

made their way south through what is now southeastern Utah.

Later that same fall three separate trapping parties under the leadership of John Rowland, William Huddart, and Antoine Robidoux all trapped on the waters of the Green River in what is now known as the Uinta Basin in northeastern Utah. Etienne Provost, Francois Leclerc, and their party traveled from Taos, New Mexico, northwest to the Green, and continued as far as the Great Salt Lake. They then wintered at the mouth of the White River where it joins the Green near present Ouray, Utah. A trapping party under William Becknell also visited the Green River area and wintered in the vicinity of either Mesa Verde or the Dolores River in southwestern Colorado before returning to Santa Fe, New Mexico, early in 1825.

OLD TRAPPER'S TRAIL

These 1824 expeditions opened up the entire Green River country of eastern Utah and effectively established what would become known as the Old Trappers' Trail. Like many trails it did not follow precisely one route, having several branches and derivations and ultimately leading to a number of destinations. The starting point could be said to be either of the Mexican towns of Santa Fe or Taos. From those points one route led trappers northwest past the village of Abiquiu, diagonally across what is now southwestern Colorado, and into eastern Utah south of the La Sal Mountains. A crossing of the Colorado River could be made at the present site of Moab, from whence the trail headed

north to the area of the Book Cliffs and Tavaputs Plateau.

Another route left the New Mexican settlements and followed the general course of the Rio Grande north into the San Luis Valley of Southern Colorado. Winding northwest across the Rockies, the trail eventually brought the trappers to the Colorado River in the vicinity of Grand Junction. The trail then turned westward to the Book Cliffs-Tavaputs Plateau region where it merged with the first route.

Here again there was a branching. One route pointed west and northwest, crossing the Green River near the present Utah of that name and approaching the trapping grounds of the Utah Lake area from the southeast. The other branch headed north through the Book Cliffs and across the Tavaputs Plateau to the Green River in the vicinity of Ouray. Once more there was a choice: north to the trapping grounds of the Uinta Mountains and the upper reaches of the Green in Wyoming, or westward to the Utah Lake-Great Salt Lake region.

Students of the Spanish period in the Southwest, especially the latter half of the 1700s, will immediately recognize the above-described routes as portions of what mistakenly came to be called the Old Spanish Trail. Like nearly all of the great well-known western trails, the Old Trappers' Trail was not a new trail unto itself. The various routes were at one time probably game trails left by migrating animals, which in turn were followed by Indians and, ultimately, Europeans and Americans, including Spanish, Mexican,

French or Anglo. Spanish explorers and traders had traveled these routes from at least 1750 up until just before Mexican independence in 1821. The eastern and northern Utah regions were searched for precious metals and as areas in which to trade with the resident Indian population. But trapping, as was said earlier, never ranked high on the list of Spanish endeavors.

1825 - 1831

Following 1824 nearly a year-by-year listing can be made of American trappers and traders traveling through eastern Utah by way of the Old Trappers' Trail. In the summer of 1825 Thomas Smith, with nine others, again returned to the San Juan River, and trapped the eastern tributaries of the Grand as well. (Before 1921 "Grand" was the name of the present-day Colorado River until the confluence with the Green in the canyonlands of southeastern Utah.) Also, sometime in the fall Ceran St. Vrain led a party over the trappers' trail to the area of Utah Lake.

The winter of the following year, 1826, found two separate groups of trappers heading northwest from New Mexico. One, led by Sylvestre S. Pratte, headed toward "Ute country," which could have been present western Colorado or eastern Utah. Included in the Pratte party was Louis Ambroise and, interestingly, a man named Duchaine. It has been theorized that this latter individual may have been the source of the name for the Duchesne River, a western tributary of the Green. The other party was under the leadership of Francois Robidoux. Francois was a brother of Antoine (who made one of the trips in 1824). His group trapped in the direction of the Green. The next spring, in March of 1827, Francois Robidoux again led a group back to the Ute region to retrieve some furs cached the previous winter.

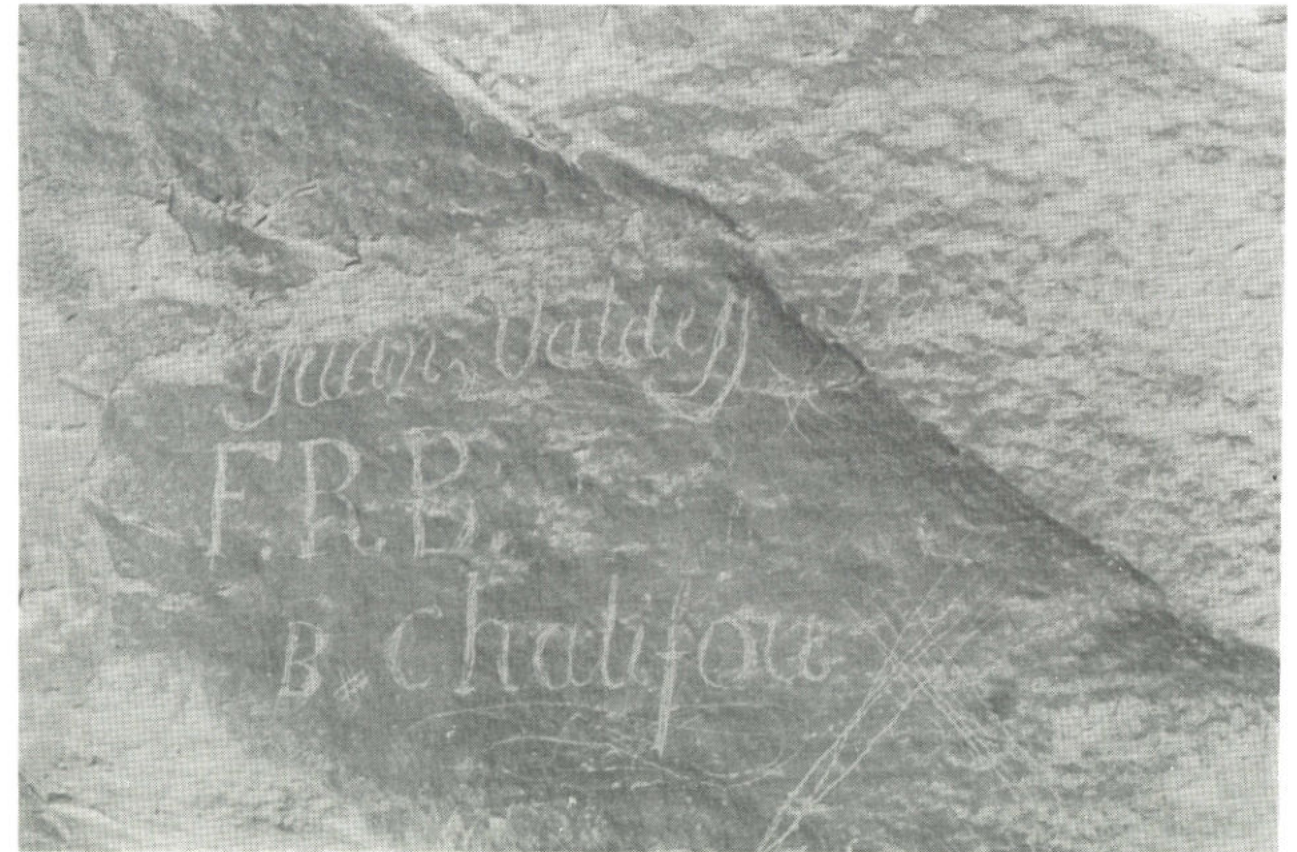
Most of these trapping expeditions took place in the fall or winter. In the parlance of the mountain men these were the seasons for "prime" beaver, when the animals had grown thicker fur in response to the colder temperatures. The spring

and summer pelts were, in comparison, much thinner and less luxuriant.

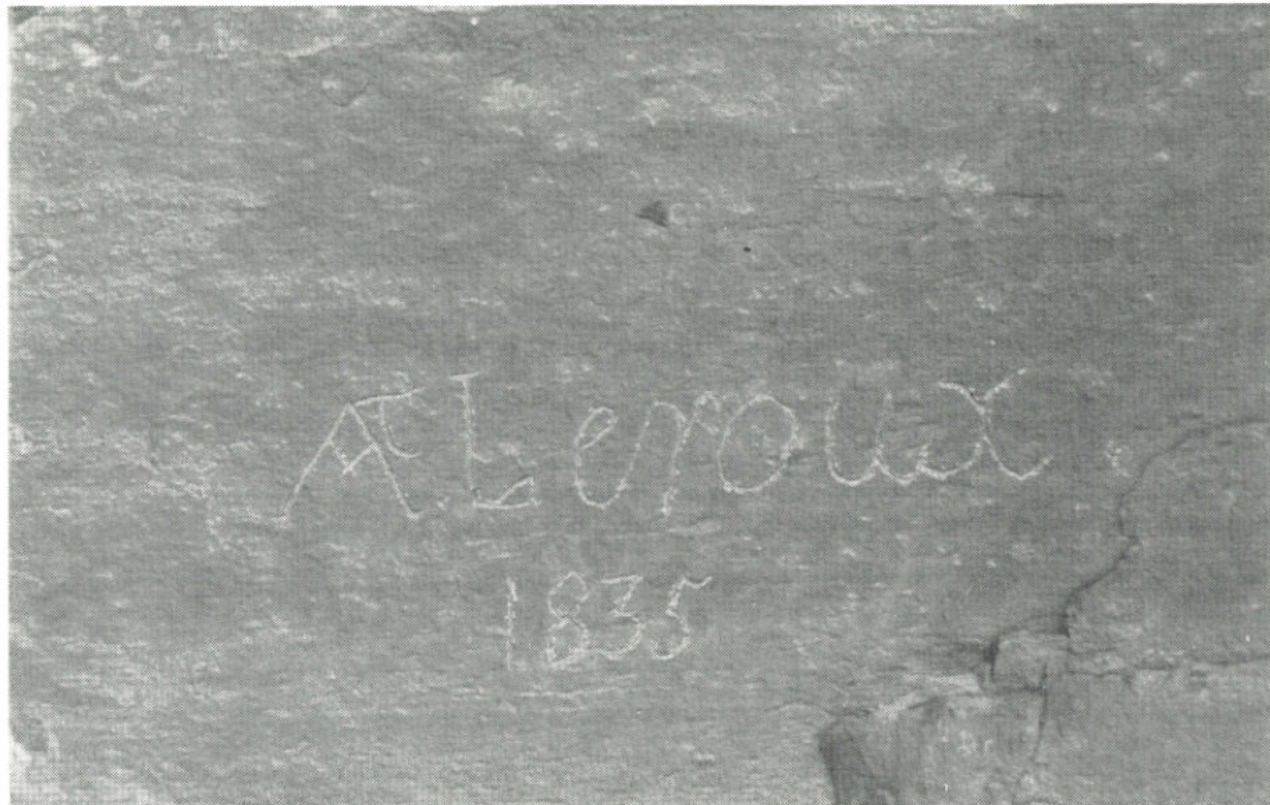
According to Ute Indian oral traditions in northeastern Utah, around 1828 four men, William and James Redd, August Archambeau, and Denis Julien (who had been a member of Francois Robidoux's group the previous year) came into the area of the Uinta River just southeast of present Whiterocks. There they established a small trading post. Some historians claim this to be the first permanent, year-round Anglo habitation in the State of Utah.

In the fall of 1829 Thomas Smith, along with George C. Yount, journeyed northwest with an expedition to the Grand, Green, and White rivers. After trapping that region they wintered at Bear Lake on the present Utah-Idaho line.

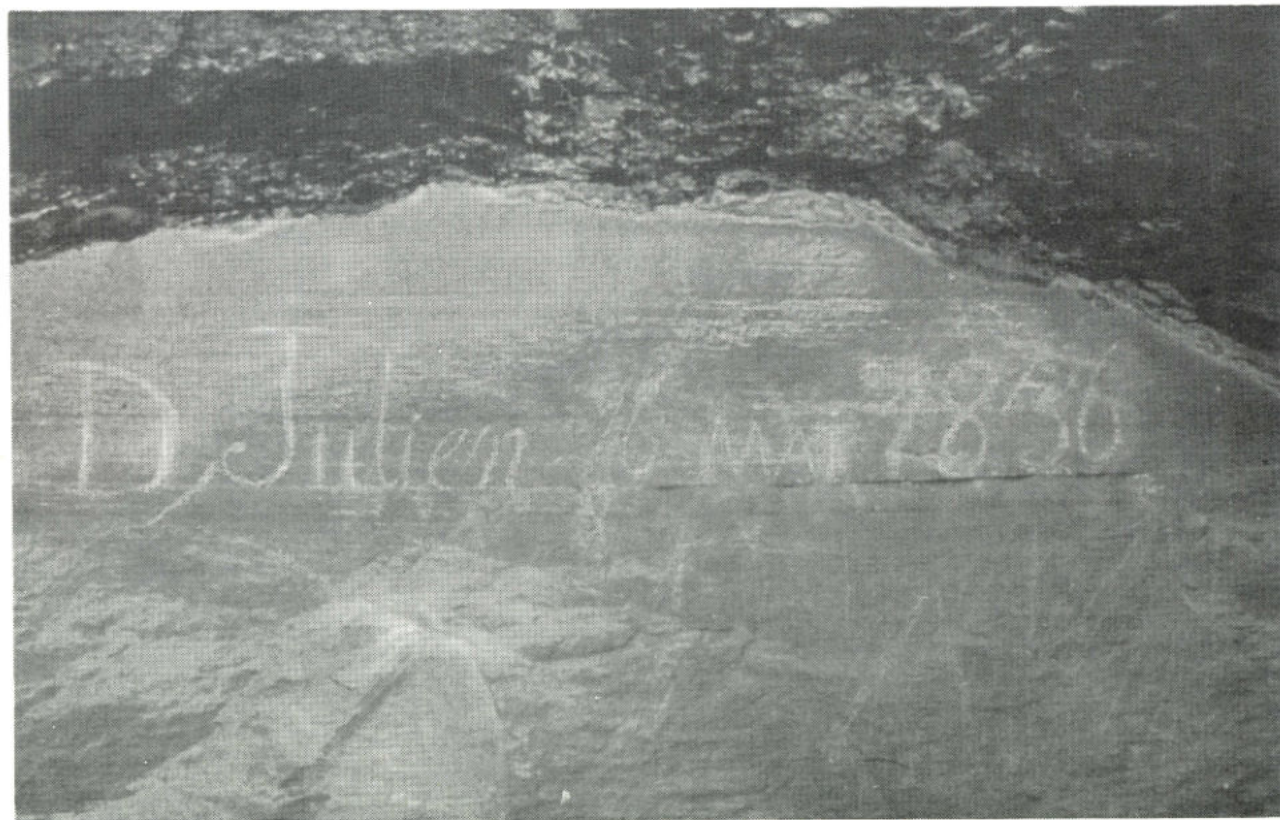
The winter of 1830-31 found a company of men under William Wolfskill and the aforementioned George Yount on the way to California. Following that part



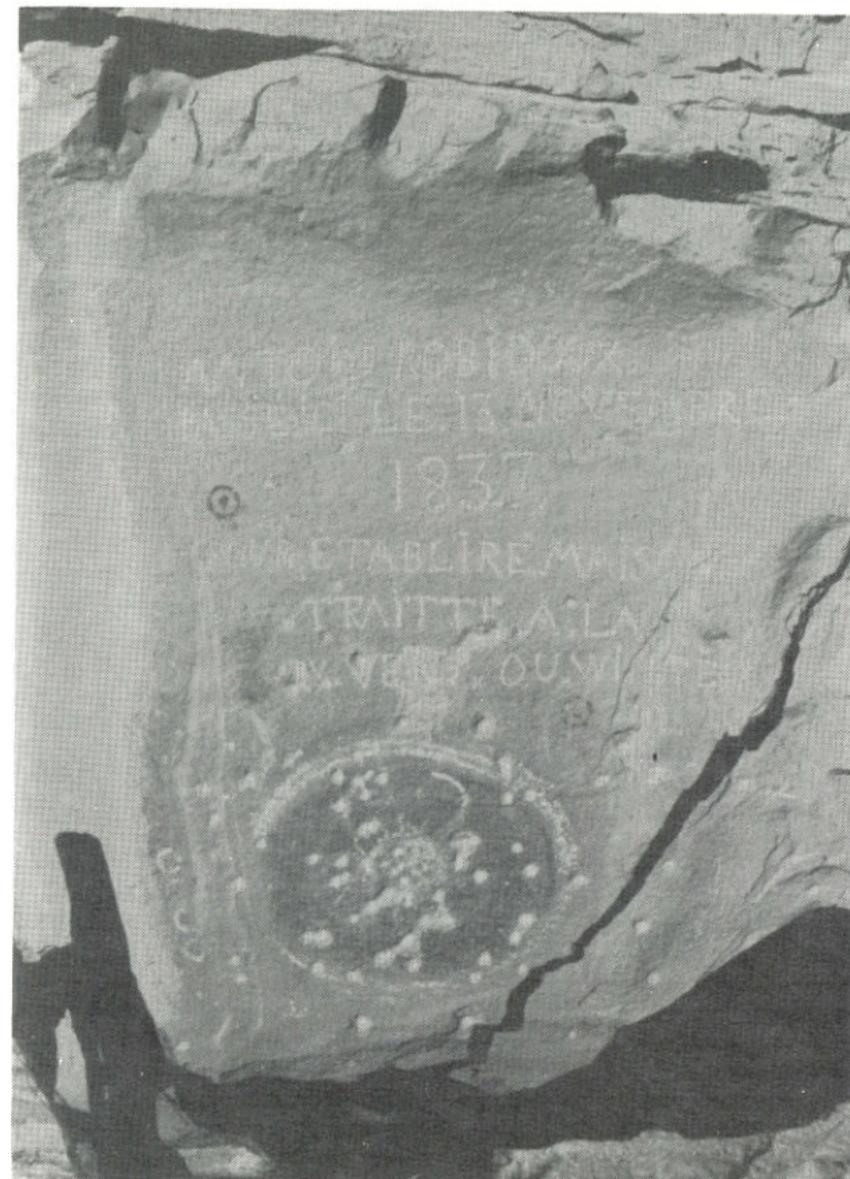
Juan Valdez, F.R.B., and B. Chalifoux (the latter probably Jean Baptiste Chalifoux) inscription found in Main Canyon of Willow Creek with the date of 1835. A total of four sets of names and dates are found at this site.
photo by James H. Knipmeyer



The A. Leroux (Antoine Leroux) inscription, dated 1835. It is also found in the Main Canyon of Willow Creek.
photo by James H. Knipmeyer



One of the many Denis Julien inscriptions found in Canyon Country. Julien left at least four scratched into the canyon walls along or near the Green and Colorado rivers.
photo by James H. Knipmeyer



The best known Antoine Robidoux signature contains not only the date but his purpose and intended destination, written in French. It is found in Westwater Creek in the Book Cliffs, northeast of Moab. (Note the vandalism damage caused by bullet holes in this incredible historical inscription.)
photo by James H. Knipmeyer

of the Old Trappers' Trail that would later come to be better known, incorrectly, as the Old Spanish Trail, the party traversed the route past the La Sal Mountains and towards the trapping grounds of the Utah Lake region. But before reaching that point they swung towards the southwest and headed for the west coast.

In September of 1831 Antoine Robidoux obtained a trapping license from the Mexican authorities. Just where

he trapped that season is not known. A trapper's name and date is to be found on a rock outcropping near the Uinta River north of present Fort Duchesne, Utah, that reads: "Denis Julien 1831." Whether Julien was associated in some way with Robidoux or was operating from the nearby Reed trading post that he supposedly helped establish around 1828 is a matter of conjecture.

MID 1830s

Late in 1833 a trapping party that included Christopher "Kit" Carson traveled from Taos to the Uinta Basin. According to Carson's autobiography they spent the winter on the east bank of the Green, just below the mouth of the White. He also remembered meeting a "Mr. Robidoux" who had twenty men trapping and trading on the Uinta. Since Antoine seems to have been in Santa Fe that winter, this was probably one of his brothers.

There was an almost yearly passage to and fro over the Old Trappers' Trail from Santa Fe and Taos through eastern Utah to the fur trapping grounds. While some parties are known by financial records, government licenses, and journals, others left only a record of their passing carved into the rock, most likely at camping places. Along Main Canyon of the Willow Creek drainage, a southeastern tributary of the Green, at least four sets of names and dates were left by trappers or traders. The names of Juan Valdez and B. Chalifou (probably Jean Baptiste Chalifoux), with the date of 1835, are inscribed at one point along the eastern wall. Nearby is the name Antoine Leroux, also with an 1835 date. Whether these individuals were together or traveling separately is not known.

In 1836 the previously mentioned Denis Julien journeyed southwest through the canyons of the Green and Colorado Rivers. He left his name carved or scratched into rocks along the canyon walls in at least four places, all dated 1836 and, in two instances, with the month and day included. All are located near points of entrance or exit from the river, so it is not known with certainty if he was traveling overland or by water. A carving of what looks to be a boat accompanies one of Julien's inscriptions, so some historians have assumed the latter possibility. The progression of dates suggests that he was moving upstream, or northward, toward the trading post on the Uinta or, possibly, to the annual trappers' rendezvous that was held that year on Horse Creek of the Green in present southwestern Wyoming.

LATE 1830s

If the Main Canyon-Willow Creek drainage was one of the principal trappers' trails down the northern slope of the Tavaputs Plateau to the Green River, the canyon of Westwater Creek was an



The riches to be obtained from the sale of beaver pelts drew trappers and traders to the western mountains, beginning the mountain man era. As a result, this one small animal had an incredible effect on the expansion of the continent.

important route through the Book Cliffs from the south side. At a small shelter in the rocky cliff not far inside the mouth of the canyon is the well-known Antoine Robidoux 1837 inscription. The message carved in the rock, written in French, indicated that he passed there on November 13, on the way "to establish a trading house on the River Green or Winte (Uinta)." According to some historians this short-lived post was located at the junction of the Green and White Rivers, where Provost and Leclerc had wintered in 1824-1825 and where Kit Carson had done the same in 1833-34.

Most of Antoine Robidoux's biographers have given the date of his founding of Fort Uinta, near present Whiterocks, Utah, as 1838. This was certainly not the post mentioned in his 1837 inscription. It has been surmised by some historians that his original post in the lowland just below the mouth of the White was more than likely inundated by the spring flooding of the Green and

summarily abandoned. The subsequent establishment of Fort Uinta, some twenty-five miles to the north, was probably made soon afterwards. Ute Indian oral traditions of the area maintain that Robidoux bought out the Reed trading post that was already located there.

Two sets of initials, dated 1838, have been found situated close together in upper Whirlpool Canyon of the Green in present Dinosaur National Monument. They are J.S. and D.J. The latter initials are in the characteristic style of Denis Julien and may very well have been carved by him. He seems to have had a great affinity for the large rivers of eastern Utah, if his many inscriptions in the region are any indication.

END OF AN ERA

The last annual mountain rendezvous in the Rockies took place in the early summer of 1840. After that time local

trading posts or "forts" became more important for receiving furs from trappers and Indians and, in turn, supplying them with needed equipment, as well as some luxuries. Antoine Robidoux's Fort Uinta was one such beneficiary of the ending of mountain man rendezvous. A brother, Louis, left his name with an inscription dated May, 1841, along the Old Trappers' Trail through Main Canyon. He may well have been bringing supplies to the fort from Santa Fe.

A traveler to Fort Uinta, Rufus B. Sage, in October of 1842 left a written account of his visit there. In part he stated: "The trade of this post is conducted principally with the trapping parties frequenting the Big Bear, Green, Grand, and the Colorado Rivers, with numerous tributaries, in search of fur-bearing game. A small business is also carried on with the Snake and Utah Indians, living in the neighborhood of this settlement."

In 1844 two inscriptions were left for posterity, carved into the rock walls of eastern Utah. Both were more than likely done by trappers. In the Devils Garden area of Arches National Park, north of present Moab, the ubiquitous Denis Julien etched his name and a date of what has been interpreted to be June 9, 1844. The location of this signature and date is along what would have been a cut-off route between the Book Cliffs area and the Moab crossing of the Colorado River.

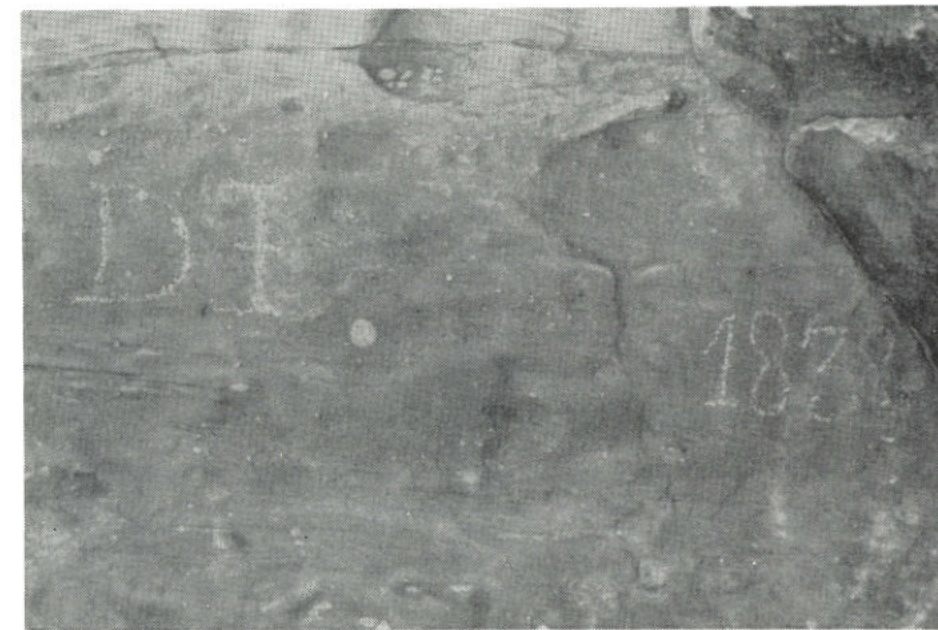
The other inscription is found several miles to the east in the area of Squaw Park just north of where the Dolores River flows into the Colorado. In block letters it reads: "J.D. Smith 1844 R.M.F.T. co." A valid assumption would be that this latter stands for the Rocky Mountain Fur Trading Company. Though that organization had been out of business for some ten years, many of the veteran trappers in the mountains still associated with it.

IN CONCLUSION

As was stated at the beginning, the era of the fur trapper in the American West began around 1824. Western historians have traditionally brought it to a close by the middle of the 1840s, but it had, in fact, passed its hey-day much sooner. As early as 1830 beaver pelts had begun to lose their popularity as the source

material for men's top hats in the fashions of Europe. By 1834 the Rocky Mountain Fur Company had been bought out by Eastern financial interests. In 1840 the last of the great trapper rendezvous in the mountains was held in the Green River Valley in southwestern Wyoming.

The mid-1840s brought to a close, as well, the era of the Old Trappers' Trail through eastern Utah. Late in the fall of 1844 Ute Indians burned Antoine Robidoux's Fort Uncompahgre in western Colorado and, soon after, forced the abandonment of his Fort Uinta. Except for perhaps an occasional individual trapper, stubbornly clinging to by-gone days, or a rare traveler to or from Oregon or California, the paths of the old



The initials D.J. and the date of 1838 are carved into sandstone in Upper Whirlpool Canyon of the Green River in present Dinosaur National Monument. They are printed in the characteristic style of Denis Julien. photo by James H. Knipmeyer

J.D. Smith inscription, found in Squaw Park, north of the Dolores/Colorado River junction. It is believed that the letters at the bottom stand for the Rocky Mountain Fur Trading Company. Even though that organization had officially been out of business for ten years, many veteran trappers still associated with it.

photo by James H. Knipmeyer

fur routes in eastern Utah fell into disuse until the coming of the cattlemen and the Mormon settlers, who would write their own chapters in the story of the trails.

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Jim Knipmeyer is a high school earth science and geology teacher from Lee's Summit, Missouri. His first love, however, has always been the history of the Colorado Plateau region. For the past 15 years he has been locating and photographing old, historic inscriptions, mainly in southern Utah and northern Arizona.

