

AN EARLY TRIP DOWN THE GREEN AND COLORADO RIVERS?

by Jim Knipmeyer

In an article entitled "Henry Fraeb, Mountain Man" that appeared in the June 1985 issue of *Frontier Times* magazine, the author, Dale T. Schoenberger, made an intriguing statement. He said that, "In the fall of 1833 Fraeb and a score of trappers descended the Green River to its junction with the Colorado in Utah. Fraeb's party then descended the Colorado into northern Arizona."

The author is clearly implying that this trip was made by water, which if true would have been one of the earliest descents of the Green and Colorado rivers on record. Unfortunately, no footnotes or endnotes accompanied the article to indicate just where Mr. Schoenberger got his information. However, it proved easy enough to trace the story back to its original sources.

The only detailed biography of Henry Fraeb is that by western historian and author LeRoy R. Hafen, and which is included in his ten-volume series *The Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West*. In it Mr. Hafen states that, "For the fall 1833 trapping Fraeb took a party of twenty men down the Green River and the Colorado, with Bill Williams as guide. Early next spring, according to Joe Meek, they were visited on Bill Williams Fork of the Colorado in Arizona by some of Joe Walker's men returning from California."

Fortunately, Mr. Hafen's biography did give the primary sources for the statements contained in the above two sentences. The first came from a letter written by Thomas Fitzpatrick to Milton Sublette on November 13, 1833. The other was contained in the biography of Joe Meek, *The River of the West*, by Frances Fuller Victor.

Fitzpatrick's letter simply said, "Fraeb with about 20 men is gone down the Seedkeedee with Bill Williams for pilot and intends not to return before March 1st." The "Seedkeedee" was one variation of the trappers' spelling of the Indian name for the Green River. Meek, in relating his life story to Mrs. Victor many years later (the book was published in 1870), provided the additional information concerning Fraeb's trip. He said, "1834. In February the trappers (Walker's group)...ascended the Colorado once more, to Williams Fork, and up the latter stream to some distance, when they fell in with a company of sixty men under Frapp (*sic*) and Jervais...."

In neither account is the actual route of Fraeb's party given. Mr. Schoenberger knew Fraeb's starting point on Ham's Fork of the Green River in present-day southwestern Wyoming and his end point on Bill Williams Fork of the Colorado River in today's western Arizona. Therefore, in his *Frontier Times* article, he evidently assumed that Fraeb and his companions descended the two rivers and so stated it thus in his article.

What the author apparently did not take into account was the geography of the region between Ham's Fork and Bill Williams Fork. A river route between those two points traverses some of the deepest can-

yons and roughest whitewater rapids on the continent. These include Disaster Falls and Hell's Half-mile in the Canyon of Lodore, Mile-long Rapid and the Big Drops in Cataract Canyon, and numerous major rapids in Marble Gorge and the Grand Canyon. Even Fitzpatrick's "20 men," much less Meek's sixty, would have been a number that precluded a voyage by boats. A journey made by water, therefore, would have been most impractical and very unlikely.

However, one of the statements in Joe Meek's account does provide an alternative possibility. As given above, Meek says that he and his party met that of Fraeb "up the latter stream (Bill Williams Fork) to some distance...." A well-known trail used by fur trappers and traders since the decade of the 1820s connected the Green River basin of southwestern Wyoming with the Mexican settlements in New Mexico by way of western Colorado. A branch of this trail threaded the Uinta Mountains separating the Green River basin from the Uinta basin of northeastern Utah, traversed the Tavaputs Plateau, forded the Colorado River near present-day Moab, Utah, and continued on south into Arizona and the headwaters of Bill Williams Fork.

It is, therefore, much more likely that Fraeb and his twenty fellow trappers (or sixty) followed this overland route and *not* the Green and Colorado rivers themselves.

Sources Used

Fitzpatrick, Thomas to Milton Sublette, November 13, 1833 letter. Sublette Collection, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.

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Schoenberger, Dale T. "Henry Fraeb, Mountain Man." *Frontier Times*, June 1985. 55.

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Jim Knipmeyer, in association with University of Utah Press, have produced a new book called *Butch Cassidy Was Here: Historic Inscriptions of the Colorado Plateau*. ISBN 0-87480-736-0

