The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth (1856)

The story of the West is one bursting with color: vivid personalities, adventure tales galore, and magnificent scenery. Many celebrated individuals have had their stories told and retold in connection with westward expansion—Jim Bowie, Kit Carson, and Davy Crockett among them—but some frontiersmen whose contributions to settlement were as significant have not met with the same fame (or infamy, depending on the evaluator). James P. Beckwourth (1798–1866) had adventures that rivalled those of his more famous fellow frontiersmen, but although his story was published within his lifetime, he did not gain the national renown that his contemporaries did. One part of the problem was in the telling of his tale itself; while exaggeration was always part of frontier tales, Beckwourth was accused by some observers of outright lying. His account certainly was embellished, but some historians who have studied Beckwourth's story have found much of it essentially valid. The other part of the problem was that Beckwourth was an African American who did not fit within whitewashed frontier stories. Yet the proper story of the frontier is that of the contacts, conflicts, and cooperation among people of different ethnicities and cultures. Beckwourth lived, loved, worked, and fought with and among all of them. Adopted by the Crow, he performed warrior duties and married—many times—within the tribe. After he left the Crow he still continued to trade with them and other Native Americans as he moved in and out of Mexican-held territory. He also served the American military at various times.

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[In the early 1840s Charles Towne and I] passed on into St. Fernandez, and found quite a number of American traders there, established in business, and supplying both mountaineers and Indians with goods. Here I encountered an old acquaintance, named Lee, with whom I entered into partnership. We purchased one hundred gallons of alcohol, and a stock of fancy articles, to return to the Indian country, and trade for robes and other peltry. We visited the Cheyennes on the South Fork of the Platte. We passed Bent's fort on our way thither. He hailed us, and inquired where we were going. I informed him that we were on our way to the Cheyenne village. He begged me not to go, as I valued my safety. . . . Ireplied to him that I anticipated no danger, and left him to pass on to their village.

The Indians were delighted at my arrival. I had heard that the hooping-cough was very prevalent among the children, and, as we happened to have several bushels of corn, and beans, and a large quantity of dried pumpkins, we could not have come at a more opportune moment. I told the Indians, in answer to their welcome, that I had come back to see them because I had heard their children were all sick. I called attention to my stock of vegetable esculents, as being best adapted for food for their children, and the best calculated to restore them to health. "Besides," I added, "I have brought a little whisky along, to put good life into your hearts."

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I deposited my goods at Old Bark's lodge, who felt highly honored with the trust. The villagers collected round, and a dispute arose among them whether the whisky should be broached or not. Porcupine Bear objected, and Bob-tailed Horse, his brother-in-law, strongly advocated my opening the kegs. This led to a warm altercation between the two warriors, until the disputed question was to be decided by the arbitrament of battle. They both left the lodge to prepare for the combat, and returned in a few minutes fully armed and equipped.

Porcupine Bear argued his cause in the following strain: "Cheyennes, look at me, and listen well to my words. I am now about to fight my brother; I shall fight him, and shall kill him if I can. In doing this, I do not fight my brother, but I fight the greatest enemy of my people.

"Once we were a great and powerful nation: our hearts were proud, and our arms were strong. But a few winters ago all other tribes feared us; now the Pawnees dare to cross our hunting-grounds, and kill our buffalo. Once we could beat the Crows, and, unaided, destroyed their villages; now we call other villages to our assistance, and we can not defend ourselves from the assaults of the enemy. How is this, Cheyennes? The Crows drink no whisky. The earnings of their hunters and toils of their women are bartered to the white man for weapons and ammunition. This keeps them powerful and dreaded by their enemies. We kill buffalo by the thousand; our women's hands are sore with dressing the robes; and what do we part with them to the white trader for? We pay them for the white man's fire-water, which turns our brains upside down, which makes our hearts black, and renders our arms weak. It takes away our warriors' skill, and makes them shoot wrong in battle. Our enemies, who drink no whisky, when they shoot, always kill their foe. We have no ammunition to encounter our foes, and we have become as dogs, which have nothing but their teeth.

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"I say, let us buy of the Crow what is useful and good, but his whisky we will not touch; let him take that away with him. I have spoken all I have to say, and if my brother wishes to kill me for it, I am ready to die. I will go and sit with my fathers in the spirit land, where I shall soon point down to the last expiring fire of the Cheyennes, and when they inquire the cause of this decline of their people, I will tell them with a straight tongue that it was the fire-water of the trader that put it out."

Old Bark then advanced between the two belligerents and thus spoke: "Cheyennes, I am your great chief; you know me. My word this day shall be obeyed. The Crow has come among us again, and has brought us good things that we need; he has also brought us a little whisky. He is poor, while we are yet strong, and we will buy all he has brought with him. This day we will drink; it will make us merry, and feel good to one another. We will all drink this once, but we will not act like fools; we will not quarrel and fight, and frighten our women and children. Now, warriors, give me your weapons."

This fiat admitted no appeal; it was law and gospel to his people; disobedience to his command subjected the offender to immediate death at the hands of the Dog Soldiers. The warriors delivered up their battle-axes, and the old chief handed them to me. "Crow," said he, "take these weapons that I have taken from my two children. Keep them until we have drunk up your whisky, and let no one have them till I bid you. Now, Crow, we are ready."

Slim Face and Gray Head, two Dog Soldiers, then harangued the village, and desired all who wished to trade to come and bring their robes and horses to Old Bark's lodge, and to remember that they were trading with the honest Crow, and not with white men, and that what they paid him was his.

They answered the summons in flocks, the women first, according to my established rule. My corn, beans, and pumpkins "exhaled like the dew," and I received in exchange their beautiful

fancy robes. The women served, the men next came in for whisky. I sold on credit to some. When one wanted thus to deal, he would tell me what kind of a horse or mule he had: I would appeal to Old Bark for confirmation of the statement; if he verified it, I served the liquor. They all got drunk, Porcupine Bear, the temperance orator, with the rest; but there was not a single fight; all passed off harmoniously.

I received over four hundred splendid robes, besides moccasins and fancy articles. When I was ready to leave, thirty-eight horses and mules, a number corresponding to what I had marked, were brought forward. I packed up my peltry, and sent my partner on in advance with every thing except the horse I rode, telling him I would overtake him shortly.

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When I passed Bent at his post he was perfectly confounded. He had seen one train pass belonging to me, and now I was conducting another, when, at the same time, he had supposed that there was not a robe in the village.

"Beckwourth," said he, "how you manage Indians as you do beats my understanding."

I told him that it was easily accounted for; that the Indians knew that the whites cheated them, and knew that they could believe what I said. Besides that, they naturally felt superior confidence in me on account of my supposed affinity of race. I had lived so much among them that I could enter into their feelings, and be in every respect one of themselves: this was an inducement which no acknowledged white trader could ever hope to hold out.

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I arrived in Pueblo de Angeles (California) in January, 1844. There I indulged my new passion for trade, and did a very profitable business for several months. At the breaking out of the revolution in 1845, I took an active part against the mother country, . . .

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The Upper Californians, on account of their great distance from the Mexican government, had long enjoyed the forms of an independent principality, although recognizing themselves as a portion of the Mexican Republic. They had for years past had the election of their own officers, their governor inclusive, and enjoyed comparative immunity from taxes and other political vexations. Under this abandonment, the inhabitants lived prosperous and contented; . . .

Two years prior to my arrival all this had been changed. President Santa Anna had appointed one of his creatures, Torrejon, governor, with absolute and tyrannical power; he arrived with an army of bandits to subject the defenseless inhabitants to every wrong that a debasing tyranny so readily indulges in. . . . The people's patience became at length exhausted, and they determined to die rather than submit to such inflictions. But they were ignorant how to shake off the yoke; they were unaccustomed to war, and knew nothing about political organizations. However, Providence finally raised up a man for the purpose, General José Castro, who had filled the office of commander under the former system, but who had been forced to retire into privacy at the inauguration of the reign of terror. He stepped boldly forth, and declared to the people his readiness to lead them to the warfare that should deliver their country from the scourge that afflicted them, he called upon them to second his exertions, and never desert his banner until

California were purified of her present pollution. His patriotic appeal was responded to by all ranks. Hundreds flocked to his standard; the young and the old left their ranches and their cattle-grounds, and rallied round their well-tried chief.

There was at that time quite a number of Americans in the country, and, according to their interests and predilections, they ranged themselves upon opposing sides. . . .

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After seeing the departure of the government troops, the rebel army returned to Pueblo, where they elected Colonel Pico governor; Colonel, now General Castro, commander of the forces; and filled other less important offices. Fandangoes, which were continued for a week, celebrated our success; and these festivities over, the insurgents returned to their various homes and occupations.

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I now resumed my business, and dispatched my partner, Mr. Waters, after a fresh supply of goods; but, before he had time to return, fresh political commotions supervened. There still seemed to exist in the minds of the majority a strong hankering for the domination of Mexico, notwithstanding they had so recently sided with the Revolutionists in shaking off the yoke of the national government. Among other causes of excitement, too, the American adventurers resident there had raised the "Bear Flag," and proclaimed their intention of establishing an independent government of their own. This caused us to be closely watched by the authorities, and matters seemed to be growing too warm to be pleasant.

In the midst of this gathering ferment, news reached us from Mazatlan of the declaration of war between the United States and Mexico, and I deemed it was fully time to leave. Colonel Fremont was at that juncture approaching from Oregon with a force, if combined with the Americans resident there, sufficient to conquer the whole country, and I would have liked exceedingly to join his forces, but to have proceeded toward him would have subjected me to mistrust, and consequent capture and imprisonment. If I looked south the same difficulties menaced me, and the west conducted me to the Pacific Ocean. . . .

My only retreat was eastward; so, considering all things fair in time of war, I, together with five trusty Americans, collected eighteen hundred stray horses we found roaming on the Californian ranchos, and started with our utmost speed from Pueblo de Angeles. . . .

General Kearney was just then on his march to Santa Fé. I took a drove of my horses, and proceeded down the Arkansas to meet him on his route; for it was probable there might be an opportunity of effecting some advantageous exchanges. The general came up, and found me in waiting with my stock; we had been acquainted for several years, and he gave me a very cordial reception.

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I informed him that I was ready for service; and, accordingly, I sent all my remaining horses back to my plantation, and went on with the general to Santa Fé, which place submitted without firing a shot. The general sent me immediately back to Fort Leavenworth with dispatches. This was my service during the war. The occupation was a tolerably good one, and I never failed in

getting my dispatches through. I enjoyed facilities superior to almost any other man, as I was known to almost all the Indians through whose country I passed.

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The next spring [1850] I engaged in mining and prospecting in various parts of the gold region. I advanced as far as the American Valley, having one man in my company, and proceeded north into the Pitt River country, where we had a slight difficulty with the Indians. We had come upon a party who manifested the utmost friendship toward us; but I, knowing how far friendly appearances could be trusted to, cautioned my partner on no account to relinquish his gun, if the Indians should attempt to take it. They crowded round us, pretending to have the greatest interest in the pack that we carried, until they made a sudden spring, and seized our guns, and attempted to wrest them from our grasp. I jerked from them, and retreated a few steps; then, cocking my gun, I bade them, if they wished to fight, to come on. This produced a change in their feelings, and they were very friendly again, begging caps and ammunition of us, which, of course, we refused. We then walked backward for about one hundred and fifty yards, still keeping our pieces ready should they attempt further hostilities; but they did not deem it prudent to molest us again.

While on this excursion I discovered what is now known as "Beckwourth's Pass" in the Sierra Nevada. From some of the elevations over which we passed I remarked a place far away to the southward that seemed lower than any other. I made no mention of it to my companion, but thought that at some future time I would examine into it farther. . . .

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In the spring of 1852 I established myself in Beckwourth Valley, and finally found myself transformed into a hotel-keeper and chief of a trading-post. My house is considered the emigrant's landing-place, as it is the first ranch he arrives at in the golden state, and is the only house between this point and Salt Lake. . . .

When I stand at my door, and watch the weary, way-worn travelers approach, their wagons holding together by a miracle, their stock in the last stage of emaciation, and themselves a perfect exaggeration of caricature, I frequently amuse myself with imagining the contrast they must offer to the *tout ensemble* and general appearance they presented to their admiring friends when they first set out upon their journey.

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