Chapter 4

Explorers are an important part of our nation's history. Some, like Christopher Columbus, came in search of new trade routes. Others, like Jedediah Smith, traveled west looking for lands to explore. In time, the land from the shores of the Atlantic to the Pacific had been explored. Each new adventure paved the way for others.

John C. Fremont wrote many of his thoughts about seeing Pyramid Lake in his journal.

- 1776: Father Francisco Garces explores near the southern tip of Nevada. Spanish priests Dominguez and Escalante explore western lands.
- 1826: Jedediah Smith enters the southern part of Nevada.
- 1843: John C. Fremont leads a mapmaking expedition into Nevada.
- 1828: Peter Ogden explores northeastern Nevada.
- 1833: Joseph Walker fights in the first battle between white men and Indians in Nevada.
Explorers Come West

Over 200 years after Christopher Columbus came to the New World, most of western North America was still unexplored. Spain had control over much of the land. It even sent soldiers to look for gold in the area. Spain had also hoped to get Native tribes to join, or convert, to the Catholic Church.

Soon Spanish missions were opened in small western outposts, where priests could begin teaching native tribes. One of the first missions was built in Santa Fe in what is now New Mexico. Monterey was another mission built near the Pacific Ocean. Today it is part of the state of California. At first, not much was known about the land between the two missions. Soon Spanish explorers were sent into the region to learn more.

Exploring Spanish Lands

Escalante and Dominguez were the two Spanish priests chosen to explore and find a new route from Santa Fe to Monterey. The priests were also asked to learn about the native people in the area.

With a party of 12, the two priests left Santa Fe in the heat of July. They took pack animals and horses through what later became New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, and Arizona. In Utah, they found many rivers and hoped one might flow as far west as the Nevada, Our Home
Pacific Ocean. They wanted a river route that would make travel between the missions easier. In the southern tip of Utah, Escalante and Dominguez came upon a large river they called the San Buenaventura. They believed it might drain toward the Pacific Ocean. Their mapmakers even added the river to the maps they were making. But the group never got a chance to fully explore the river. Bad weather and problems with their guide forced them to return to Santa Fe.

Years later, traders and other explorers got lost trying to find the river route shown on the Escalante and Dominguez map. They soon found that the San Buenaventura didn't really exist. Today, some people think the river seen by Escalante and Dominguez was what we now call the Colorado River.

Even though some of the information on their early maps turned out to be false, the travels of Escalante and Dominguez are still important to our history. Many people seeking adventure eventually found their way to Nevada because of their writings.

**Linking the Past to the Present**

Can you imagine using a map with wrong information today? What do you think would happen? What could happen if we sent explorers into space with incorrect maps? Have you ever thought about how we get maps of space?
Activity

Writing in a Journal

Many early explorers wrote in a journal, or diary, almost every day. This is just one of the ways we know so much about them. Explorers wrote about wild animals and finding food. They wrote about crossing new rivers or seeing new land. They wrote when they met new people.

Keep a journal for a week or more. Start with the date, and then write your thoughts or what you did that day. Talk about who you saw or what you learned. A few years from now, you'll love reading your journal.

Father Francisco Garces was one of many priests sent from Mexico to the native tribes. He lived at an est in the Arizona desert. Father Garces was also asked to help find the route to California. In 1776, Garces led an expedition, or journey, through today's Nevada. He was most the first European to see our state. His writings were very helpful to others who later traveled through the area. Sadly, Garces and four of his men were killed by Indians in the Arizona desert.

Memory Master

1. Name one reason Spain set up missions in the unexplored West.
2. Who had been living in the "New World" for thousands of years?
Mountain Men, Trappers, and Traders

Mountain men and fur trappers were some of the first explorers to enter the Nevada region. They came looking for animals to trap. Soon trading companies began to compete with one another. Each hoped to gather more furs than the others.

The Fur Trade

Beaver was one of the most popular furs of the time. Trappers went looking for beaver in ponds and streams. They placed baited traps in the water and checked them often. When a beaver went after the bait, the trap would snap shut, holding the beaver inside.

Trappers skinned beaver for their pelts, or furs, and took them to a trading post or settlement. Sometimes pelts were traded for food, money, or weapons. Trading posts often sent furs to Europe or large cities in the East. Companies then made them into clothing or fancy hats. In those days, nearly everyone wanted something made from beaver or fox fur.

What do you think?

Today, many people feel that killing animals for their furs is wrong. What do you think? Is it fair to judge the actions of people from the past by our standards today?

How to Catch a Beaver

To catch a beaver, trappers used strong steel traps that had long chains. Traps were placed in shallow water. Then a twig covered in beaver oil was placed above the trap. When the smell brought the beaver to the twig, the trap snapped shut. Most beavers drowned while trying to break free. Trappers then skinned the beaver and dried the fur. A fur pelt weighed up to two pounds. Trappers pressed pelts into bundles and tied them together.
Peter Skene Ogden

Peter Skene Ogden was a trapper for the Hudson Bay Company. He traveled along Nevada’s Humboldt River, searching for beaver. He wrote:

I will venture to say in no part of the country have I found beaver more abundant than in this river... trappers now with me average 125 beavers per man...

Ogden explored several other streams in northern Nevada. Thousands of settlers followed his trails and read his journals.

Ogden was another explorer who came to believe that the river on the Escalante and Dominguez map was not real.

Joseph Walker

Joseph Walker led many explorations across our state, looking for furs. He also met Native Americans on his trips. But they did not like each other. In fact, between the Walker party and a band of Paiutes was the first recorded battle in Nevada between whites and Indians. One member of this group wrote about the battle in his journal:

We were teased until a party of 80 or 100 came forward, who appeared more saucy and bold than any others. This greatly excited Walker...and he gave orders for the charge...A number of our men never been engaged in any fighting with the Indians, and were anxious to show their skill. We closed in on them and fired, leaving 39 dead on the field...the remainder running into the high grass in every direction.

Walker’s battle caused problems for other explorers and settlers coming to Nevada after the conflict. The Indians were very hostile to these later groups.

Some people thought Joseph Walker was sent to the Mexican territory as a U.S. government spy.
Jim Beckwourth

Jim Beckwourth was one of the few African American mountain men in the West. He was a trapper and an army scout who ran trading posts. He married a Native American woman and later became a chief in her tribe. He also discovered a pass in the Sierra Nevada that was later given his name. The pass made it easier for pioneers to get through Nevada’s high mountains on their way to California.

Beckwourth told his life story to a writer who put it in a book called *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth*. One man said of him, “That Beckwourth is surely one of the most [unusual] men I ever met.” Others claimed his courage and strength helped change the West.

Beckwourth often dressed like the Crow Indians who adopted him into their tribe.

Kit Carson

Christopher “Kit” Carson was one of the West’s most famous mountain men. He began traveling through the western territories when he was just 16. Carson worked as a trapper and guide even though he couldn’t read or write. He tried to make up for it by learning all he could about western trails and lands. He also learned to speak Spanish, French, and many Indian languages.

Like other mountain men, his main job was to trap animals for their pelts. He also worked as a guide for John C. Fremont’s expedition across Nevada. It was this trip that made him famous. Nevada’s Carson River was named after this important trapper and guide.

Kit Carson was known as a tough mountain man who knew a lot about the trails of the West.
John C. Fremont was one of the most famous explorers of our state. Many people call him the great “Pathfinder”. As an army officer, his job was to map the Southwest. He was the first to make correct maps of this region, which helped many settlers later find their way.

During his travels through Nevada, Fremont named several important lakes and rivers. He named the Humboldt River, Pyramid Lake, Walker River, and Walker Lake. You may remember that he named the Great Basin too. His maps made it clear that most of the rivers in Nevada run toward the center of the state. Fremont wrote about one Nevada river in his journal:

The most considerable river in the interior of the Great Basin is the one called on the map Humboldt River...It is a very peculiar stream...rising in mountains and losing itself in a lake of its own, after a long and solitary course. It lies on the line of travel to California and Oregon, and is the best route now known through the Great Basin, and one traveled by emigrants.

On another of Fremont’s trips through the area, he and his party tried crossing the Sierra Nevada during winter. There were 27 men, 67 horses and mules, and one cannon mounted on wheels. Two Washoe Indians tried to warn Fremont about crossing the mountains in the deep snow. Making signs with his hands and speaking loudly, one Indian said, “Rock upon rock... snow upon snow, even if you get over the snow, you will not be able to get down from the mountains.”

When Fremont finally arrived in California, he was short on supplies and had only half of the 67 animals. Years later, Fremont published his writings. They proved to be a valuable resource to hundreds of emigrants who were traveling west.

*Fremont’s writings described the Great Basin as a huge land with waters running inward. His writings proved once and for all that the San Buenaventura River did not exist.*

Nevada, Our Home
The Rendezvous

Each year mountain men, friendly Indians, and trappers came together for a rendezvous. Rendezvous is a French word that means "a place and time of meeting." A rendezvous was like a long, wild party. The men played games and competed in contests. They raced to see who could eat cooked buffalo intestine the fastest. They even shot cups of whiskey off of one another's heads to prove their bravery.

Gambling games were popular with both trappers and Indians. Trappers loved to bet on all kinds of things, from foot races to horse races. They especially liked playing the Indian hand game.

Sometimes a rendezvous lasted an entire week. After most of their money was spent, trappers went back to their work in the mountains for another year. The mountain men of the West and their yearly rendezvous soon became legends in American history.

What do you think

What do you think trappers wrote in their journals about the yearly rendezvous?

Memory Master

1. Why were Spanish priests sent to explore our western lands?
2. Which explorer could neither read nor write?
3. What did Fremont name the largest region in Nevada?
4. What was the yearly mountain man meeting called?
CHAPTER 4 REVIEW

Consider Character

This chapter talks about many famous men who were an important part of Nevada history. Pick one person; then go back and read about him again. Which character traits does this person show? Try to learn more about this person from books or the Internet. See if you can find examples of other character traits in the actions of this person.

Geography Tie-In

Pretend you are an early explorer to the area or neighborhood you live in. Suppose you want to keep a record of the regions you explore. Take a walk with a family member or with your entire class to a safe location nearby. Maybe you could go to a friend’s house, a nearby store, office building, or a church. Make a map of the route you travel. Be sure to include important landmarks on your map, such as parking lots, walls, parks, or buildings you pass along the way. Do you think your map is correct and clear enough for others to follow? Compare your mapmaking experience to that of early explorers. How difficult is mapmaking?
This chapter talks a lot about early explorers who came through Nevada. Do you think many women explorers came to Nevada then? What about Indian women living in Nevada when explorers came? What can you find out about these women? Do some research to find what life was like for the women who lived in Nevada at this time.

**Activity**

**Mountain Man Slang**

Like other groups of people, the trappers began using slang words among themselves. Slang words are words that are sometimes used instead of common words. Look at the words and meanings below. Can you match each word to its correct meaning?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Slang</th>
<th>Meanings</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>buffer</td>
<td>Rocky Mountains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cache</td>
<td>buffalo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>critter</td>
<td>hiding places for furs</td>
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<tr>
<td>fixins</td>
<td>animal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pill</td>
<td>bullet</td>
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<tr>
<td>give ‘em a teach</td>
<td>teach them a lesson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>make beaver</td>
<td>an even trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>para swap</td>
<td>sack of things</td>
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<tr>
<td>possible sack</td>
<td>the way things happened</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shining Mountains</td>
<td>things needed in the trapping business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the way the stick floats</td>
<td>food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vittles</td>
<td>make money</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Go West!

—Horace Greeley

**Timeline of Events**

- **1830**
  - American workers suffer through economic hard times.

- **1840**
  - Emigrant parties begin traveling the Oregon and California Trails.

- **1841**
  - Bidwell-Bartleson Party travels through Nevada.