

## **SAVED BY AN ARTIST IN TREASON**

### **Forrest Whitman**

From time to time in U. S. history it has looked like strong man government was about to take over all or part of the country. Our mountains were somewhat up for grabs in 1806. Would we be part of an expanding United States? Would we stay in Mexico as before the Louisiana Purchase? After all our tiny Mexican outrider population then depended on ties to Santa Fe. The expedition of Zebulon Pike helped the case for joining the United States permanently.

Our part of the world came into United States focus when Zebulon Pike made his survey of discovery in 1806. Few knew much about the huge area President Thomas Jefferson had bought in 1803. The Louisiana Purchase area encompassed thousands of acres right up to the headwaters of the Mississippi River. It was unknown back in Washington. A treaty in 1819 (Adams/Onis) did set up a boundary but even that was what we'd call mushy.

Spanish headquarters in Chihuahua and Santa Fe knew some things about the mountains of Colorado. By 1806 they knew very roughly where the waters in the Rio Bravo (Rio Grande River) and the Red River originated. That was information known by the explorers from the Spanish villages around Santa Fe and the little camps, cities today called Costilla, Antonito, Durango among others. Those were not there in 1806 and once started lived always fearing the Comanches.

Colorado had been explored up to the headwaters of the Arkansas by Spanish sheep herders and hunters. "Accounts." existed. But Pike was mostly lost. When Pike explored the Arkansas River he was still thinking it was the Red River!

Not until Pike explored through the west did the U. S. government of Thomas Jefferson know much about our Rocky Mountain west. What was known was that the newly fixed boundary between Spain and the United States would be the line set off by the Adams-Ortiz agreement. President Jefferson had bought all of that real estate in the Louisiana Purchase, but prior to Pike few reports were verified about where that line even might be.

Pike was to find out as much as possible of the mountain west. But did he know he was trespassing? Did he know he was pushing through the snow into Mexico? His trip was commissioned by the senior general of the armies, James Wilkinson. How more legitimate could it be? Actually it wasn't all that legitimate.

Unfortunately this general was an artist of deception. As the senior U. S. General of the Army he long worked for the our government. He actively served for four presidents: Washington, Adams, Jefferson, and Madison. But he also was well paid by Spain as "Agent 13." He was a very fancy spy, traitor if you will. How much did Wilkinson know? Surely he knew he was sending Pike on a chancy mission.

Pike seldom knew where he was. He risked the lives of his men on some very wild goose chases, After camping near today's Canon City he fought up to the headwaters of

the Red River (he thought) in fact the Arkansas. He found that out when he came out at his old camp site. He'd made a circle!

Clearly General Wilkinson was in league with Aaron Burr. Burr made no bones about his desire to set up his own dictatorship in a new country west of the Appalachian mountains. That would seem like enough for even an artful traitor like Wilkinson. But he also wanted to make money even if nothing ever happened. He made plenty as "Agent 13." working for the Spanish crown. He didn't want any third nation established west of the Mississippi unless he could run it. Or that seemed to be the case. Before he retired in Mexico City he never did say what he hoped for.

There is little direct evidence of how much Wilkinson knew about Spanish intentions. Letters from Pike indicate that Zebulon Pike expected to be made a prisoner of war. There's lots of evidence that he was loyal to Wilkinson, his boss. He also seemed to approve of Burr's attempt to spark a war with Mexico. That came close when strong man Burr moved in troops a time or two.

What would have been the fate of the mountain people if Burr had succeeded? We had a prominent place in Burr's plan. He had only a hint of the gold and silver to be found, but he had enough to know this would power his new nation.

We did come close to strong man government overpowering democracy. Burr was tried but never found guilty. In the end Burr's store house of armaments was sold off. He was an expert at treason, but he never regained public trust. While he never won any court battles, he never lost either. The thousand men who had pledged to fight with him vanished. He earned scorn when he fought the famous duel with Hamilton. Some said Hamilton never fought to really kill Burr. It all came to nothing and strong man government did not overpower democracy.

But we did possibly come close to being a state in Mexico? Some historians think close indeed. And how about Pike? And how about General Wilkinson, the old expert at treason? It's fun to stay tuned to our history around here.