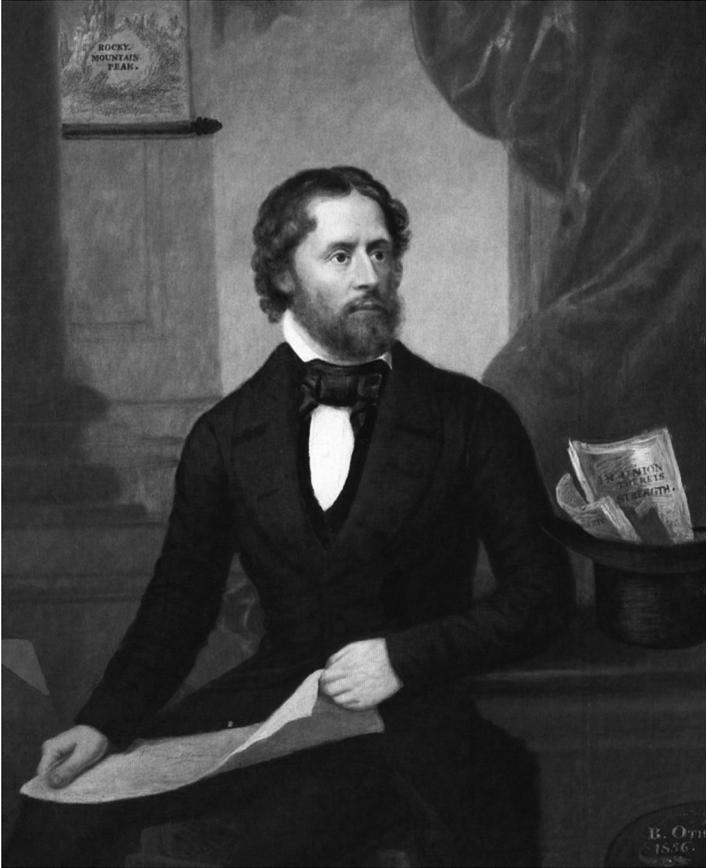


from Gary McCarthy's

OUR AMERICAN WEST

John C. Fremont
"The Pathfinder"

Few men involved in the early development and exploration of the West led as interesting and controversial life as John C. Fremont. He was born in 1813, the illegitimate son of a Southern belle who had shocked Savannah a few years earlier by abandoning her wealthy husband to run off with a poor Frenchman named Charles Fremont. Young Charles must have felt the sting of his illegitimacy very much because for the rest of his life he seemed driven to excel no matter what the cost. As a youth, he was an excellent student and a social climber, always seeking ways to further his lofty dreams of fame and fortune. He enrolled in Charleston College and became a scholar. A few years later, he managed to attract a wealthy and influential patron named Joel Poinsett. Poinsett became Secretary of War and was instrumental in obtaining Fremont a commission in the U.S. Topographical Corps and the assignment of exploring the upper reaches of our country between the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. It was a wonderful opportunity and Fremont joined the best and brightest officers in the Army, nearly all of whom were top graduates of West Point and either engineers or scientists. Fremont was especially fortunate to be under the command of the finest topographer of his day, Joseph Nicollet. It was from Nicollet that he learned how to take astronomical and barometric readings, to collect, preserve and even classify botanical and mineralogical specimens, to draw accurate maps and survey the still uncharted American West.



During the two years in the field, Fremont distinguished himself as a daring and resourceful officer. He was eager to please and even more eager to assume responsibility and command. He returned from the West to transcribe and collate the voluminous records of Nicollet's survey. Fremont soon used his good looks and engaging personality to gain entry into Washington D.C. high society. In a few months, he courted and won the heart of the most sought-after young woman in the nation's capitol, Miss Jessie Benton. Jessie was the vivacious daughter of one of the most powerful members of Congress, Senator Thomas Hart Benton. She had been courted by suitors much more prominent

and eligible than young and ambitious John Fremont, but in October of 1841, despite the strenuous objections of her powerful father, Jessie and Charles eloped and were wed. The senator from Missouri was outraged, but his daughter was his greatest love and treasure and he could not long remain estranged from her or her penniless husband. Loud, dominating Senator Thomas Benton soon became one of his son-in-law's greatest proponents.

Fremont did many things in his life purely to enhance his own political and monetary ambitions, but marrying the beautiful Jessie Benton surely was not one of them. Theirs was one of the greatest love stories of that time and during Fremont's roller-coaster journey through life, their marriage was the cement that bound them together through the triumphs and the tragedies.

During the early years, Fremont had only successes. Between 1842 and 1854, he led five major expeditions into the West and all of them were highly successful. Fremont earned the sobriquet of "The Pathfinder". He almost always charted the paths that the early mountain men had already tread but managed to gain the credit for his discoveries. It is true, however, that Fremont was the first to accurately describe and delineate the "Great Basin" which is that vast and arid high desert resting between the Wasatch and the Sierra Nevada mountains now known as Utah and Nevada.

The year 1846 found Fremont in California and squarely in the middle of a growing revolution which would soon overthrow Mexico and claim California as a United States Territory. It was called the Bear Flag Revolution, and Fremont was instrumental in stirring up and leading the American citizenry in the successful rebellion. He commanded volunteers known as the California Battalion who forcibly occupied Los Angeles. The Mexicans, however, did not give up California as easily as expected and it took General Steven Kearney and his dragoons to finally drive the Mexicans to the south.

Fremont who was always adept at choosing the winning side both politically as well as militarily at last seriously erred and opposed Kearney trying to seek greater influence for himself in California. For this he was brought to Washington and court-

martialed on the charges of mutiny, disobedience and conduct prejudicial to military discipline. To his shock and that of Jessie and the senator from Missouri, he was found guilty of all charges. However, the military court suggested leniency and President James Polk, under pressure to restore the name of a national hero and explorer, ordered Fremont back to duty again without the loss of rank. But Fremont's enormous pride was bruised and he disdained the order and resigned from the military to become a civilian.

This proved to be the second critical error in Fremont's life and, thereafter, only misfortune seemed to be his lot. He was given the task of finding a path over the San Juan Mountains of southern Colorado and northern New Mexico in order that Senator Benton and the powerful Southern interests could persuade a divided Congress that the proposed Transcontinental Railroad should take a southern rather than a mid-continent or upper continental route. This poorly planned and executed assault on the high southern Rocky Mountains turned out to be a disastrous foray ending in death, abandonment and defeat. Fremont barely managed to escape the snowed-in mountain passes with his life and most of his nearly mutinous men.

For a few brief years just before and after the Forty-Niner Gold Rush in California, the Fremont family found themselves rich beyond their imaginations as gold was discovered on some cheap land they had invested in right in the middle of the fabulous California gold fields. But Fremont, a poor businessman and unwise investor, soon lost his fortune and by 1856 he was broke and his former glory had long since faded. He thought he might recoup his status and name during the Civil War but his actions in the West had displeased President Lincoln and by the war's end, he was relegated to the status of an assistant to General Pope, a man he thoroughly despised.

Again, Fremont resigned his commission and became a civilian. Lincoln forgave Fremont and generously appointed him to be the new Territorial Governor of Arizona, but Fremont found the position boring and so he devoted most of his money and



energy into various mining, railroad and land promotion get-rich-quick schemes. When they all failed, he found himself in his fifties, bitter and with few friends or supporters except his faithful and devoted wife, Jessie.

Jessie stood beside her husband throughout his last years and from all accounts, theirs was a happy marriage. Jessie became a writer on whose income the Fremont family became largely dependent, though his autobiography written by Jessie, never sold

well enough to afford them a really good or lasting income.

John C. Fremont died in 1890 better remembered today than he was at the time of his death when all American's knew him as "The Pathfinder".

Gary McCarthy is a national award-winning western and historical novelist who welcomes comments about this column and can be reached through his website:

www.CanyonCountryBooks.com