



The Mark of a Great Man or How Many Mistakes Can You Make?
By Linda McGowan

A very special thanks to the Local History Center at the Cañon City Public Library.

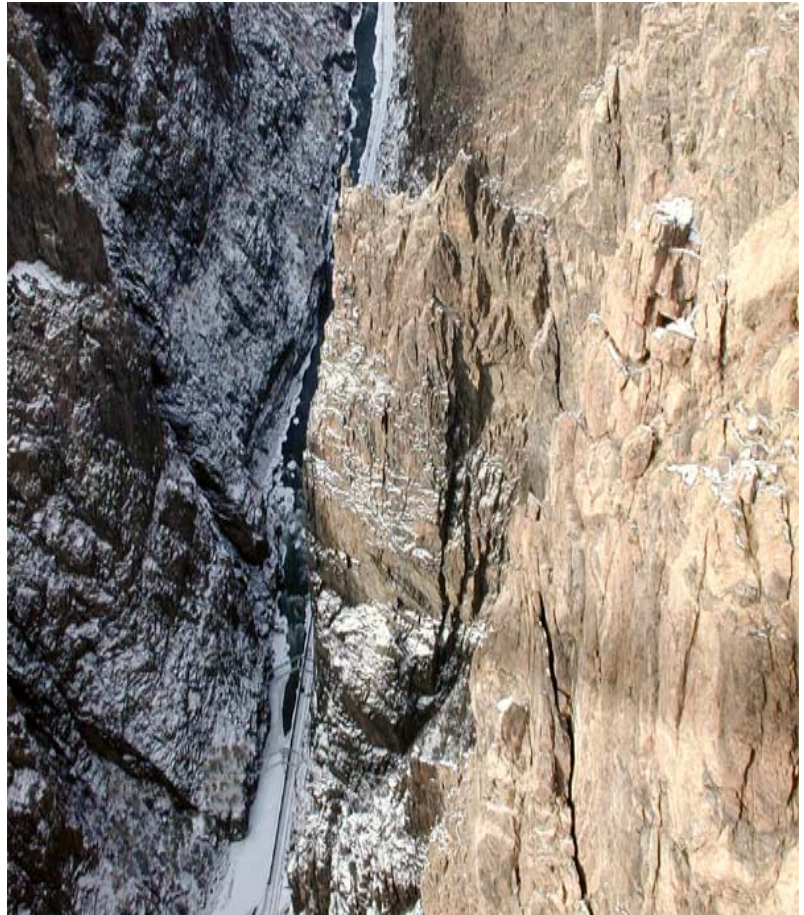
*W*elcome to the eastern entrance to the Royal Gorge where the Arkansas River cascades through the center of the beautiful town of Cañon City. The wealth of history Fremont County possesses is filled with excitement and adventure. I feel a little like Zebulon Montgomery Pike when he first ventured into the Grand Canyon of the Arkansas, nearly two hundred years ago. Our connection to the Arkansas River runs deep.





With over 650,000 visitors a year, the Arkansas River is one of this country's most popular rivers. Fishing, camping, rafting, hiking, horseback riding and mountain biking, to name a few, are activities experienced by everyone from the novice to the professional.

The Royal Gorge is a section of the river that the canyon walls reach some 5,000 feet into the air. The rate of erosion by the river has been calculated to be approximately one foot every 2,500 years, so the first settlers that came into this area saw the river much the same as we see it today with, of course, the exception of civilization. Each year's impact of tourists leaves behind a trail of adventurers who take with them the memory of their very own little expedition. To the local inhabitants, the canyon's beauty is beyond any other. Originally called the Grand Canyon of the Arkansas, the Royal Gorge has remained an enchantment to all who visit it and live within its beauty.



Photography By James. H. Egbert

Before Zebulon Montgomery Pike set foot in our area, the Ute who were mountain Indians frequently wintered at our canyon entrance. Some plains Indians including the Blackfeet, Comanche, Cheyenne, Kiowa and the Sioux followed the herds of buffalo and summered in the valleys and mountain meadows of the Arkansas River and then returned to the plains during the winter. The first white settlers were probably Spanish missionaries of the 17th century. These missionaries journeyed north from their settlements in the current state of New Mexico and were the first to learn of this great Grand Canyon of the Arkansas. Later in the 18th century, fur trappers and mountain men journeyed the area, but no known map was ever made to record the area until Zebulon Montgomery Pike was ordered by General James Wilkerson to find the source of the Red River then believed to be the western border of the Louisiana Territory.



Buck Skin Charlie of the Ute Indians
Garden of the Gods Visitor's Center

The Spaniards originally named this territory New Spain which held for a few centuries until 1762 when La Salle claimed all the land around the tributaries of the Mississippi River for France. But in 1801, Napoleon managed to force Spain to surrender the territory. It then became the Louisiana Territory and in 1803 was sold to the United States.

It was a hazy looking future for Zebulon Montgomery Pike when he received orders from General Wilkerson to explore and map the Territory in 1805. At the time, the Arkansas River was thought to be the Red River, one of Mississippi's tributaries that borders Texas and Oklahoma as we know them today, and was thought to be the far northwestern border of the territory. Presuming the Red River continued northwest into the mountains, Pike was ordered to find this Red River and follow it to its source. He was warned excessively not to venture into Spanish territory which would be considered an act of war. The amazing thing about Old Zeb's adventure is that it was riddled with mistakes which gives his story an added twist: humor.

Zebulon Montgomery Pike was a short man, slender and stealthy but a bit pompous (did I say a bit?). He was adventurous and courageous and jumped at the chance to be highlighted like Lewis and Clark. He and Lt. Wilkerson, General Wilkerson's son, ventured into the Louisiana Territory with a civilian doctor, Dr. John H. Robinson, an interpreter and nineteen enlisted men. The date was July 15, 1806, when the small expedition left Fort Bellefontaine. Expectations high and months later on December 5, 1806, they ventured into this unknown territory and made camp at the east entrance to what he thought was the Red River. Some historians claim Pike was lost most the time traveling blindly west to find a river presumably there but was, never-the-less, considered the first white man to set foot into the Royal Gorge and claim access to the Rocky Mountains.

Some of the literature I investigated states that the first settlement was in Manitou Springs where he tried to scale the impossible mountain, but most other bits of information state that his first settlement was established at the entrance to the canyon where Cañon City sits today. It was here that he went north to scale the mountain in the distance, which was a longer trip that expected-perhaps?



Photo provided by Ed BoMurs

Pike is best known for his name sake Pikes Peak near Colorado Springs—the peak he never climbed and the peak he claimed no one would ever climb. In his journal that was published in 1810, he explains the climbing excursion as a difficult and impossible one. Pike had seen the peak in the distance from his camp at the east entrance to the canyon and decided it would be a great place to plant a flag; it would make a good impression; all, it was the highest peak in the territory!

Please realize that Pike's crew was exhausted from the five month excursion, the bitter cold and lack of food. Put yourselves in a soldier's high-laced, thin leather boots and ill-tailored military jacket and remember there weren't any roads and the fact the peak looked closer than it really was and imagine how excited you would be. By the time they reached the peak, they were so exhausted that Pike had no choice but to claim it impossible to climb (besides, have you ever heard men whine?). It was a reasonable answer, made a good excuse to quit. Today a winding road leads to the summit of Pikes Peak. There at its top, Santa and his reindeer beckon a welcome to families that scale the peak. It is considered by some visitors to be one of Colorado's most frightening drives.



Back at the canyon's mouth, he made yet another mistake. He claimed the river branched in several places and that the origin of these outlets did not extend beyond the canyon walls. It was a dead end. Then believing the canyon impassable, he set out on the northern Ute passage through South Park, probably through Guffy and Hartzel, and came over Trout Creek located just southeast of the town we know today as Buena Vista. There he camped next to what he thought was the Red River and spent time writing in his journal and creating the first map of the area. Thinking he had found the Red River, he began planning his trip home. He would follow the river back to the Mississippi and claim his recognition. He and his men had successfully killed two buffalo and carrying the carcasses on homemade rafts, moved down the river skimming over ice and dangerous white waters. The trip was one that, if you have ever rafted down the Arkansas, you know was a dangerous one. It left some of those poor soldiers wishing they had been captured by the Spanish and left warm in some desolate cell. But the real embarrassing moment came when he rounded the last precarious bend to find himself facing the structure he and his men built only a month before. There standing on the embankment was the bewildered small settlement that had been left behind to secure the entrance to the Grand Canyon of the Arkansas River. Humiliated to say the least but proud, Pike merely crossed out the "Red" in the Red River's name. On the map so diligently drawn and wrote "Arkansas" over the word.

Still in search for the Red River's source, and not at all taunted by his mistake, Pike headed south following Grape Creek towards the Wet Mountains where Westcliffe and Silver Cliff are today. He continued across the Sangre de Cristos and, again thinking he had found the Red River, camped near the Rio Grande in the San Louis Valley, his final and most vital mistake. Another larger settlement, near today's Las Animas, was built and the flag proudly flown to show his pride and patronage. Here he was captured by the Spanish, where he put up no fight. He then spent some time in Santa Fe, New Mexico, trying to convince the Spanish he was not a spy.

Had he any humiliation at this point is not evident in his journal. It was this incident that put the expedition's credentials in jeopardy. Because of General Wilkerson's involvement with statesman Aaron Burr who completed his term as vice-president in March 1805, Pike was thought to be a spy sent to Mexico in a round about way to help start a war. Wilkerson and Burr concocted a grandiose scheme for establishing a kingdom west of the Appalachians, raiding Spanish lands, and settling the lands in the Washita Valley. Burr was tried for treason but was acquitted after a long trial. Today historians still argue whether Pike's expedition was a ploy by Wilkerson and Burr. Most will agree, however, Pike was in no way an accomplice in the plot. He was so naive that he was probably not more than a puppet, and too, his coming back to his hometown with so many errors marking his trails was not a consequence to him. Of course, the Grand Canyon of the Arkansas was not passable for a few decades and was often the cause of many pioneers veering away from our area and following Lewis and Clark's better-mapped expedition over the Rockies to Oregon. But there was the Gold Rush fever exclamation, "Pike's Peak or Bust!" that must have had some kind of logic in its usage. After all, you don't have to follow the Grand Canyon of the Arkansas to get to Cripple Creek, now do you?