THE CLARENCE KING EXPEDITION
UNITED STATES GEOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF THE FORTIETH PARALLEL
1867 through 1869

In the mid 1860's, an expedition for the purpose of assessing the minerals, the flora and the fauna and agricultural potential of the Great Basin was commissioned by Congress. In the Spring of 1857, a party comprising, four Geological Engineers, three Topographic Engineers, a Zoologist, a Botanist, and a photographer named Timothy O'Sullivan, proceeded to California, where they set out for the deserts of Nevada. During that season, the party made assessments while traveling down the Truckee River to Pyramid Lake; along the Carson River, near Fort Churchill; Carson City and thence along the Western reaches of the Humboldt River, ending the season at Unionville. In 1868, their investigations took them cross country from Unionville to Battle Mountain, then south to Austin and Smith Creek, then Easterly along the pony express trail to Fort Ruby. From Fort Ruby, they traveled North through Ruby Valley, Secret Pass, Star Valley and then East along the California trail to Salt Lake City. In 1869, the party covered much of the Northern part of the Wasatch Mountains as far South as Provo Canyon, Utah Lake, Antelope, Stansbury and Carrington Islands and portion of the Uinta Mountains.

It is interesting that the findings of this expedition have not been well publicized. Perhaps, I, myself, might not have become involved in learning the extent of the party's investigations, if it had not been that on a sunny day in August, 1995, an elderly gentlemen and his wife stopped on the road, where I was retrieving my mail, to learn if I knew of a way, where they could get to the shores of Franklin Lake.

After introducing ourselves, I learned that Mr. Ketner was the recipient of a grant which had been made for the purpose of reassessing the findings of Robert Ridgway, the Zoologist who had accompanied the King Expedition. Mr. Ketner explained that before coming to Ruby Valley, he had conducted comparison surveys, one near Carson City at Fort Churchill and another at Antelope Island in the Great Salt Lake. When I ask what he was finding, Mr. Ketner said that he was finding the birdlife to be more diverse and abundant than was reported by Robert Ridgway

I remember thinking to myself at the time, I'll bet, if Mr. Ketner's work had produced the opposite result, we would soon be seeing an article printed in newspapers across this Nation telling of the loss of birdlife since settlement. But with the result being what it is, I suspect that we will hear nothing of his findings.

That September, after Mr. Ketner had returned to his home in Arvada, Colorado, he sent me a summary of his work which had been completed to that time. He stated in his letter, "This year we

were not able to stay in the Ruby Mountain area anywhere near as long as Ridgway did. However, we intend to return next year and probably again the following year in order to make the length of time observing birds somewhat comparable to the several weeks that he was in the Area."

However, Mr. Ketner did not appear the following summer. So, that Fall, I called Mr. Ketner and mentioned that I had missed seeing him that summer. As I suspected, Mr Ketner informed me that financial problems had arisen, wherein moneys were not then available for the continuation of the project - but that he hoped there would be funding the following year - and if so he would see me then. I have not seen Mr. Ketner since.

When I was in Reno the following year, I made a point of going to the special collections archives at the University of Nevada to obtain a complete copy of Robert Ridgway's report. While there, I also obtained a copy of Sereno Watson's report which he had done on the botany of the region.

Within the text of Mr. Watson's Report, is the following description of the county as it appeared at the time of the King Expedition.

> The erosion and decomposition of these various rocks have filled the valleys to a monotonous level with a detritus of gravel, sand, or silt, and given to them that accumulation of alkaline salts which is so marked a peculiarity of the county.
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> With few exceptions also these mountains are for most of the year wholly destitute of water, with but small rivulets in the principal canons, frequently with only scanty springs here and there at their bases, irrigating a few square yards of ground. Even where the mountain supply is sufficient to send a stream into the valleys it is usually either soon entirely evaporated, sinks into the porous soil, or becomes demoralized with alkali and is "lost" in the mud of the plain. ...
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> The chief exceptional ranges in northern Nevada, which from their greater altitude receive heavier snowfalls in winter, retained through the year in greater or less quantity in the more sheltered depressions of the higher peaks, and which in summer are subject to more abundant rains, are the West Humboldt Mountains, 100 miles east of the California state-line, the East Humboldt Mountains, 75 miles from the Utah line, and the Toyabes, nearly intermediate between the two. ...
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> Several constant streams here flow from the principal eastern canons and reach the middle of the valley, where they supply irrigation for as many small ranches. ...

On the western side [of the Toiyabes] lies Reese River, flowing northward toward the Humboldt - of which it is a reputed tributary. In the upper portion of its course of 150 miles it is reenforced to some extent by the drainage of the Shoshone Mountains, a rather high range west of the Toyabes, but as it nears Humboldt Valley it diverges into side-channels and seldom has volume sufficient to reach the main river itself.

* * *

This [the] vegetation covering alike the valley plains, the graded inclines of the mesas, the rounded foothills and the mountain slopes, possesses a monotonous sameness of aspect and is characterized by the absence of trees, by want of a grass greensward, the wide distribution of a few lowshrubs or half-shrubby plants to the apparent exclusion of nearly all other growth, and by the universally prevalent gray or dull olive color of the herbage. ...

...the turfing "buffalo" or "grama" grasses, which make the plains east of the Rocky Mountains a vast pasture for the bison, deer, and antelope, are here unknown. There are indeed, various other species more or less abundant in localities, but always growing in sparsely scattered tufts and dying away with the early summer heat, or to be then found only in favored spots in the mountain canyons.

...usurping entire predominance is the "everlasting sagebrush", the Artemisia tridentata. This is by far the most prevalent of all species, covering valleys and foothills in broad stretches farther than the eye can reach...

On the foothills only and not ascending above the base of the mountains Purshsa Tridenfata [bitterbrush] is widely distributed...

* * *

For grazing purposes the region is not generally adapted, as is proven by the absence of all graminivorous animals excepting rabbits in the valleys and rarely a few mountain sheep or antelopes in the higher ranges.
(Spelling in the original)

When Jedediah Smith, Peter Skeen Ogden, and John Fremont first made tracks throughout the West, they found the rivers muddy, the grass poor, and game hard to find. Unfortunately, no one within the agencies or the environmental community want to take the earliest explorers word for it. That is why the findings of Sereno Watson and Robert Ridgway are so important. These were government scientist, saying the same thing.

Cliff Gardner
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