

BENJAMIN BONNEVILLE, A CELEBRITY AMONG US

Of all the noted frontiersmen and explorers that inhabited Northeastern Oklahoma, few if any, traveled further or acquired more visibility than Captain Benjamin Bonneville. Namesake for the Bonneville Flats, the salt packed speedway west of Salt Lake City, creator of the first accurate maps of the northwest, veteran of three wars and subject of a book by noted author, Washington Irving, For all practical purposes, Bonneville's professional career began and ended at Fort Smith.

Born in 1796 in Paris, France Benjamin's family moved to New York when he was a child. Appointed to the United States Military Academy, he graduated in 1815 and in 1820 was assigned to construct a military road in Mississippi. Later, assigned to the Seventh Infantry, for the next ten years he served at frontier posts including Fort Smith and Fort Gibson. Undoubtedly he received the motivation to explore during his assignments at these posts by interacting with or observing frontiersmen like Nathan Pryor, A.P. Chouteau or Hugh Glenn.

Bonneville, wanted to lead one of these expeditions but he was confronted with two problems, his present assignment and money. The fact that he was assigned to the military and living on a captain's salary made it very unlikely that he could fulfill his dream. Fortunately, the country was not at war and Indian tribes in his region were relatively quiet, so when he petitioned Major General Macomb in Washington for a leave of absence for one year, his request was granted. His first obstacle overcome, Bonneville proceeded to make contacts to raise money. Enlisting the aid of a friend, Alfred Seton, member of a prominent mercantile family in New York, the two formed an association of businessmen interested in the fur trade. Once he completed the task of gaining sponsors and financing the necessary equipment, Bonneville departed for the west to Fort Osage near present day Kansas City. After recruiting 110 men, on May 1st of 1832, his expedition set out for the west to trap furs. Time was important because his leave of absence from the army would expire in October. Following what later would become known as the Oregon Trail, in August, the expedition reached the Green River across the continental divide in the Rocky Mountains. Although furs were obtained in abundance, they were "summer furs," not as full and elegant as those trapped in early spring. They were sold at the fall rendezvous to one of the fur companies owned by John Jacob Astor who became America's first millionaire and later played a role in introducing Bonneville to Irving.

Obviously overextending his leave, Bonneville sent a request by courier for additional time citing his map making as a valuable contribution to the nation. However, miscommunication resulted, papers were not delivered and there were even rumors that he had died. Assuming that his request had been received, Bonneville continued to explore, map and send contingents to explore the vast region. One, expedition led by Joseph Walker, laid out the primary trail to California, later called the California Trail by immigrants, another discovered the Great Salt Lake region.

Satisfied with his accomplishments, Bonneville returned east during August of 1835, unaware of the problems that lie ahead. Upon arriving in New York, Bonneville learned that he had been dropped from the army two years previously, absent without leave.

Appealing the decision to the Secretary of the Army and the Major General he found both to be sympathetic. However, in appealing to his fellow officers at Fort Gibson he found them to be strongly opposed, evidently concerned regarding the potential of their own advancement because peacetime promotions in the army were infrequent. However, their concerns were overruled in Washington and he was reinstated to Captain.

The delay proved to be a blessing in disguise. While he waited Bonneville composed a manuscript detailing his exploration and, during a meeting with John Jacob Astor, he was introduced to the famous author Washington Irving. Intrigued by Bonneville's story, Irving purchased the manuscript which later became the basis for his book *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville, USA*, one of three he published about the exploration and settlement of the northwest.

Bonneville's life in the army resumed. He participated in both the Seminole and Mexican Wars and was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel. Later, he served as commandant of several western posts, then retired in 1861, but immediately re-enlisted when the Civil War began, serving in various office capacities then retiring in 1865. Promoted to Brigadier General, he died in 1878 and was buried at Fort Smith, the oldest officer on the retirement list. Benjamin Bonneville's life and adventures had come full circle.

