

IF SOMETHING CAN GO WRONG...IT WILL

One dictum from the list of Murphy's Laws, "if something can go wrong," certainly applied to first lieutenant Zebulon Pike's expedition in 1806. There had been jubilation following the United States negotiation of the Louisiana Purchase with France in 1803. The next year an expedition promoted by President Thomas Jefferson and led by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark set forth to explore the northwest portion of this new acquisition. The expedition, concluded in 1806, was an unqualified success that provided detailed reports on topography, Indian tribes and the flora and fauna of the region. Spurred by the information gathered from that expedition, a second was planned to explore the west and southwest. Jefferson placed James Wilkinson, the recently appointed Governor of the Louisiana Territory, himself a Brigadier General, in charge of the venture. The objectives were similar to those of the previous expedition, but in addition the boundaries between the recent purchase and Spanish territory were to be defined and the prospects of using the Arkansas River as a navigable portion of a trade route to Santa Fe was to be determined. Pike had recently completed a successful venture involving the headwaters of the Mississippi River and Wilkinson immediately selected him to lead the new expedition. In addition, the governor included his son, James Jr., also a first lieutenant, to address the task of surveying the Arkansas River to determine if it was navigable west of Three Forks, where it joined the Grand and Verdigris Rivers. Another of his mission objectives was to encourage peaceful relations with Chief Cashegera and the Grand River Osage.

On July 15, 1806, the Pike expedition departed from Fort Bellefontaine near St. Louis. Following the Missouri River to western Missouri, they obtained horses from friendly Indians and turned northwest to the Republican River in southeastern Nebraska, then south into central Kansas. Reaching the Arkansas River in late October, Pike divided the expedition into two groups, one led by Wilkinson would proceed down the river for an estimated fourteen day trip, the other, under Pike, would continue west. The total contingent in the expedition only numbered about twenty men and he assigned seven members to Wilkinson however supplies proved to be limited for both groups.

The Wilkinson expedition left on October 28 and immediately ran into trouble due to shallow water. Forced to drag the canoes with their supplies, the troupe made slow progress and were soon forced to abandon them, carrying what they could on their backs. Ten days later, the river again became navigable, pirogues were hollowed out of cotton wood trees and they continued until they were again grounded and one boat with supplies overturned. By this time, ice had begun to form on the river, but as the haggard men continued south near the future Kansas and Oklahoma border, lady luck smiled down. Wilkinson met a hunting party of Osage and was recognized as having befriended one of their chiefs who he had previously met on a peace mission in Washington DC. The tribesmen assisted in replenishing the party with food supplies and a canoe and they continued down river. Wading and occasionally chopping through ice, the party finally reached a point near present day Ponca City on December 3rd, but had to abandon the canoe. Continuing on foot along the river Wilkinson's expedition finally reached Three Forks on December 23rd, and the Osage camp of Cashesegea or "Big Track." His estimated

two week journey had taken 54 days. After resting and replenishing supplies, the expedition continued down the Arkansas reaching the Mississippi on January 9, 1807. The journey not only far exceeded the estimate of time, but verified that north of Three Forks the Arkansas River was undependable as a navigable route to Santa Fe. In addition to the unforeseen hardships, an unintended consequence, “a lingering nervous disease,” essentially ended Wilkinson’s military career.

Meanwhile, after sending Wilkinson down the Arkansas, Pike’s own situation began deteriorating. Seeking the headwaters of the Red River, part of the southern boundary of the Louisiana Territory, his expedition followed the Arkansas west and became embroiled in winter conditions in the Rocky Mountains. On November 15, 1806 he recorded the first sighting of what became known as “Pike’s Peak.” Not equipped for mountain exploration, hungry, cold and exhausted, the expedition finally encamped near today’s Alamosa, Colorado, then in Spanish Territory. On February 26th, Pike and his men were captured by Spanish soldiers, and marched to headquarters in Los Coabos, Mexico. Treated with respect by Spanish officials, Pike and most of his men were released later that spring and returned to Fort Jesup near Natchitoches, Louisiana July 1, 1807.

Questions linger regarding Pike’s actions starting with inadequate provisions, followed by beginning westward exploration into uncharted territory in July, traveling northwest to Nebraska when the mission was to determine southern boundaries, or proceeding west into the mountains in November. Although Zebulon Pike and his men were courageous beyond a doubt, some of his decisions make it apparent that Murphy had some help.

