



Z.M. Pike, Capt. U.S.I. Near Colorado Springs Winter, 1806

by Joe H. McCracken III

NOVEMBER 15, SATURDAY — At two o'clock in the afternoon I thought I could distinguish a mountain to our right, which appeared like a small blue cloud; viewed it with a spyglass, and it was still more confirmed in my conjecture. — I commented regarding this vision to Dr. Robinson.

The foregoing excerpt from Captain Pike's diary and fieldnotes of the 1806 expedition is the first indication of his view of the mountain peak that was eventually to bear his name.¹ Captain Pike and his men had established a more or less permanent campsite near the present city of Pueblo, Colorado, and from there made explorations up the Arkansas River Valley and through and around various locations in the Rocky Mountain areas west of the present cities of Denver and Colorado Springs.²

Leaving the Pueblo camp in early November, Pike and his men followed the Arkansas River Valley in a general westerly direction. In the days following the November 15 diary entry Captain Pike selected Privates Brown and Miller and the expedition's physician, Dr. John R. Robinson, to accompany him on a further exploration north toward the mountain peak he had first viewed on November 15.

NOVEMBER 27, THURSDAY — Commenced our march up the mountain, and in about an hour arrived at the summit of this chain; here we found the snow middle deep; no sign of beast or bird inhabiting this region. The thermometer which stood at 9° above zero at the foot of the mountain, here fell to 4° below zero (22° Fahrenheit). The summit of the Grand Peak, which was entirely bare of vegetation and covered with snow, now appeared at the distance of 15 or 16 miles from us, and as high again as what we had ascended and would have taken a whole day's march to have arrived at its base, when I believe no human being could have ascended to its pinnacle.

Their clothing becoming in bad state of repair and condition, and being virtually out of provisions, and with no big game anywhere, that day's entry continues:

We descended — found our baggage safe, but the provisions all destroyed. It began to snow, and we sought shelter under the side of a projecting rock — where we, all four, made a meal on one partridge and a piece of deer's ribs — being the first we had eaten in that forty-eight hours.

It is probable that the lower mountain that Captain Pike reached, being some miles south to southeast of the Peak, was Cheyenne Mountain (8 miles southwest of Colorado Springs), but quite possibly it could have been either what was later known as Blue Mountain or Black Mountain.

DECEMBER 3, WEDNESDAY — Dr. Robinson and myself, with assistants, went out and took the altitude of the North mountain, on the base of a mile — The perpendicular height of the mountain from the level of the prairie, was 10,581 feet, and admitting that the prairie was 8,000 feet from the level of the sea, it would make the elevation of this peak 18,581 feet³ — Indeed, it was so remarkable as to be known to all the savage nation for hundreds of miles around and to be spoken of with admiration by the Spaniards of N. Mexico — Indeed, in all our wanderings in the mountains it was never out of sight, except when in a valley, from the 14th November to the 27th January (1807).

It is not true, as many have believed, that Pike named the mountain in honor of himself. Throughout his diary and fieldnotes and on his maps he refers to it as "Highest Peak" or "Grand Peak." In reality of course it is not the highest peak in the Colorado Rockies, but nowhere in his journals and fieldnotes is there reference or mention of his viewing or measuring any other peak in Colorado which we know today to be somewhat higher. For many years it continued to simply be referred to as the Grand Mountain or Grand Peak of Colorado. In 1818 Dr. John H. Robinson secured the publication of his own notes and references regarding the geography of the exploratory trip made with Captain Pike and therein made mention for the first time of "Pike's Mountain."

Zebulon Montgomery Pike was born in 1779 and at age fifteen was a cadet in his father's regiment, and was made First Lieutenant in 1800. In 1805, at the instigation of President Jefferson, he began the exploration of the sources of the Mississippi, and in 1806 began the exploration of the western areas of the Louisiana Purchase. He was promoted up the ranks in the army and attained the rank of Brigadier General in 1813, and that year died of wounds received in the expedition against the British at York (Toronto), Ontario, Canada.

NOTES

- ¹ *The Journals of Zebulon Montgomery Pike*, Vol. I and II, University of Oklahoma Press, 1966;
The Southwestern Expedition of Zebulon M. Pike, edited by Quaife, Donnelley & Sons, 1925
- ² During the remainder of December, 1806, Pike and the expedition continued their exploration of the Arkansas Valley, passing through and over the Royal Gorge, and continuing on up the Arkansas, passing by, or even through Harmon and Joey Leonard's ranch.
- ³ Modern surveys confirm the top of the Peak to be 14,110 feet. Pike erroneously believed that the "prairie" was 8,000 feet, when in reality it was probably closer to 4,000. Considering the crudeness of the instruments available and the weather conditions, such errors are understandable.