

HOW THE WEST WAS LOST

A road trip in search of the Oregon Trail

BY TOM CHAFFIN

There are places in the American West—a mountaintop, say, or a parking lot—where you can stand and know that right there, at precisely those coordinates, more than 150 years ago, John C. Frémont stopped, opened his journal, and wrote down what he saw. To do this, to stand in such places and read Frémont's notes, is to learn the truth of that old line "The past is another country." One of the most controversial figures of his era, Frémont was, variously, the leader of the conquest of California, a U.S. senator, a gold and railroad speculator, the first presidential candidate of the Republican Party (he lost to Buchanan in 1856), and a Union general in the Civil War. But it is Frémont "The Pathfinder" who is best remembered. In 1842 expansionists in Washington sent him on the first of two federal expeditions to survey what became known as the Oregon Trail. Illuminated with poetic observations and survival tips, the seven sequential maps that he and his cartographer, Charles Preuss, published in 1846—the second, third, and fourth of which appear in the following pages—served as a kind of Baedeker guide for the settlers who came caravanning in his footsteps, visiting themselves upon the West like a plague. By 1891 his wife, the author Jessie Benton Frémont, could say of him, with only slight exaggeration, "Railroads followed the lines of his journeyings—a nation followed his maps to their resting place—and cities have risen on the ashes of his lonely campfires." A few summers ago, accompanied by my wife, Meta, and our dog, Zoie, I embarked upon an adventure in anachronism, a pilgrimage in search of the country of the past. Traveling not by ox-drawn wagon but by sport-utility vehicle, guided by his journals and maps, we retraced Frémont's trail.

Tom Chaffin teaches U.S. history at Emory University. He is the author of Fatal Glory: Narciso López and the First Clandestine U.S. War Against Cuba and is presently completing a book about John C. Frémont and American expansionism.

TOPOGRAPHICAL MAP
OF THE
ROAD FROM MISSOURI TO OREGON
COMMENCING AT THE MOUTH OF THE KANSAS IN THE MISSOURI RIVER
AND ENDING AT THE MOUTH OF THE WALLAH-WALLAH IN THE COLUMBIA
In VII Sections

SECTION II

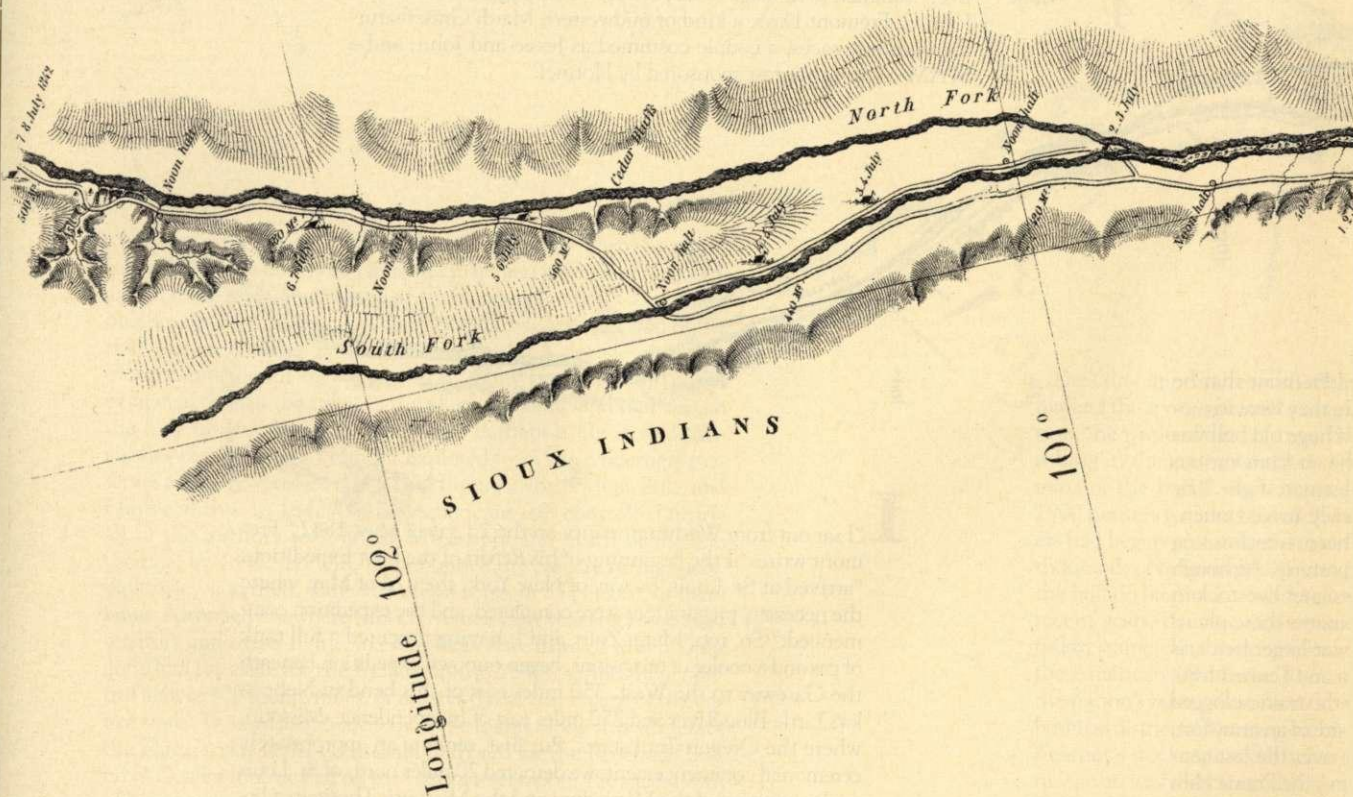
*From the field notes and journal of Capt. J.C. Frémont,
and from sketches and notes made on the ground by his assistant Charles Preuss*

Compiled by Charles Preuss, 1846

By order of the Senate of the United States

SCALE 10 MILES TO THE INCH.

Lithogr. by E. Weber & Co. Baltimore



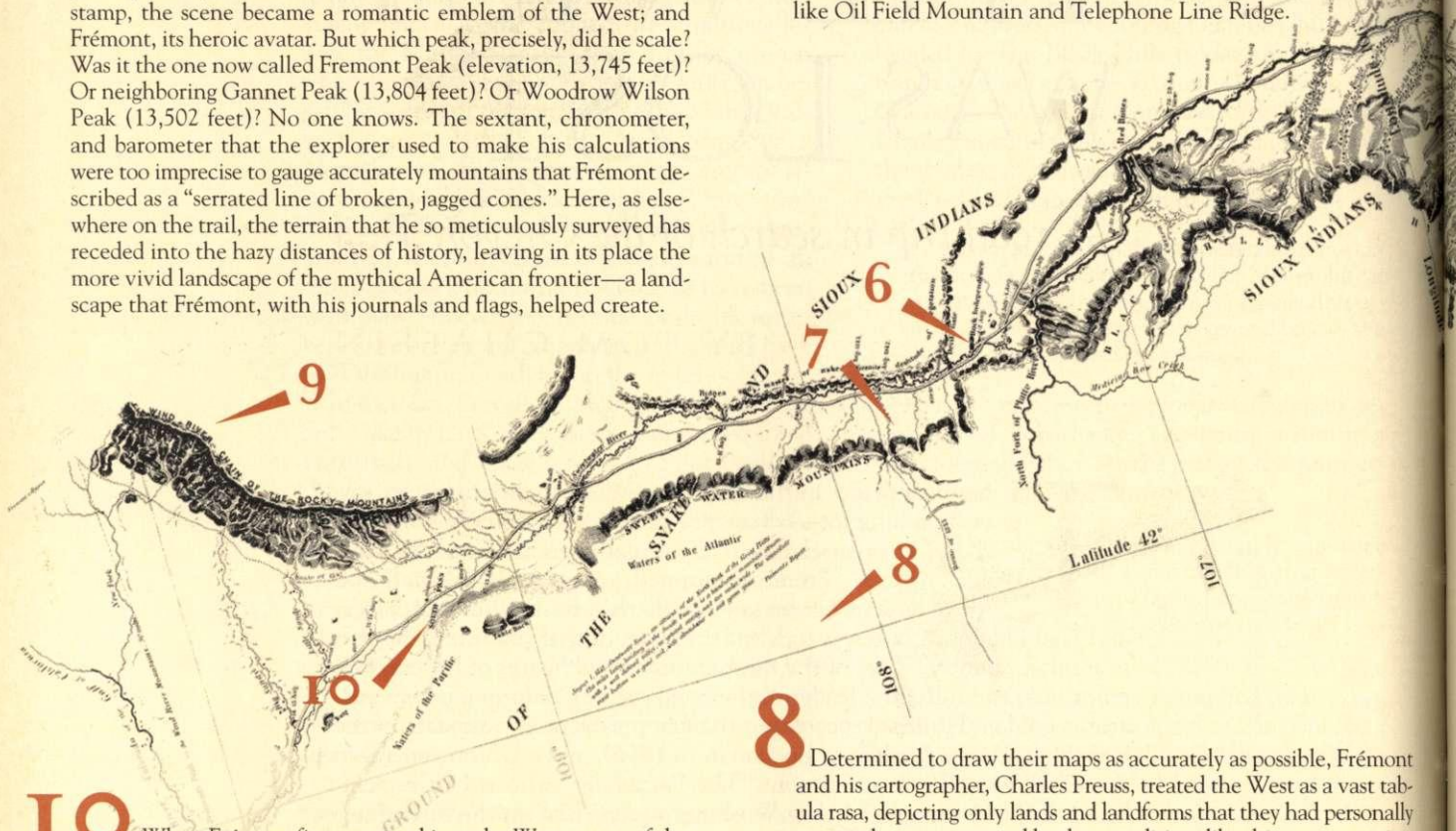
REMARKS

1. The figures on the road indicate the distance in miles from Westport Landing.
2. Game - Antelope and Buffalo, the latter in innumerable bands.
3. Timber is extremely scarce, except on the islands. Some driftwood and buffalo excrement makes the fuel, as that of the camels does in the deserts of Arabia.
4. Good guard ought to be kept. Pawnees, if they do not kill, will at least take what they can from the travellers by force if they are strong enough, and by stealth if too weak to act openly.
5. With this section the prairie ends, and the barren sage (artemisia) country begins.



9 Somewhere in the Wind River Range, Frémont scaled what he mistakenly believed to be the tallest mountain in the Rockies. “The barometer stood at 18.293, the attached thermometer at 44°,” he recorded in his *Report*, “giving for the elevation of this summit 13,570 feet.” To commemorate the moment, he retrieved from his pack a U.S. flag emblazoned with a bald eagle clutching arrows and a peace pipe in its talons; raising this modified Old Glory, he staged what amounted to the 1840s version of a photo-op. Described grandly in his journals, and eventually memorialized on a five-cent stamp, the scene became a romantic emblem of the West; and Frémont, its heroic avatar. But which peak, precisely, did he scale? Was it the one now called Fremont Peak (elevation, 13,745 feet)? Or neighboring Gannet Peak (13,804 feet)? Or Woodrow Wilson Peak (13,502 feet)? No one knows. The sextant, chronometer, and barometer that the explorer used to make his calculations were too imprecise to gauge accurately mountains that Frémont described as a “serrated line of broken, jagged cones.” Here, as elsewhere on the trail, the terrain that he so meticulously surveyed has receded into the hazy distances of history, leaving in its place the more vivid landscape of the mythical American frontier—a landscape that Frémont, with his journals and flags, helped create.

7 “The country here is exceedingly picturesque,” Frémont noted at this bend in the trail overlooking the Sweetwater River valley. “Everywhere its deep verdure and profusion of beautiful flowers is in pleasing contrast with the sterile grandeur of the rock and the barrenness of the sandy plain.” For the next 110 years, the area remained so tranquil—so free of clouds and discouraging words—that a gas station and post office on the valley floor came to be known as Home on the Range. But in 1956, Western Nuclear, Inc., built a uranium plant here and turned Home on the Range into a mining camp called Jeffrey City. After uranium prices plummeted in the early 1980s, Jeffrey City went bust. Today there’s a clay-capped waste dump here, and the groundwater is polluted with acid, heavy metals, and uranium. Across the plains Frémont so admired, weed-cracked macadam and gravel roads run from semi-deserted mining towns to poetically named oil and gas fields (Crooks Gap, Jade, Antelope, Sheep Creek) scattered among hills with names like Oil Field Mountain and Telephone Line Ridge.



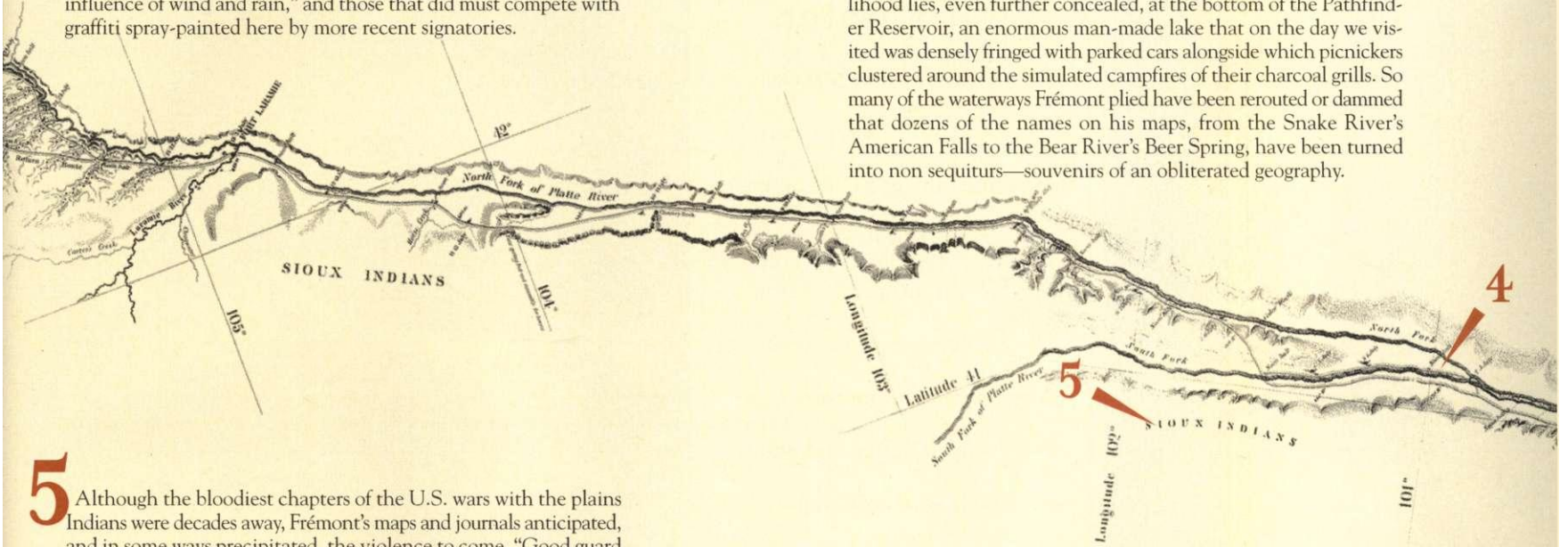
10 When Frémont first ventured into the West, many of the maps then available borrowed heavily from the hearsay of fur trappers, and among the most cherished of these geographic legends was that of the Buenaventura River, a vast waterway reputed to flow from the Rockies to the Pacific. Although Frémont ascertained that there was no such river, in a sense he conjured it into existence: By surveying and publicizing South Pass, a 20-mile gap in the Rockies, he made mass migration over the Continental Divide feasible. Even now, thousands of Americans every year stream through the pass on State Highway 28, thousands more on the hundreds of other roads that today traverse these mountains, completing in a few hours a crossing that once took weeks. Not even The Pathfinder would have dared to predict that within a century not only the waterways he transited but railroads as well would be supplanted by these Buenaventura Rivers of asphalt flowing, often heedless of topography, through dynamited mountains, over canyons and bays, across landfilled swamps—from nearly everywhere to nearly everywhere else.

8 Determined to draw their maps as accurately as possible, Frémont and his cartographer, Charles Preuss, treated the West as a vast tabula rasa, depicting only lands and landforms that they had personally surveyed; areas uncrossed by the expedition, like this one, were simply left blank. A hundred and fifty years later, there is hardly a square foot of America that hasn’t been photographed from space, digitized, and posted on the Internet, let alone surveyed. This corner of Fremont County, Wyoming, is so empty that it’s still easy to imagine what this terra incognita would have looked like, how terribly and magnificently strange it must have seemed—as strange as the moon—to those first migrants from the East. On today’s government maps these sparsely populated acres look like this:



COURTESY WYO. DEPT. OF TRANSPORTATION

6 Independence Rock, a 193-foot-tall outcrop of red granite, is likely the most famous milestone on the trail. Travelers customarily carved their signatures into its surface, and Frémont was no exception: "Among the thickly inscribed names, I made on the hard granite the impression of a large cross, which I covered with a black preparation of India rubber, well calculated to resist the influence of wind and rain." Today few such traces of the migration endure, though you can still find 300 fragmentary miles of wheel ruts, worn into the lime- and sandstone. They materialize at the edges of highways and suburbs, only to dead-end 1,000 or 10,000 yards later, vanishing beneath a railroad escarpment or plunging into a reservoir. Hundreds of the gravestones and monuments left along the trail have been desecrated or removed. At Independence Rock, Frémont's "well calculated" cross is gone, accidentally dynamited during a Fourth of July celebration in 1847. Most of the 50,000 inscriptions other migrants made in the granite failed to "resist the influence of wind and rain," and those that did must compete with graffiti spray-painted here by more recent signatories.

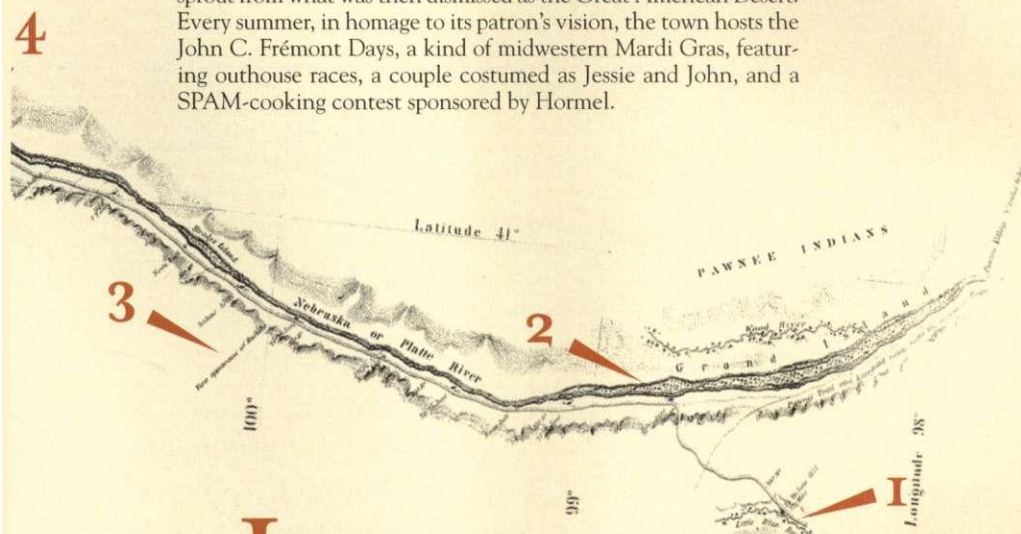


5 Although the bloodiest chapters of the U.S. wars with the plains Indians were decades away, Frémont's maps and journals anticipated, and in some ways precipitated, the violence to come. "Good guard ought to be kept all the way," Frémont warns of this section of the trail. "Sioux Indians are not to be trusted." A decade after Frémont published his report, the U.S. Army began its thirty-year campaign against the tribes of the plains—a campaign that was, in the long run, horrendously successful. Perhaps nothing so distinguishes the West that Frémont explored from the wilderness preserves and impoverished ranch land through which Meta, Zoie, and I drove as this: In 1842, Native Americans still controlled nearly all of the territory west of the Mississippi and north of the Rio Grande; by 1895, the U.S. had obtained, by chicanery, massacre, diplomacy, and theft, some 90 million acres, or 95 percent, of these lands. Although elsewhere tribes have in recent years reclaimed lost territory and treaty rights, in Nebraska—one third of which Congress had set aside for the Indians in the 1830s—tribes now control a mere 100 square miles, or one tenth of one percent of the entire state. The only sign of Sioux to be found along this stretch of the Platte today is the occasional billboard for the Rosebud Casino & Quality Inn, located on the Lakota reservation, 150 miles north of here on the South Dakota border.

4 Upon arriving at this fork in the Platte, Frémont made detailed measurements of both the north and south channels. He calculated their widths, compared the quality of their riverbeds, sounded their depths. It was my intention to make my own reckoning of the place and of Frémont's descriptions of it; to stand on the north bank of the south fork and, gazing out over the shoals of quicksand where the expedition forded, try to imagine the men endeavoring to keep the mules "constantly in motion" and the carts from sinking irretrievably into the silt. The rancher who now owns the site happily gave us a tour, but he prefaced it with this disclaimer: The river's channels have been so extensively reconfigured by farmers and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation that in many places they bear little resemblance to what they looked like 150 years ago. Upstream, near Casper, Wyoming, we stopped to see the spot where Frémont's boat "struck a concealed rock at the foot of a fall" and capsized. Today the fall is gone and the rock at its foot in all likelihood lies, even further concealed, at the bottom of the Pathfinder Reservoir, an enormous man-made lake that on the day we visited was densely fringed with parked cars alongside which picnickers clustered around the simulated campfires of their charcoal grills. So many of the waterways Frémont plied have been rerouted or dammed that dozens of the names on his maps, from the Snake River's American Falls to the Bear River's Beer Spring, have been turned into non sequiturs—souvenirs of an obliterated geography.

3 The "first appearance of Buffalo" so impressed Frémont that he marked the spot, here, on his map. "[E]very where they were in motion," he wrote of the sighting. "Here and there a huge old bull was rolling in the grass and clouds of dust rose in the air from various parts of the bands, each the scene of some obstinate fight." By 1900 hunters had decimated these herds, and newly arrived ranchers had begun replacing them with cattle and sheep, transforming thousands of miles of prairie into croplands and pastures. Although the buffalo has made a modest comeback as a designer livestock in recent years, the species that most visibly dominates these plains today, stampeding westward every summer in ever larger herds, is the American vacationer. Just east of here, Meta and I exited I-80, the nation's busiest east-west thoroughfare, into the traffic-clogged business district of Kearney, Nebraska. Once the site of an army fort, Kearney's stockades and blacksmith shops have over the last century given way to factory outlets, motels, gas stations, the Prairie Hills Golf and Ski Club, a car museum called Chevyland U.S.A., and replicas of stockades and blacksmith shops. Pilgrims seeking prosperity still pass through here, migrating in record numbers to the sprawling e-business boomtowns of the New West, places like Denver and Portland and Boise, but on the summer afternoon we stopped in Kearney, most visitors—camping gear bungeed to the roofs of their cars, disposable cameras dangling from their wrists—appeared to be headed to the West's national parks, where, amid RVs and gift shops and backpackers, buffalo continue to roam.

2 About 170 miles downstream from this 30-mile-long sliver of earth known as Grand Island (which no longer exists), Frémont and his party camped, on their return from the first expedition, “in an almost impenetrable undergrowth on the left bank of the Platte, in the point of land at its confluence with the Missouri.” It would take them another seventeen days to reach St. Louis. Speeding in the opposite direction, west on I-70 and north on I-29, it took us only eight hours to reach that “point of land,” near what is today Plattsmouth, Nebraska. Frémont’s campsite is even more impenetrable now than it was then: the property presently belongs to the PCS Nitrogen chemical company, which doesn’t welcome visitors. Undaunted, we continued westward another 60 miles to Fremont, a town named by local Republicans during the elections of 1856. As its residents proudly remind you, the rival Democratic burg of Buchanan had turned into a ghost town by the time its namesake left office, whereas Fremont thrives still. Although Frémont never camped there, the colossal Hormel meat-packing plant at the town’s edge is in a sense a monument to his legacy. The explorer had insisted that an arcadia could be made to sprout from what was then dismissed as the Great American Desert. Every summer, in homage to its patron’s vision, the town hosts the John C. Frémont Days, a kind of midwestern Mardi Gras, featuring outhouse races, a couple costumed as Jessie and John, and a SPAM-cooking contest sponsored by Hormel.



I “I sat out from Washington city on the 2d day of May, 1842,” Frémont writes at the beginning of his *Report of the First Expedition*, “arrived at St. Louis, by way of New York, the 22d of May, where the necessary preparations were completed, and the expedition commenced.” So, too, Meta, Zoie, and I, having procured a full tank of gas and a cooler of provisions, began our own expedition beneath the Gateway to the West, 350 miles east of this bend in Nebraska’s Little Blue River and 250 miles east of Independence, Missouri, where the Oregon Trail starts. But first, seeking an appropriately ceremonial commencement, we detoured 20 miles north of St. Louis to the juncture of the Mississippi and the Missouri. There, in a litter-strewn clearing on the Illinois bank of the mingling rivers, stands a weather-worn colonnade dedicated to Lewis and Clark. The two explorers had wintered in the area, in 1804, before departing on their own epic journey to the Pacific coast. I’m not sure what I expected to discover at that hallowed stretch of riverbank from which so many other pilgrims had “sat out”—something majestic, I suppose. What we found instead resembled nothing so much as a dilapidated rest stop on some forsaken two-lane highway, the sort of place where local teenagers go on Friday nights to get drunk and burn things.