



Journal of a Trapper: Nine Years in the Rocky Mountains 1834-1843

Osborne Russell

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Journal of a Trapper is one of the most important first hand accounts of the mountain man era. In it, Russell provides a detailed narrative describing the day-to-day life of an ordinary trapper in the Rocky Mountains. The Journal begins when Russell hired on with Nathaniel Wyeth's second expedition to the west. He participated in the establishment of Fort Hall, and later became a free trapper. He trapped for nine years in the greater Yellowstone region before leaving the mountains to settle in Oregon.

Osborne Russell (1814 – August 2, 1892) was a mountain man and politician who helped form the government of the U.S. state of Oregon. He was born in Maine.

Russell first came to the Oregon Country in 1834 as a member of Nathaniel J. Wyeth's second expedition. He returned to the country in 1842 with the Elijah White party. He participated in the May 2, 1843 Champoege Meeting, voting in favor of forming a government. In October of that year he was selected by the First Executive Committee to serve as the supreme judge for the Provisional Government of Oregon and served until May 14, 1844. In 1844, he was elected to the second Executive Committee of the Provisional Government of Oregon. He was allied with the group that planned to create an independent Republic of the Pacific and thus was unsuccessful in his run for governor of the Provisional Government in 1845, losing to George Abernethy. Russell eventually went to California.

Although not published until well after the establishment of Yellowstone National Park, Osborne's Journal of a Trapper contains an early description of the Lamar Valley or Osborne's Secluded Valley in Yellowstone.

Journal of a Trapper: Nine Years in the Rocky Mountains 1834-1843 Details

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Matthew Dambro says

Wonderful journal of the mountain men at the end of the fur trade. A real joy to read and oozes authenticity.

Sandra says

This was a boring in spots but there were highlights of a past and scenery and even animals and their behavior that we can only imagine now. The insight into different Native American tribes was fascinating and his descriptions of animals and tribes and their lifestyles and characteristics at the end of the journal were very enlightening.

Donna says

This is four-star for me, but your mileage may vary. Spelling and punctuation are not edited for flow, but Russell's orthographic currents are far easier to navigate than the Lewis & Clark Journals. Still, I like the journals of my explorers unvarnished. This journal runs from 1834 to 1843. The Little Big Horn is still a river. Russell is mainly trapping beaver. What I love about this book is how closely it brings me into an unimaginable life. It's all there. Days of looking for places to trap, hunting meat, maintaining horses. Not easy. They break down and need to eat. They get shot out from under you. The journal is a masterpiece of this mix of dailiness, then all of a sudden being face to face with a grizzly bear or crawling 2 days to the main camp because you took an arrow in the hip and can't walk. Someone's looking for you too. But you didn't lose the journal or the stub of pencil.

That Russell kept a journal says he knew he was somewhere special and that it was fleeting. Trapping beaver in the Rockies didn't last very long. Nor did much else.

"We travelled up about 40 mls and arranged an encampment in a beautiful valley as the weather began to grow cold--In the year 1836 large bands of Buffaloe could be seen in almost every little Valley on the small branches of this Stream at this time the only traces which could be seen of them were the scattered bones of those that had been killed. Their trails which had been made in former years deeply indented in the earth were over grown with grass and weeds. The trappers often remarked to each other as they rode over these lonely plains that it was time for the White man to leave the mountains as Beaver and game had nearly disappeared."

Russell is not a frustrating journal-keeper. He is a keen observer of landscape, Indian life, the oddities of Yellowstone, and the perils of civilization.

Since all of my memories of Yellowstone are faded segments from 'The Wonderful World of Disney' replete with tourists pointing Brownies at Old Faithful, loveable black bears and Air Streams; this more detailed view is appreciated.

"It would be natural for me to suppose that after escaping all the danger attendant for upon nearly nine years residence in a wild inhospitable region like the Rocky Mountains where I was daily and a great part of the

time hourly anticipating danger from hostile Savages and other sources, I should on arriving in a civilized and enlightened community live in comparative security free from the harassing intrigues of Dames Fortunes Eldest daughter but I found it was all a delusion for danger is not always the greatest when most apparent..."

He settled in that place, the Willamette Valley, after the melancholy task of saying good-bye to his trapping partner of many years who decided to make his way back to Vermont. One of my favourite passages is his description of the Great Salt Lake from the top of a mountain, but before I return to the sounds of Saturday's lawn mowers, I'll go with this account of the dangers of the buffalo hunt.

"The most general mode practiced by the Indians for killing Buffaloe is running upon horseback and shooting them with arrows but it requires a degree of experience for both man and horse to kill them in this manner with any degree of safety, particularly in places where the ground is rocky and uneven. The horse that is well trained for this purpose not only watches the ground over which he is running and avoids the holes ditches and rocks by shortening or extending his leaps but also the animal which he is pursuing in order to prevent being 'horned' when tis brot suddenly to bay which is done instantaneously and if the Buffaloe wheel to the right the horse passes as quick as thought to the left behind it and thereby avoids its horns but if the horse in close pursuit wheels on the same side with the Buffaloe he comes directly in contact with its horns and with one stroke the horses entrails are often torn out and his rider thrown headlong to the ground."

This edition edited by Aubrey L. Haines has more biographical material, excellent footnotes, and maps tracing Russell's routes.

Reg Brown says

I now know all the streams, etc. Etc.Etc.

I thought I would be reading about the trials and escapades of a mountain man.. but what I got was a travel log of all the rivers and streams in the "west". I know to go west or north or south or east to find this stream or river or meadow but I still don't know much about the life of a mountain man. This was supposedly written by an uneducated person from Boston.. I wish I could write as well as this uneducated Bostonian "did"

robert g. bentley says

A good record of the life of a mountain man

Gave me a good picture of a mountain man's life . Also gave me a better feeling of an Indians life.

Kurtbg says

Herein lies the journal of a trapper in the Yellowstone region in the 1830's.

The author was in his early 20's when he decided to join an expedition. He ended up as trapper looking mainly for Beaver pelts (as was the fashion of the times).

What is included in his journal is sometimes matter of fact, basic information on where he went and what he did. Most of it takes the form of "21 mar. went 5 miles to ... laid some traps... met some ... indians/other trappers... 22 mar. etc" Some indians were friendly (snake, flathead) and others not so tolerant (Blackfoot).

I felt the absent of information was also interesting. He didn't set his opinions down too often, nor did he keep a tally of how many beaver pelts he obtained. He did mention when he killed buffalo (about 1 bull per day or 2 cows, if he could) and deer. I was surprised on how many bison were killed for just him or for him and a fellow trapper. I find it odd that meat from one bull would only last a day.

Sometimes it was smoked and preserved, but it wasn't documented he did it every time, nor what parts were used for food.

At one point he stated he could get \$5 (that's 1830's USD, not 2011 USD) for a beaver pelt.

He also detailed markup's on prices up to 2000 times.

One series of entries related being attacked by Blackfoot, shot through with an arrow, walked 60 miles in 3 days with a hurt companion and finally made it to a Fort. Fear? anxiety? thoughts of death? Nope, all in a days work. Man, people back then were tough.

The book retained his spellings and punctuations. He appears to have had a real hatred for the period as sentences run on with just a month day indicating a change.

Spellings varied sometimes. The english language must have been much more mutable back then.

Russell refers to Epishimores which seem to be another name for a buffalo pelt or a pelt prepared in a specific manner. Google brings up 5 entries - 2 regarding this book. I'm not sure of its origin.

Even in the 1830's the author knew that with the amount of animal killing going on that many would be gone relatively soon. He was just one trapper killing buffalo, deer, hares, bears. etc every day. He trapped in the same areas. One person alone could probably decimate an entire beaver population in an area in a short period of time.

Lisa Kearns says

Osborne Russell was a New England born man who left to find his destiny in the Rocky Mountains in the 1830s and 1840s. He spent 9 years living with friendly Indians, trapping, riding, fighting hostile Indians, working for various fur companies, and keeping a daily diary.

This book is his (basically) unedited diary, and it's a treasure. It's hard to read because it's basically a hundred-page long paragraph without much punctuation. It tells of temperatures, and distances, and describes the wonders of Yellowstone. It talks of hunting and cooking, huge herds of buffalo, suffering in winter, the Rendezvous the Mountain Men are famous for, and his fellow mountain men. Punctuation aside,

it's one of the most authentic accounts of the trapper days I've ever read.

Most useful are the footnotes in the back of the book, which the editor added to help explain places and people Russell refers to. There are also many maps and reproductions of paintings by Charles Russell (no relation to the author) and others which set the tone for the book. I also enjoyed the biography of Osborne Russell, added by the editor, which prefaced the diary part of the book.

As you read this book, you will see his attitude towards wildlife change. At first he was happy to shoot multiple buffalo and only take choice parts. Towards the end he writes about the way the Indians kill only what they can use, and that perhaps white men should move on before all the wildlife is gone.

When Russell decided to leave the mountains, he wrote a beautiful poem (included in this book) which portrays a gentle, romantic side of the man that wasn't apparent in the rough and tumble of his diary. And the inclusion of some personal letters he wrote to family back East round out the whole picture of his personality.

I highly recommend this book to anyone who loves reading about the Old West, the Mountain Men, or historical diaries.

Ravi Mikkelsen says

Super interesting read of life in the Rocky Mountains during the 1830s and early 1840s. "A party came from the United States" Wild to think that they weren't part of the US then and to read about the annual supply wagons coming from the States and buying a bit of coffee or sugar or a cotton shirt. Most of what they wore were animal hides, including their footwear.

The format is in the original journal entry style with little to no punctuation so that makes it difficult to track at parts, but other than that, it's a great read.

Patrick Murphy says

A true and amazing picture.

For those willing to be patient, and those seeking a clear descriptoon of a mountain man's life in the Rocky Mountains of the early 1800s, this story delivers. I've learned from here not hollywood's version, but the truth and vigor of those who journeyed into an unknown and dangerous landscape. This is a journal, written with eloquence, by the man who lived it. Yes, there are passages a bit thick with directions--due south along the river for 15 miles to a fork flowing easterly through a canyon of high cliffs--but there are also unfluffed reports of encounters with the tribes, friendly and not, with grizzly bears, vast herds of buffalo, elk, and antelope, and the material of the day to day "doing" of such an incredibal part of our history. Highly recommended for those of us who wish we could have lived it, and those who simply want to know the reality of the wilderness that became the United States.

Dustin says

Interesting read

I liked it for the most part, but there were huge sections of just dates, miles, and directions with no real narrative. It would probably be more fulfilling with a map to follow. The actual narrative accounts were fascinating, and when he took the time to add his thoughts and impressions of the country his words jumped from the page. Unfortunately those instances are few. I would not recommend this to the casual reader, but it may be worthwhile for those with a deep interest in 19th century woodsmanship, trapping, and Native American interaction.

Lance Schichtl says

Great read

Very detailed read on the life of a mountain man !!! Very interesting to picture the land that the author traveled.

Robert Lewter says

Pretty much like a ship's log. Not much color commentary. Interesting.

Dana says

Osborne Russell has given the world one of the most true accounts of a trapper's life working in the Rocky Mountains. That was his goal when he strived to get it published. He became so incensed when he read other more colorful trappers embellished stories that he set out to publish his journal. Unfortunately, he died before he could realize his dream.

This was a man who was more than a trapper who accompanied Jim Bridger's Rocky Mountain Fur Company. After 10 years of living in the mountains, he settled in Oregon for a while and became a judge. After losing an election for governor, he joins the gold rush to California. His life before and after trapping gives an insight into an interesting, multi-faceted human being. He truly dispels the notion that mountain men were illiterate hermits. He comes across as a thoughtful, serious and peaceful man.

There are priceless and even humorous stories but I do have to warn you that there is quite a bit of detail describing exact directions of his travels. It might be interesting to some and it does lend credibility to the painstaking measures Russell goes to to give as truthful account of the experiences, ways and lives of a trapper.

Gil Lance says

A real historic journey

Very good rendition of living in and off nature in the northwest. One can visualize the journeys, battles, and places from the vivid descriptions the author

William Rabjohn says

Osborne Russell's journal is a fascinating read. The edition I read kept his original spelling and punctuation which made it difficult at times. No paragraphs and no periods! Often the reader enters the doldrums of the author's record keeping of navigation and geographic sightings as in "I traveled ENE 9 miles to the Fork of Milk Creek and set 4 beaver traps" but then there are surreal moments that are unbelievable if it was a work of fiction like being shot twice by arrows and dragging his body for 65 miles to the nearest fort and almost dying in the process, only to get patched up and hunt for beaver 10 days later. He faces grizzly bears, the elements, Indians, and the weakness of other men. I have traveled to the Grand Tetons and Yellowstone N.P. and his minute descriptions fulfilled my fantasy of "What did the first men think of when they saw this magnificent beauty?" Despite his spelling, he changed my view of mountain men from being brutes who would rather face the elements than be in society to men who were actually quite intelligent. He quotes classical works and mentions that he read Shakespeare, Bible commentaries, Geology, and Chemistry in the Fort's library. He humbly submits a poem which is actually quite good when you consider he wrote in on a mountain top under elements that soft, modern men would run from. Also, the edition I read had ample footnotes that transferred the names of mountains, valleys, and rivers to their current names and supplied additional information about these geographical locations. He even has the foresight to predict the extinction of the Buffalo and other species because of the massive harvesting of them some 50 years before the US government sends Bill Cody "Buffalo Bill" out to the prairies to get rid of them. This is a must read for anyone who loves Western history.
