

B&C CONSER

PROFILE: Francis Parkman (1823-1893)

By Leonard H. Wurman B&C Regular Member

Although the Boone and Crockett Club is best known for its conservation successes, some Members achieved distinction in other fields. Francis Parkman, whose best-known book, *The Oregon Trail*, is still in print, overcame enormous physical and emotional handicaps to become one of America's greatest nineteenth century historians.

Parkman was born in Boston on September 16th, 1823. He came from a long line of Unitarian clergymen, and his ancestors were well represented in the colonial wars. His grandfather, the twelfth son of a poor clergyman, became one of Boston's wealthiest merchants. His father was a dignified yet unimaginative preacher who was always socially and politically correct. Turned off by these puritanical characteristics, Francis developed an antipathy for his religion.

From the age of eight until thirteen, Francis lived with his mother's parents

in West Medford. Their farm was adjacent to the Middlesex Fells, a rough, rocky 4,000-acre tract unfit for agriculture. Francis walked a mile to school, detested it, skipped class often, and spent much of his time in the Fells collecting, trapping, and hunting wildlife with his bow and arrow.

Harvard Years

Francis entered Harvard in 1840 but, rather than study, preferred to practice marksmanship and hunt the Cambridge marshes. By his sophomore year, however, he became a serious student, reading the classics in their original Greek, Latin, and Italian languages, and aggressively challenging his body with boxing and circus riding. He was an avid reader. Among his favorite books were the romantic, but fictional tales of James Fennimore Cooper. He was, and remained, a Boston aristocrat, never comfortable with the average man. In later years, his magazine articles would argue against democracy and universal education and suffrage.

Parkman developed a deep interest in the French and English struggle for North America, an area neglected by scholars. Believing that personal experience was important to the historian, Parkman spent years visiting the locations of the conflict. He examined the battle areas, sought records, letters and other historical documents, interviewed descendants of those who had fought, and kept extensive journals of his trips.

After his freshman year, he headed north into New Hampshire's White Mountains, where his solo climb up a previously "inaccessible precipice" showed extreme courage for a 17-year-old. The journey continued on foot to the Canadian border. Carrying no tent and minimal food, he went hungry when the fish weren't biting. He and an Indian guide together downed a cow moose.

He traveled to Lake George and Lake Champlain the next summer, examining the old battle sites. After his junior year, he followed the Richelieu River, the great water highway of the Old French War, from Lake Champlain to Montreal, and then down the St. Lawrence River to Quebec. He had now traveled the routes of the French explorers Champlain and LaSalle, as well as both the French and British armies. He also realized that he would have to go west to find Indians who still practiced the same primitive lifestyles as did the Indians during the Old French War.

Europe and Law School

Despite Parkman's adventurous spirit, his health was not well. In the fall of 1843, he suffered the first in a series of breakdowns. Needing a change, he left Harvard and sailed for Europe.

Parkman spent eight months touring Sicily, Italy, Switzerland, France, England, and Scotland. For someone raised in the drab Puritanism of New England, the colorful, romantic, and historic continent was fascinating. He felt he had to understand Catholicism if he was to write the history of the Jesuit missionaries that penetrated French North America. James Fennimore Cooper's novels, which he found translated throughout Europe, portrayed the Indian as the noble savage, an image Parkman was to refute with his own writings.

To please his father, Parkman entered Harvard Law School. Since his stud-



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ies only demanded one hour daily, he pursued his interest in history and published several short stories.

Parkman traveled through western Pennsylvania to Buffalo during the summer of 1845. From there, traveling on a steamer to Detroit, he commented on the dirty, motley, and dumb immigrants seeking a new home. His elitist "Brahmin" snobbery would affect, for his whole life, Parkman's ability to understand the common man. He then sailed up Lake Huron to Sault Sainte Marie, and then back to Detroit and Buffalo. His route home took him through New York's Mohawk Valley, the site of many colonial forts.

In Michigan, he went through six trunks of papers of a lieutenant who had been a prisoner of Pontiac during the siege of Detroit. At Mackinaw, he had hoped to contact Indians in their native state, but was disappointed to find them perpetually drunk and unable to help his historical record.

The Oregon Trail

Back in Boston, Parkman developed a complex of symptoms that would critically affect him for the rest of his life. "My Enemy," as he termed it, included, at one time or another, indigestion, insomnia, knee arthritis, and severe photophobia (intolerance of light). In addition to an apparently permanent visual difficulty, the most debilitating symptom was a "whirling of the brain," a profound inability to concentrate. Unable to read himself, his sister read aloud his law studies.

Following graduation from law school in early 1846, with his health somewhat improved by the anticipation of a new adventure, he and a cousin embarked in March on the journey that would establish his name in the annals of western history. In 1840, there were fewer than 100 Americans in California and Oregon. Within six years, 3,000 souls annually traveled the Oregon Trail, two-thirds to Oregon and the rest to California. This was an early and exciting time in the migration and settlement of the far west.

In St. Louis, Parkman interviewed early settlers and retired trappers and mountain men. He hired as his guide Henry Chatillon, a 30-year-old mountain man who had been hunting the mountains for over 15 years. Henry had an Oglala Sioux wife and was an invaluable resource and li-

LEFT: FRANCIS PARKMAN RECLINING OUTDOORS. PHOTOGRAPHED BY MRS. HENRY ADAMS IN 1870.

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RIGHT: PARKMAN'S STUDY AT HIS JAMAICA POND SUMMER HOME NEAR BOSTON. AT THE UPPER RIGHT, ON TOP OF THE BOOKCASE, ARE HIS LAKOTA INDIAN SHIELD, BOW, AND ARROWS AND HIS POWDER HORN FROM HIS OREGON TRAIL JOURNEY OF 1846.



aison to the Sioux. His wife had remained with the tribe in Wyoming and, tragically, died days before Parkman's party arrived.

Parkman assiduously avoided the "rabble" on the trail, which is unfortunate. He was an excellent observer and recorder, and history would have benefited from his valuable historical insights of these early "emigrants." In Missouri, he met the Donner party, which would become infamous that winter by practicing cannibalism when stranded in the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

Travel was dangerous. The emigrants feared the Mormon "fanatics" that were traveling west in small and large parties. Dreading Indian attacks, traveling parties banded together in larger groups for defense. Reaching the Platte River at present day Grand Island, Parkman's group traveled west to the North Platte, which they followed into Wyoming. Pronghorn became a primary food source. They reached Fort Laramie six weeks after leaving Missouri. Here he found, coming and going, Indian villages, trappers with their Indian families, and the ever-present suspicious and unfriendly emigrant groups. Traders charged exorbitant prices, but the mountain men were a friendly and carefree lot.

Parker spent several weeks living and moving with an Ogalala Sioux village. He hoped to accompany a war party against the Shoshone, but found that the Sioux's many factions and lack of leadership made any large war expedition problematic. He joined a four-day buffalo hunt, a "surround," and

recorded the superb horsemanship and archery skills of the hunters. He was, however, appalled by a story of how they had captured and burned alive a Shoshone warrior. A French trader and an old chief provided tribal and historic information.

Despite having some admiration for the Indian's way of life, he did not find them "noble," and did not feel safe or trust them. He characterized them as childlike savages who lived for the moment, be it the hunt or the battle, and who lacked curiosity beyond custom. Parkman's elitism apparently affected his appraisal of the Indian as it did the emigrant.

Leaving Fort Laramie, the party journeyed south, spent time with another Sioux village, and reached the Pueblo, a small settlement where the Santa Fe Trail deviated south from the Arkansas River. The war with Mexico had started and Colonel Stephen Watts Kearny had recently passed through on the way to Santa Fe with 1,600 soldiers, 1,556 wagons and 20,000 oxen, mules, and horses. A Mormon party camped nearby was noted by Parkman to be dangerous and fanatical.

Following the Arkansas River east, Parkman ran into a village of Arapahoe, whom he described as dirty, ugly, savage, sinister, and generally inferior to the Sioux. Nevertheless, he joined them on a buffalo hunt and killed a young bull. Over the next few days, his traveling party of about 10 men killed dozens of buffalo, far more than they could use. They continued eastward

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and passed numerous parties of soldiers and emigrants, but their main fear was the Pawnee, now quite hostile to the white invasion.

Parkman reached Kansas City in late September 1846 and headed home by steamer. His pencil notes filled three journals, which he was unable to read. His cousin read them out loud, and Francis then dictated them back while his cousin transcribed them anew.

The Vengeance of The Enemy

"The Enemy" recurred. Francis tried practicing law, and quickly gave it up. To his sister he dictated *The Oregon Trail*, published initially in a series of magazine articles in 1847 and 1848. Parkman had a smooth, easily readable style and his story elicited an excitement about the American West that persists today. His handwrit-

FRANCIS PARKMAN , CA. 1855, THE HERO-HISTORIAN IN HIS PRIME.

ten journals, however, are far more informative to the historian than his book.

Having completed most of his research on the French-British quarrel in North America, he started dictating *The Conspiracy of Pontiac*, his first book on this conflict, but the last in historical sequence. Only capable of working two hours a day, he did not complete it until 1850. He had maps drawn from memory, which were reproduced on a large scale and corrected.

For the next 20 years, "The Enemy" exacted a severe toll on his health and his productive capacity. He sought spas in the United States, Canada, and Europe, traveling abroad three times seeking medical help. More than once, he was told he was going insane, which probably was true, but he never admitted defeat, and struggled constantly against his adversary. Despite the handicap, he always managed to visit libraries and collections to further his research.

Parkman married in 1850 and had two daughters and one son. Two years later, his father died, leaving Francis sufficient funds to live comfortably. His illness took turns for the worse after the deaths of his four-year-old son in 1857 and his wife in childbirth the following year. At times his knee arthritis forced him to be carried around his house that was already darkened because of his photophobia.

To ease his affliction, he immersed himself in horticulture and published in 1866 *The Book of Roses*, which for years was a standard manual on the subject. Certain hybrids of roses, apples, and lilies were named after him. The complexity of "The Enemy" was evidenced by his need of a wheelchair to sow, plant and weed, yet at times he could rapidly walk from one part of the garden to another. It is also odd that his photophobia was not present when he was outside gardening.

His vision apparently improved as he aged, and at age 60, he was still a good

shot and enjoyed fly-fishing. An optical examination in 1881 showed no pathology. Without doubt, there was a huge psychoneurotic element. If he did have eye pathology, it was the precipitating factor of a severe psychosis.

Over the next 25 years, Parkman dictated 7 more books on the history of France in North America, beginning with the explorations of Samuel de Champlain in 1603 and finishing with the French and Indian War of 1756-1763. He was the first to see clearly that the British-French conflict was a struggle between absolutism and liberty. Feudal, militant, Catholic France wished to create a large vassal population under a corrupt monarchical system, while democratic, protestant England wanted to expand its industrial and agricultural base.

Lasting Legacy

Parkman became a Professional Member of the Boone and Crockett Club sometime after 1889, and was promoted to Honorary Life Member before he died on November 8, 1893. His extensive research travels along with his wilderness trips to the historical sites of conflict made Parkman one of the most important historians on the French experience in the New World. Later scholars, with access to more extensive sources, would legitimately criticize Parkman's accuracy and romantic flair. His most acknowledged contribution, however, was *The Oregon Trail*, a story that excited the country toward its western migration and portrayed the plains Indians as they were before civilization destroyed their way of life. ■

