

Explorers in the Back Country

IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY STREAM AFTER stream of German and Scotch-Irish immigrants poured into the frontier known as the Old West. Here, in the back country of New England, the Great Valley of southeastern Pennsylvania, central and western Maryland, the Piedmont of Virginia and the Carolinas, and the Valley of Virginia, they had to adopt a pattern of life entirely isolated from European influences. Here they formed the first pioneer society with characteristics which are regarded as typically American.

The southern section of the Old West, where the first settlements were made, had singular geographic features, as though it were a stage especially set for actors about to begin some unique and fascinating drama. It started at the Fall Line where navigation on coastal rivers halted before cataracts and, south of the Roanoke, before pine barrens that rose hundreds of feet above the level countryside. Beyond these barriers spread the Piedmont of Virginia and the Carolinas. Its rich soil, its swift streams, its mild climate and its boundless forests were irresistible attractions to the farm-loving Germans and to the adventurous, land-hungry Scotch-Irish. In the west rose the Blue Ridge Mountains. The pioneers, pressing their advance in this new land of Canaan, passed through gaps in the mountains to emerge on the Great Valley of the Appalachians where they cleared the wilderness and raised their humble cabins. In the far distance the jagged peaks of the Allegheny Front ended the Old West and temporarily shut

in the pioneers from the rich and mysterious country of Kentucky and Tennessee beyond.

White explorers, hunters and fur traders had tramped into the Old West a full century before the German and Scotch-Irish immigrants appeared. The first exploration of the Old West goes back to the middle of the seventeenth century when that Frontenac of Virginia, Captain Abraham Wood, commanded Fort Henry at the Falls of the Appomattox on the present site of Petersburg. Fort Henry was one of several strategic points built to protect white settlements against possible Indian depredations. But though their immediate purpose was defensive, they were to the Tidewater, as the Virginia plain was called, what St. Louis and Chicago later became to the Great Plains: points of departure for traders and explorers into the interior. In Wood's day, Fort Henry was a combination of frontier town and military and trading post, much like Chicago in the early nineteenth century. Just across the river lay the principal village of the Appomattox Indians, "who furnished Wood with messengers, hunters, porters, and courageous and faithful guides." The Indians bartered furs for such articles as guns, powder, bullets, tomahawks, kettles, blankets, cutlery, brass rings and other trinkets.

In August 1650 Wood, with three companions on horseback and two white servants and an Indian guide on foot, advanced to the forks of the Roanoke in search of choice lands which Wood hoped to sell. One of the party, Edward Bland, a merchant from Charles City County, kept a diary of the journey in which he recorded the discovery of "exceeding rich Land, that beare two Crops of Indian Corne a yeare and hath timber trees above five foot over, whose truncks are a hundred foot in cleare timber, which will make twenty Cuts of Board timber a piece, and of these there is abundance."

They journeyed in this fertile country for about a hundred and twenty miles to the present site of Clarksville, Virginia, near the North Carolina line. The Indians grew less and less friendly as they advanced. Bland wrote that a Tuscarora chief urged them to turn back before they should reach impassable marsh and swamp country. They replied in the spirit of true explorers that

they "were resolved to go through," that they were afraid neither of him nor of his tribe and that they had no choice but to advance, "for we were commanded by our King."

Their avowed loyalty, however, fled before the mere rumor of a plot to destroy them. After paying a nervous visit to the falls of the Roanoke and to a place where Indians killed huge sturgeon, they packed their belongings and turned homeward. Bland called the region "New Brittain" because he concluded from discovering a westward-flowing river that he and his comrades had journeyed beyond the limits of Virginia. In four days they were back in the safety of Fort Henry.

The next organized effort at western exploration came two decades later under Governor William Berkeley of Virginia. Both he and his lieutenant, Abraham Wood, were primarily businessmen who, under the guise of sponsoring western exploratory parties for the Crown, sought to enrich themselves in the Indian fur trade. In order to expand this trade as much as possible, Berkeley willingly sacrificed his popularity with the agricultural elements of the colony. In 1669-1670 he sent out three expeditions under a learned German physician, John Lederer, one across the Rapidan River to the mountains, another to Saura, an Indian village on the Pee Dee River, and the last up the Rappahannock.

Lederer's journal of his explorations, translated from the original Latin by his friend, Sir William Talbot, contains statements which scholars of the Old West have questioned for many years. In the underbrush of Virginia, for example, he saw "leopards" and "lions," though he admitted that these animals were "neither so large nor so fierce as those of Asia and Africa." He reported the height of a ridge as so "extraordinary" that he climbed, presumably on horseback, from "the first appearance of light" until "late in the evening" before he reached the summit. Next day he saw from a peak of the Blue Ridge "the Atlantick-Ocean washing the Virginian-shore." He wrote of Amazonian women who "shoot arrows over their husbands shoulders," men who fought with silver tomahawks, and a tribe of Indians whose

women "delighted in feather ornaments, of which they have great variety; but peacocks in most esteem, because rare in those parts."

The editors of Lederer's journal, Alvord and Bidgood, declared that such statements "make pleasant reading," but "sound like the tales of Baron Münchhausen." Most academic writers held this view until another scholar, Lyman Carrier, came to Lederer's defense. After carefully studying the journal and the region in which the explorer had traveled, Carrier charged Alvord and Bidgood with failing to make "full use of the evidence at their disposal" and with falling "into the common error of modern historians" of labeling false or inaccurate what they cannot readily understand. He then offered explanations of the dubious statements. "The American lion," which is also called "mountain lion, puma, catamount and cougar, formerly ranged the Atlantic slope . . . as it does the western mountains today. Several native members of the cat family could qualify as small leopards." As for the ridge, might not Lederer have exaggerated its height by inadvertently climbing it in circuitous manner and by judging from the amount of time he required to reach the summit? In believing that he saw the Atlantic from a peak of the Blue Ridge, Lederer simply indulged the optical illusion that "has deceived many others since that time." For purposes of propaganda, Indians often deprecate their enemies by accusing them of using their womenfolk as warriors. Finally, the metal hatchets and peacock feathers are easily explained—Indians had been purchasing such articles for years from Spanish traders in the Gulf Region.

Lederer contributed much to the exploration of the Old West. He may have been the first white man to see the Valley of Virginia. He was also the first man to make a map of the region between the Atlantic coast and the Blue Ridge Mountains. Covering about twenty-five thousand square miles, it showed the Rappahannock, Pamunkey, James and Roanoke rivers—all more or less in their proper sources. This was a remarkable achievement for a man who was obliged to obtain his information from his own observations and from Indians he chanced to interview during his journeys. Yet, ironically, Lederer's map was ignored

in Virginia for another century in favor of an incomplete and inaccurate map made by one Augustine Herman.

Lederer's journal contains excellent descriptions of some of the places he visited and keen observations of Indian psychology. Here, for example, is his advice in trading with Indians:

you must be positive and at a word; for if they perswade you to fall anything in your price, they will spend time in higgling for further abatements, and seldom conclude any bargain. Sometimes you may with brandy or strong liquor dispose them to an humour of giving you ten times the value of your commodity; and at other times they are so hide-bound, that they will not offer half the market-price, especially if they be aware that you have a designe to circumvent them with drink, or that they think you have a desire to their goods, which you must seem to slight and disparage.

This was valuable advice, for already Berkeley had made fur trading one of the principal industries of the colony.

In the following year Berkeley and Wood prepared another expedition for the purpose of finding "the ebbing and flowing of the Waters on the other side of the Mountains." The new venture was led by Captain Thomas Batts, a successful planter from a well-known English family, and two other gentlemen, Thomas Wood, perhaps a relative of Abraham Wood, and Robert Fallam, who kept a brief, clear, and accurate journal of the expedition.

During the journey Wood became seriously ill and remained behind, but Batts and Fallam advanced along the Staunton River to the Blue Ridge Mountains and emerged in the valley of the New River where, having exhausted their food supply, they called a halt. They had reached the point where the New River breaks through Peters Mountain at Peters Falls in Giles County, Virginia, near the West Virginia line.

Early next morning they took possession, in the name of their King, Charles II, of the land drained by the waters flowing westward into the Ohio River. They also commemorated their discovery by branding four trees, one with their own initials, two others with those of Berkeley and Abraham Wood, and the last with the royal insignia. Mindful of the purpose of the expedition,

they persuaded themselves that the slight movement of the water was caused by the ebb and flow of the tide. Returning home, they jubilantly announced that they had discovered a route to the Pacific Ocean.

The English based their claim to ownership of the Ohio Valley on this expedition. Yet, ironically, says Alvord,

. . . the event which redounds so much to the credit of Englishmen, and substantiates so completely the claims of the mother country to that particular territory for which she made war on her rival at such a cost of blood and money, is practically unknown and has even been frequently denied by historians. The names of Frontenac, Joliet, Marquette, and La Salle are familiar to every schoolboy, while those of their English competitors in exploration, who were in every respect their equals in daring and enterprise, have remained till this day in obscurity, almost in oblivion.

Two years later Abraham Wood, who had been promoted to the rank of general, sent James Needham, a "gentleman," and Gabriel Arthur, an illiterate but courageous young man, to trade with the Indians in the back country of Carolina. Needham and Arthur advanced toward their destination by the Great Trading Path, which crossed an island in the Staunton River. This island the Occaneechi had fortified in order to control the fur trade of the region by acting as middlemen between the Virginians and the tribes farther west. They did not want to lose their profits by allowing Needham and Arthur to trade directly with the Cherokee and other tribes. The two were forced to return to Fort Henry; but General Wood persuaded them to resume the expedition. This time they succeeded, through the influence of an independent trader named Henry Hatcher, in gaining passage to a Cherokee village, perhaps on the French Broad River, where they were welcomed by a chief of the tribe. After a short rest, Needham with eleven Cherokee returned to Fort Henry, leaving Arthur with the villagers to learn their language.

A month later Needham with his Cherokee friends and an Occaneechi guide named Indian John set out for the village with the intention of taking Arthur back to Fort Henry. One night,

as they encamped at the ford of the Yadkin, Indian John quarreled with Needham, shot him through the head, ripped open his body, tore out his heart, and, holding this up as he turned eastward, shouted defiance at the whole English nation. He then sent the frightened Cherokee home to kill Arthur, while he himself rode off to his people on Needham's horse.

The Cherokee hurried to their village and reported what had happened. Seizing on the absence of the chief, who was friendly to the English, some friends of the Occaneechi bound Arthur to a stake and began to heap dry reeds around him. Just then the chief appeared with gun on his shoulder and killed the Indian who was lighting the pyre. Promising to escort Arthur home in the spring, he contrived to safeguard his life by sending him out with a war party, which roamed as far south as the Apalachee country in West Florida, where it unsuccessfully raided a small Spanish mission before it trekked northward to the valley of the Great Kanawha in the present state of West Virginia.

Homeward bound, the war party fell in with some hostile Indians, who wounded Arthur in the thigh and captured him, but who, finding from his long blond hair that he was a white man, returned his weapons and treated him kindly. Finally the band made its way back to its starting point, whence Arthur, accompanied by the chief and eighteen of his people laden with furs, eventually returned to Fort Henry.

Both Needham and Arthur made valuable contributions to American exploration. Needham, by reaching the French Broad River, became the discoverer of Tennessee, while Arthur was perhaps the first white man to see the valley of the Great Kanawha.

On the trail of these explorers followed ambitious fur traders. In expeditions which sometimes included as many as a hundred pack horses, each equipped with merrily tinkling bells, they advanced from the Fall Line forts farther and farther into the wilderness. Some went as far as the New River; some crossed the Blue Ridge and hunted in the Shenandoah Valley, and some followed Needham's route to the Carolina Piedmont, where they exchanged guns and trinkets for furs with the Cherokee. The more adventuresome pressed as far south as the foothills of the

Alleghenies and traded with the Creek and the Chickasaw.

From every direction they returned with glowing descriptions of the choice lands they had found. Inspired by these tales, groups of small Virginia farmers packed their meager belongings and moved westward with their cows and sheep, which they grazed in the open meadows and canebrakes while they built cowpens, cleared fields, grew corn and raised crude cabins for protection and shelter.

They were soon joined by homeseekers from the Tidewater, where plantation farming had crowded them out. Governor Alexander Spotswood, one of the ablest leaders of colonial Virginia, actively encouraged them. He herded the Indians in the colony into a huge reservation, which he called Christanna. There he took care to provide the Indian children with Christian training and a practical education. Indian elders gratefully laid presents of furs at his feet, while young men and women, wrapped in crimson blankets and painted with blue and vermilion, bowed to him in reverence.

Spotswood also founded a colony of Germans at Germanna, on the banks of the Rapidan, for the purpose of developing the production of iron. For this enterprise he was pleased to be known as the Tubal Cain of America.

Such a man as Spotswood was naturally curious about the country beyond the mountains, which Virginia claimed by right of her ancient charter. Moreover, he had learned, perhaps from the surveyor Colonel William Byrd, that the French had taken possession of the Great Lakes region, where they carried on a lucrative fur trade, and had established themselves at Kaskaskia and on the lower Mississippi.

Possessed of a robust and "restless spirit only slightly concealed under an air of dignity," Spotswood resolved to see things for himself. His military experience complemented his adventurous temperament. He had been wounded at Blenheim, had fought at Malplaquet, and had risen at the age of twenty-eight to the rank of quartermaster-general.

In August 1716 Spotswood assembled at Germanna two companies of rangers and a small group of mounted "gentlemen" with their servants and Indian guides. The expedition was to

assume the form of an exploratory picnic. The gentlemen had abundant provisions, which included several cases of Virginia wine—both white and red—Irish usquebaugh, brandy, stout, two kinds of rum, champagne, cherry punch and cider. The blast of a trumpet early on the morning of August 30 called them to their horses.

The governor, dressed in green velvet riding clothes, Russian leather boots and a hat bedecked with a brilliant plume, led his companions along the banks of the Rapidan toward its source. Five days later they reached the Blue Ridge Mountains. Up they clambered for three more days, crossing small streams, killing rattlesnakes and suffering such discomfort as that of being stung by hornets, until they halted on one of the loftiest peaks of the mountains.

The occasion called for proper celebration. Spotswood delivered an eloquent address and drank the health of the King and that of the royal family; then he led his companions down the western slope of the peak. The descent proved hazardous. The little streams they followed led to precipices which often frightened and stalled their horses. But their perseverance was eventually rewarded; they came on a smiling valley watered by a clear and beautiful river which Spotswood called the Euphrates—a name which later yielded to that of Shenandoah. Crossing the river, they buried in its bank a bottle which contained a paper claiming the region for their King, George I.

The valley abounded with wild turkeys and deer and cucumbers and currants and grapes. On these they feasted and then, assembling and loading their guns, drank to the health of the King in champagne, and fired a volley; drank to the Princess in Burgundy, and fired a volley; drank to the royal family in claret, and fired a volley; drank to the governor, and fired a volley. In this convivial mood the gentlemen turned their horses homeward, leaving some of the rangers to continue west to the Warriors' Path where Iroquois often hunted or sent arrows in their jealousy against Shawnee, Tuscarora and Catawbias.

Later Spotswood glowingly described "World's End," as he called the country he had visited. To encourage settlement in the western valley, he pictured it as an agricultural paradise

abounding with health-restoring mineral springs. He also presented to each of the gentlemen who had accompanied him a miniature golden horseshoe on which was inscribed *Sic Juvat Transcendere Montes*. It is pleasurable to cross the mountains—and to have relived the expedition with the adventurous governor and his Knights of the Golden Horseshoe.

Before long Spotswood had acquired immense estates for himself and his friends. His appetite for property increased with every acre he secured. In 1720 he influenced the Virginia assembly to pass an act which divided the Piedmont of Virginia into two counties, Brunswick and Spotsylvania, where the landowners enjoyed religious toleration and exemption from taxes or quitrents for a period of ten years. Spotswood and his associates put this act into operation despite the refusal of the Crown to approve it unless land grants were limited to 1,000 acres.

By the middle of the eighteenth century these large landowners or planters controlled the Virginia and Carolina piedmonts. Most of the grants, which ranged from ten to forty thousand acres, were owned by Tidewater planters. A few, however, were in the hands of such powerful noblemen as Lord Fairfax and the Earl of Granville, court favorites of Charles II and James II respectively. Fairfax owned the portion of Virginia between the Rappahannock and Potomac rivers; Granville owned most of northern Virginia.

These speculators and others employed a liberal number of agents in a variety of duties. They assigned lands, collected quitrents, and distributed pamphlets which promoted the western country as “the best, richest, and most healthy part” of America. Some owners attracted immigrants by making slight improvements in their properties and by maintaining agents in the eastern ports to persuade new arrivals to settle on their grants. Some speculators held their lands until they became valuable; others insisted on renting and encouraging settlement, only to demand an exorbitant fee for what improvements they had made. Sometimes hastily drawn boundaries resulted in the discomfiture of the farmer, who found that he was forced to repurchase his land at a higher price after ownership was finally established.

Such was the section of the Old West in which the German

and Scotch-Irish immigrants planted the first settlements. Among them were small groups of New Englanders, Welsh and French Huguenots. In ensuing years they were joined by thousands of others from all parts of the east and from Europe. Some of the original settlers and some of the newcomers settled permanently in the Old West; others, or their descendants, moved in large or small groups across the Alleghenies to the frontier southwest of the Ohio River, known as the Appalachian Frontier or the Old Southwest, where they founded new settlements and eventually established the states of Kentucky and Tennessee.

Each group, irrespective of its origin or its national background, evinced typically American characteristics engendered by a blending of European heritage with frontier influences. How and why these characteristics developed and led to the making of the social order known as American democracy entails the fortunes of the migratory groups in the Old World and in the New. Let us, therefore, follow them.