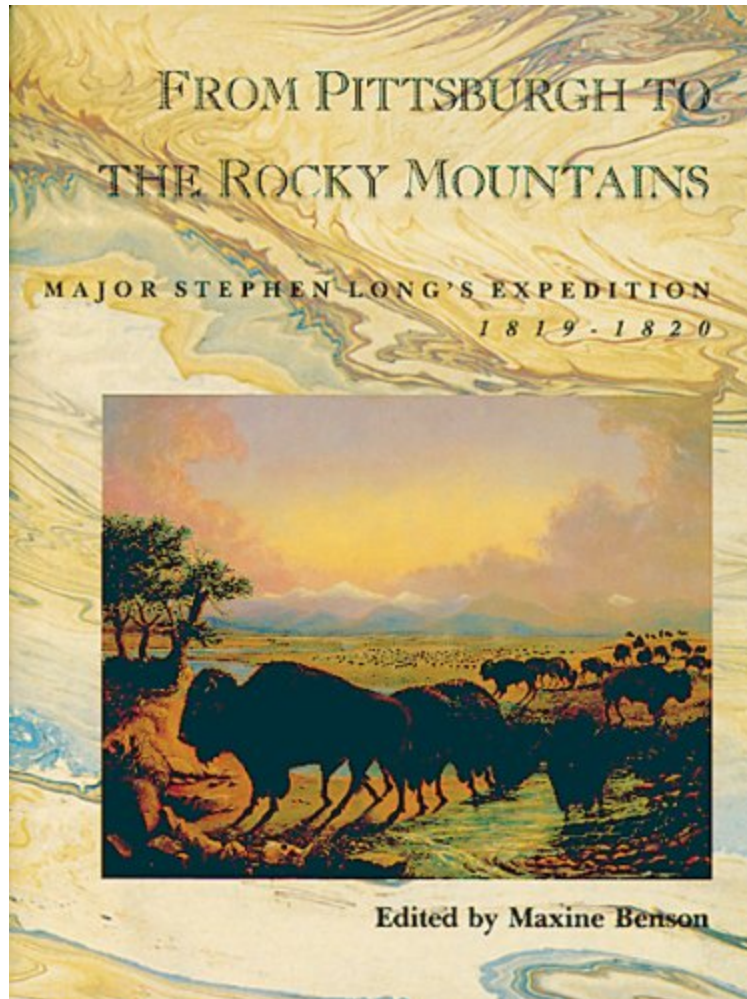


# From Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains: Major Stephen Long's Expedition, 1819-1820

Maxine Benson

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## Maxine Benson : From Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains: Major Stephen Long's Expedition, 1819-1820

before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised From Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains: Major Stephen Long's Expedition, 1819-1820:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. intrigued to discover what this region was like -the animalsBy John WickhamAs a longtime Colorado resident, intrigued to learn of this region in a pristine state before civilization flooded in, before Interstate 25 and its ribbon of endless cities and suburbs converted the Front Range into the New Jersey turnpike. There is little reliably recorded for this region at this time. Captain Zebulon Pike's 1806-07 attempted exploration of the lower boundary of the Louisiana Puchase (Red and Arkansas Rivers) was cut short by Spanish capture, imprisonment and loss of his journals. The editor here provides an excellent introduction summarizing the

expedition, and invites us to consider this as the southern companion to the Lewis Clark northern exploration of the Louisiana Purchase on the upper Missouri river. The editor Maxine Benson, chief historian of the Colorado Historical Society, deftly brings together a readable book (abridged without cumbersome footnotes) from the multi-volume journals, and its color illustrations. After Pike's incomplete exploration (and his combat death in War of 1812), Major Long's 1819-20 expedition was a second attempt ("Long's Peak" on the front range, his namesake). This took on added importance after the 1819 Adams-Onis Treaty redrew the American-Spanish border of the Louisiana Purchase that had followed west along the Red River to now near its sources go directly north up to the Arkansas River to follow west to (through present state of Colorado) to its headwaters. Major Long's cadre included some soldiers, native and french-canadian guides, and about 15 scientists. Most departed from Pittsburgh by steamship down the Ohio River, up the Mississippi to the Missouri River past Fort Lisa, wintering near Council Bluffs NE. In the Spring, now on horseback, they left a large Pawnee village, following west along the South Platte, past the North Fork of Platte into now Boulder Colorado, having seen no human for 400 miles. They described the Flat Irons, drawing an illustration. Small parties fanned out to explore and study, some climbing the peaks to look over the Continental Divide, and gasping at the endless peaks extending to the horizon (James Peak and Wilderness named for Dr Edwin James, the doctor/geologist). Traveling south past Castle Rock, to Manitou Springs; a small party took 3 days to climb Pike's Peak. After their descent the two soldiers tending the horses below had disappeared, scattered from a grizzly bear attack. The cadre took Fountain Creek to the Arkansas River near present day Pueblo; a small party turned west for a week along that river. The entire expedition then traveled east along the Arkansas River until present day La Junta then split - one group continuing, the other south along the Purgatory River, at about halfway turned SE looking for the source of the Red River (North and South Forks). But as did Cpt Pike, Long never found the Red River sources as they were likely too far west in present day New Mexico, and north of the twin fork sources of Red River. Instead Long entered into harsh high-desert until mistaking the Canadian River as the sources of the Red River. They turned east; followed the river through the often unforgiving barren landscape and sandy wastes, to northern Texas, plagued with blowing flies and ticks, near starvation and dehydration. They eventually reached the fertile plains and gentle hills of Oklahoma, until the Canadian joined the Arkansas River; to reunite with the other group near Belles Point, then Fort Smith Arkansas, spending several weeks with various native tribes. The journal was comprehensive in scope, so some of this Book is tedious with digressive monographs on flora and fauna, geologic properties of sediment and rocks, meteorological readings, etc. But the jewels of the journal are the vignettes of awestruck Eastern bred and high-browed cultured white men humbled by this mysterious wilderness - a few examples are noteworthy- the first impressions of the vast treeless prairies, strewn with bison skeletons, the immense bison herds trailed by packs of wolves, vultures, clouds of crows, and bear, "all disputing for their share of bison carcasses." Comparing the north south-axis "wall" of the Front Range to the Andes. At night as they fell asleep after storms "the thunder...its low and distant mutterings blending with the roaring of the bisons...intermixed [during lulls of quiet] with the solemn notes of the hooting owl, desolate cries of the prairie wolf, and screeched owl." They saw vestiges of tribal breastworks and makeshift fighting positions with human skulls and skeletons where warriors had fallen. During the late night all the expedition's horses, frightened by a few inquisitive bison bulls, stampeded through the camp overturning tents, men panicked in the chaos fired their rifles believing under Indian attack....thereafter Long routinely practiced defense drills, all encampments were scouted 15 miles out in 4 directions. Or encountering and exchanging gifts with a lone native man and his loving bride on horseback whom had eloped after fleeing from an elderly Kiowa chief - remarkably many weeks later Maj Long at tribal camps found a Kiowa claiming the lone man had "fled with his wife...and with several under arms, instantly went in pursuit." Later, to illustrate Long party's desperate hunger, the group's hunters shot a lone straggling bison; but the hunters had to fight off a wolf pack swarming for the same meal. Later when the southern group was near collapse from starvation and dehydration, a passing Kiowa or Apache band saved them. But apparently after displeasure with Long's paltry exchange offerings, the band took all the group's horses; a standoff ensued with the soldiers pointing rifles at surrounded women and children, then warriors surrounding Long's party with bows drawn. The chief relented and violence averted. On reaching the grassy Oklahoma plains and gentle hills, they saw something gone today - many valleys overflowing with a garden of eden zoo... "delightful view...grazing peacefully on fertile pastures bison herds, wild horses, elk, deer, pronghorn, turkeys ..... along with great numbers of sandhill cranes, ducks, white egret, snowy heron, white pelicans...the cry of the great ivory billed woodpecker [now extinct] ... black bears and wolves still frequent." After rejoining their Arkansas northern group, they described the differing tribal cultures upon visiting a large gathering. Of the Cheyenne it was distinctive from other tribes - an omen perhaps to their dogged resistance of white encroachment in the 1860s until the US Army's defeat in now Montana, at the Little Big Horn in 1876 - "the Cheyenne chief, a man born to command, endowed with a spirit of unconquerable ferocity, capable of inflicting exemplary punishment upon anyone who should dare disobey him...with remarkable piercing eyes which when fixed upon your countenance appeared strained in the intenseness of its gaze, and to seek rather for the movements of the soul within." The journal does contain occasional inapt descriptions of the prairies as a "great American desert....though in some places fertile, the want of timber, navigable streams and water...render it an unfit residence for any but a nomade population." This may have fit the bleak sandy wastes of the Purgatory and dry Red River, penned

by minds suffering from starvation. And these scientists were biased: high-cultured and pampered in eastern cities, with humid, verdant landscapes, lush forests, large rivers and crisscrossing creeks to irrigate farms. If their slanted views delayed the onslaught of Manifest Destiny, it gave native populations decades more to live freely, fortuitous for our eventual Native American brethren. There are two other recent books describing this expedition before Benson's edition. They criticize Long for not accomplishing enough science and missing the obscure twin fork sources of the Red River. But critique in 21st Century hindsight is too harsh: they lived off the land, in desolate areas often starving, periodically ill (Long's primary Naturalist early on was near death unable to continue). They often had no maps except Pike's vague notes; were fast moving wary of plains Indian attacks, some guides deserted stealing some journals and specimens. Yes, Long could have done better with 4x4 Vehicles and GPS. In sum, Colorado school students would benefit from a distilled summary of Benson's book (highlighting the vignettes) as a companion study to the Lewis Clark expedition. John Wickham.<sup>4</sup> of 4 people found the following review helpful. Highly educated and very observant

By Michael Green Long's party left Pittsburg and steamed down the Ohio and up the Missouri before heading overland westward. As a travel documentary and expedition, the account is vivid with the joy of the men after the dreary weeks on the Great Plains when they catch their first glimpse of the Rockies. When food sources run low, the drama intensifies. Altogether the expedition shares many of the fates of the Lewis and Clark expedition, with desertion, hungry, half and then quarter rations, and the loss of equipment and documentation, the account is too specific and at length on a too broad range of subjects. While I had hoped to read more about the men's impression of new places and scenes, the journal leans more toward the classification of plants, flowers and small animals. After all this was a scientific expedition like Lewis and Clark's, but the digressions on plant and animal life make the "expedition's" journal somewhat suffer.

An illustrated account of the first western expedition of naturalists, topographers, and artists.