

FIRST DRAFT

Antoine Leroux, trapper, explorer and guide, left mark on Colorado

In 1853, as Capt. John Gunnison led his expedition across western Colorado — including the first wheeled vehicles to cross this part of the state — to assess the possibility of a central railroad route to California, he depended heavily on 52-year-old guide Antoine Leroux of Taos.

Because of his experience, Gunnison rejected another guide in favor of Leroux, even though he knew Leroux couldn't make the entire journey.

Joaquin Antoine Leroux spent nearly 40 years in the Southwest as a trapper, trader and guide. He led four military expeditions from New Mexico to California, along four different routes. And many times he crossed western Colorado, trekking through the San Luis Valley, over Cochetopa Pass to what was later called the Gunnison River Valley, to the Uncompahgre Valley, then north to the Grand Valley and west into Utah.

"Leroux was one of a class of famous mountain men, celebrated as a guide and scout, and spoken of with great respect by all who knew that class of men," wrote 20th century biographer Forbes Parkhill.

Leroux was often favorably compared to his friend and neighbor, Kit Carson.

It was likely during the trip with Gunnison that Leroux Creek, near present-day Hotchkiss, was named for the guide. On maps produced 20 years later by Ferdinand Hayden's surveyors, it was designated by that name.

To reach Leroux Creek, Leroux may have taken a path north of the Black Canyon, past today's communities of Maher and Crawford, seeking a shortcut to the North Fork of the Gunnison River, according to Jon Horn of Alpine Archaeological Consultants in Montrose.

However, Leroux determined that the northern route was too difficult for Gunnison's wagons, so Gunnison and his men took the more frequently used trail along the south side of the Black Canyon of the Gunnison, over Cerro Summit and into the Uncompahgre Valley, then north to the Grand Valley.

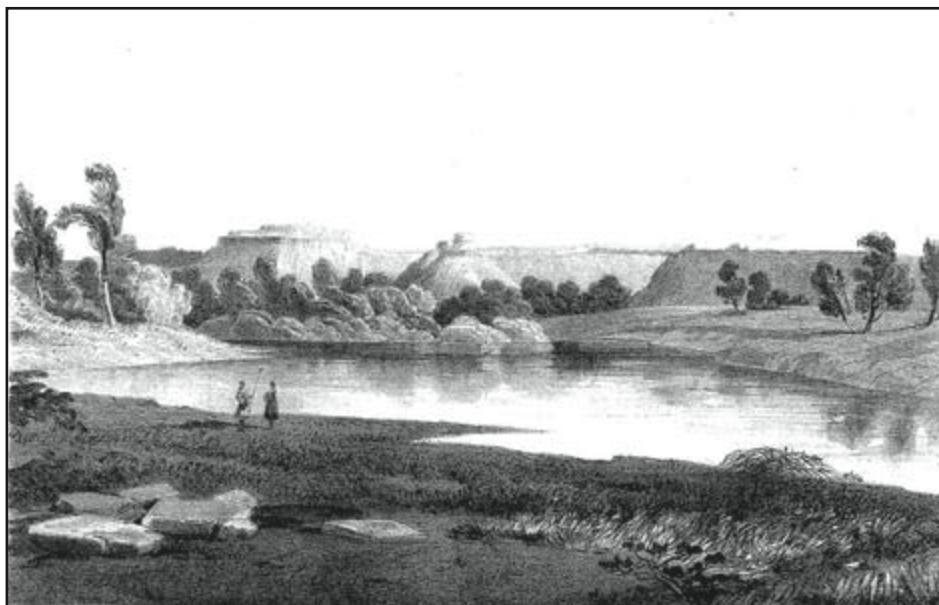
Even so, it was not easy for the wagons. Breakdowns were frequent and river crossings were rough. But Leroux led them successfully to a point in Utah west of today's Grand Junction.

Like so many men who trapped across the West in the early 19th century, Leroux was originally from St. Louis.

But unlike others with French names — such as his friend and sometime employer, Antoine Robidoux — Leroux wasn't descended from French-Canadians who had migrated south.

Instead, Leroux reportedly had roots in French nobility — his grandfather was a marquis and his father fled to America during the French Revolution. His mother was from a family of 18th century Spanish nobility in New Mexico.

Antoine Leroux left St. Louis in 1822 as a member of fur trader William Ashley's 100 adventurous



LT. E.G. BECKWITH REPORT TO CONGRESS ON THE 1853 GUNNISON EXPEDITION

A drawing of the Roan Cliffs near present-day Green River, Utah. Antoine Leroux guided the Gunnison Expedition to roughly the Colorado-Utah border before returning to Taos to guide another group. Lt. Beckwith, Gunnison's second in command, completed the report to Congress, along with drawings by one of the expedition members, after Gunnison's death.

young men recruited to trap on the Upper Missouri River.

By 1826, he had left Ashley's firm and was working as an independent trader. He often visited Antoine Robidoux's Fort Uncompahgre near today's Delta.

In 1833, Leroux married Juana Catarina Vigil in Taos, and through her he acquired a portion of a Spanish Land Grant that became known as the Leroux Grant.

Leroux had a home in Taos and a ranch north of the village. He later served on the committee that developed the governing framework for the new U.S. territory of New Mexico.

He also explored much of New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and Utah and soon developed a reputation as a guide.

Parkhill's book lists a dozen expeditions from the 1840s through 1860 on which Leroux served as either principal guide or worked with the lead guide.

One of his most important assignments came in 1846, at the beginning of the U.S. war with Mexico, when he was hired by Capt. Philip St. George Cooke to lead Cooke and the Mormon Battalion from Santa Fe to California by way of New Mexico and southern Arizona.

Part of their assignment was to establish a wagon road along this southern route, and they certainly succeeded. After the war and California gold discoveries, the road became a major route for westbound gold seekers.

Cooke, Leroux and the Mormon Battalion marched more than 1,100 miles across rugged desert and deep canyons.

About 480 of them arrived in San Diego in January, 1847, with their uniforms in tatters, some with no shoes, their animals exhausted and their wagons barely mobile.

Cooke and Leroux sometimes butted heads, but Cooke later called him "the most sensible and experienced of men."

By 1853, Leroux was in great demand. Early in the year, he traveled to Washington, D.C., and testified before Congress about what he saw as the best route for a railroad across the West — the one over Cochetopa Pass where he would lead Capt. Gunnison later in the year.

But another commitment prevented him from accompanying Gunnison for his entire journey. On Sept. 25, Leroux left the Gunnison expedition to



PUBLIC DOMAIN PAINTING

Capt. John Gunnison traversed western Colorado and Utah in 1853 while exploring a possible railroad route to California. He was killed by Pahvant Indians in Utah in October 1853. The Gunnison River is named for him.

return to Taos and join Lt. A.W. Whipple on another survey of a potential railroad route. This one sought a southern path near the road he had pioneered with Cooke six years earlier.

Consequently, Leroux wasn't with Gunnison in Utah's Sevier Valley Oct. 26, 1853, when Gunnison and seven men were killed by Pahvant Indians, a branch of the Ute tribe.

William Wallace, a 20th century writer, suggested if he had remained with the expedition, "Leroux might have changed the fortunes of Captain Gunnison."

Leroux continued to lead expeditions after that fateful year.

In 1855, he guided a military force against Ute Indians who had been causing trouble in southern Colorado and northern New Mexico.

In 1858, he led Capt. Randolph Marcy north along Colorado's Front Range, after Marcy and his men nearly died trying to cross the San Juan Mountains in the dead of winter.

His last known assignment came in 1860, when he was 59 years old, an unsuccessful military effort to track down rebellious Comanche Indians in New Mexico and Texas.

Leroux died in Taos in July 1861.

He was no saint, especially by modern standards. Like many wealthy New Mexicans, he and his wife owned Indian slaves. Although he is believed

to have treated most Natives he encountered fairly, he fought a number of battles with Natives of various tribes, and he acknowledged killing several Natives. He was wounded at least twice in these battles.

But he also abhorred traders who used alcohol to take advantage of Natives.

Moreover, Leroux left his mark on this region, even if he isn't as well remembered today as men like Kit Carson and Jim Bridger.

There are two streams in Colorado called Leroux Creek, and a mountain pass that was once named for him. There is a Leroux Springs in Arizona, a Leroux Wash and a Leroux Island on the Little Colorado in the same state.

He is credited with being one of the first European-Americans to visit ancient Native ruins in Arizona's Verde Valley. For a time, they were even referred to as Leroux's Ruins.

Sources: "The Blazed Trail of Antoine Leroux," by Forbes Parkhill; "Antoine Leroux, New Mexico Guide," by Grant Foreman, *New Mexico Historical Review*, October, 1941; "Consideration of the Route of the Northern Branch of the Spanish Trail From the Cochetopa Pass Area to the Uncompahgre Valley," by Jon Horn, December 14, 2010.

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BOOK NOTES

SENTINEL STAFF

Poetry reading features four

Add an evening of poetry to your post-Thanksgiving activities by attending a reading at 7 p.m. Saturday at Lithic Bookstore and Gallery, 138 S. Park Square, Unit 202, in Fruita.

The poets set to read are Paul Vangelisti, Danny Rosen, Wendy Videlock and Kyle Harvey.

For information about this poetry reading and the poets, go to facebook.com/LithicBookstoreAndGallery.

Bookstore hosts two authors

Barnes and Noble Booksellers, 2451 Patterson Road, has scheduled two book signings for the coming days.

■ Alex P. Hartwell, author of "Voices of Resilience: Children's and Adults' Stories of Strength and Courage of Heart," will be signing copies of her book at 2 p.m. Saturday at the store.

"Voices of Resilience" is a collection of stories from children and adults "that reveal a candid glimpse into how each learned to look deep within for the strength to face and resolve difficulties," according to information about the book at barnesandnoble.com.

■ Marla Larson is the author of "Cross Contamination: A Different Kind of Ghost Story," the first book in her Dearly Departed Series of cozy mysteries.

Larson will be signing copies of the book at 2 p.m. Sunday at Barnes and Noble Booksellers.

"Cross Contamination" follows four sisters in a small Colorado town as "they make unexpected discoveries about their town, their family and themselves," according to barnesandnoble.com.

1.8 million chickens killed in Nebraska because of bird flu

BY JOSH FUNK
AP Business Writer

OMAHA, Neb. — Nebraska agriculture officials say another 1.8 million chickens must be killed after bird flu was found on a farm in the latest sign that the outbreak that has already prompted the slaughter of more than 50 million birds nationwide continues to spread.

The Nebraska Department of Agriculture said Saturday that the state's 13th case of bird flu was found on an egg-laying farm in northeast Nebraska's Dixon County, about 120 miles north of Omaha, Nebraska.

Just like on other farms where bird flu has been found this year, all the chickens on the Nebraska farm will be killed to limit the spread of the disease.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture says more than 52.3 million birds in 46 states — mostly chickens and turkeys on commercial farms — have been slaughtered as part of this year's outbreak.

Nebraska is second only to Iowa's 15.5 million birds killed with 6.8 million birds affected at 13 farms.

In most past bird flu

outbreaks the virus largely died off during the summer, but this year's version found a way to linger and started to make a resurgence this fall with more than 6 million birds killed in September.

The virus is primarily spread by wild birds as they migrate across the country. Wild birds can often carry the disease without showing symptoms. The virus spreads through droppings or the nasal discharge of an infected bird, which can contaminate dust and soil.

Commercial farms have taken steps to prevent the virus from infecting their flocks, including requiring workers to change clothes before entering barns and sanitizing trucks as they enter the farm, but the disease can be difficult to control. Zoos have also taken precautions and closed some exhibits to protect their birds.

Officials say there is little risk to human health from the virus because human cases are extremely rare and the infected birds aren't allowed to enter the nation's food supply.

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