

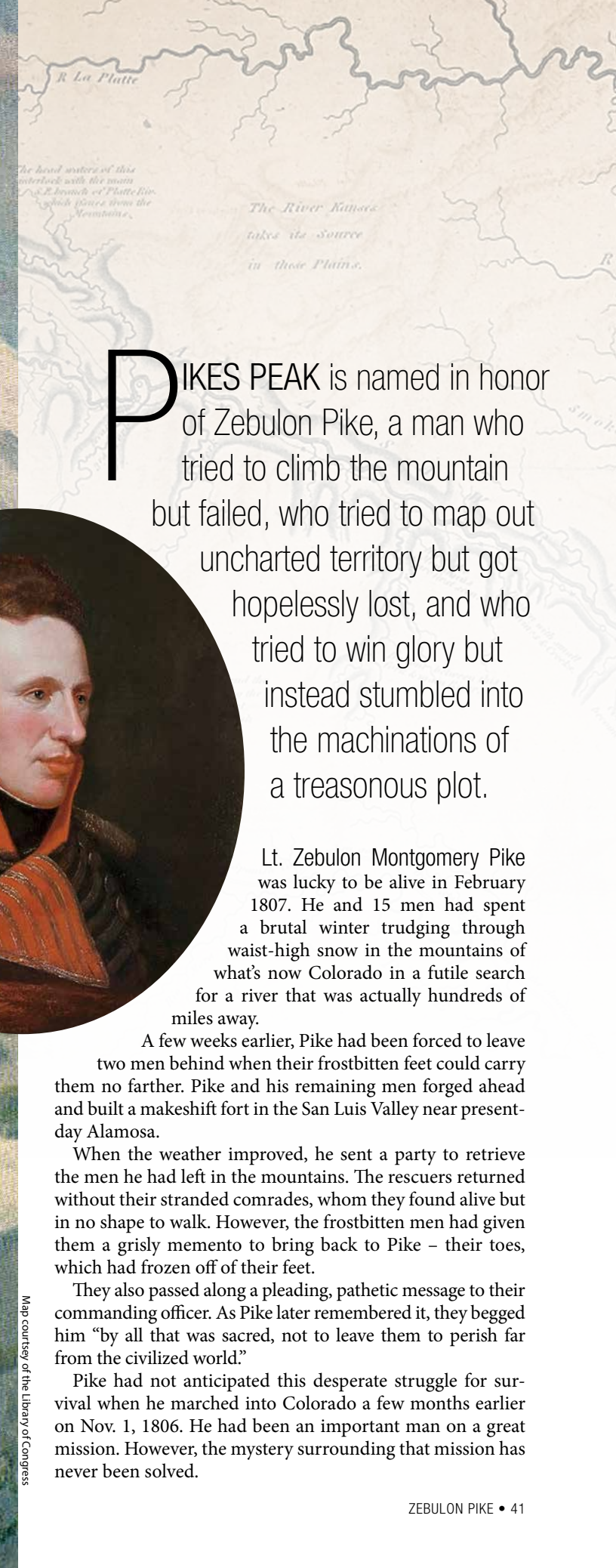
Zebulon Pike

LOST IN THE ROCKIES

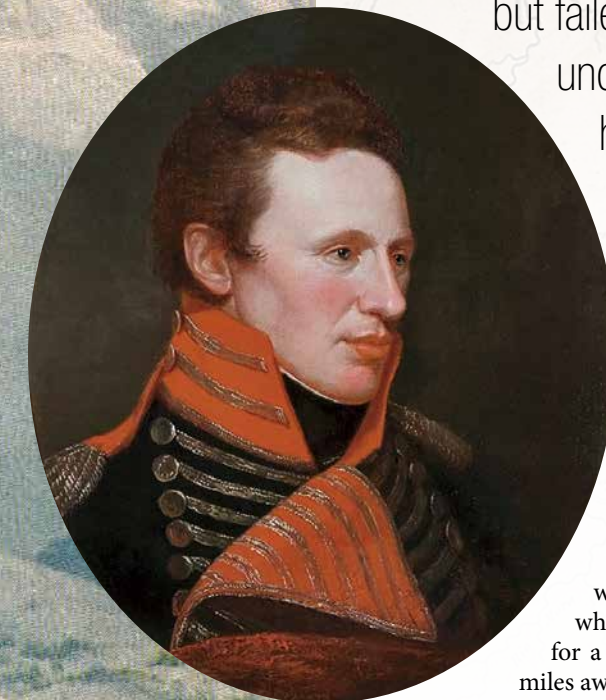
story by NANCY PIKE HAUSE



Zebulon Pike and company lay eyes on the mountain now named for him in the painting "The Discovery of Pikes Peak" by Edgar Cameron. Pike tried and failed to reach the summit, then declared no man could ever do it. Today, a paved road leads to the top.



PIKES PEAK is named in honor of Zebulon Pike, a man who tried to climb the mountain but failed, who tried to map out uncharted territory but got hopelessly lost, and who tried to win glory but instead stumbled into the machinations of a treasonous plot.



Lt. Zebulon Montgomery Pike was lucky to be alive in February 1807. He and 15 men had spent a brutal winter trudging through waist-high snow in the mountains of what's now Colorado in a futile search for a river that was actually hundreds of miles away.

A few weeks earlier, Pike had been forced to leave two men behind when their frostbitten feet could carry them no farther. Pike and his remaining men forged ahead and built a makeshift fort in the San Luis Valley near present-day Alamosa.

When the weather improved, he sent a party to retrieve the men he had left in the mountains. The rescuers returned without their stranded comrades, whom they found alive but in no shape to walk. However, the frostbitten men had given them a grisly memento to bring back to Pike – their toes, which had frozen off of their feet.

They also passed along a pleading, pathetic message to their commanding officer. As Pike later remembered it, they begged him "by all that was sacred, not to leave them to perish far from the civilized world."

Pike had not anticipated this desperate struggle for survival when he marched into Colorado a few months earlier on Nov. 1, 1806. He had been an important man on a great mission. However, the mystery surrounding that mission has never been solved.

Map courtesy of the Library of Congress



Was the cocky young lieutenant exploring the territory as a spy for two corrupt politicians who wanted to carve out their own kingdom on America's frontier? Or was Pike simply a good soldier following orders to explore the Southwest just as contemporaries Lewis and Clark were exploring the Northwest?

Whatever he was trying to do, he wasn't doing it very well.

PIKE WASN'T CUT out to be an explorer, but he was a natural soldier. Born in 1779, the son of Capt. Zebulon Pike Sr., who served under George Washington in the American Revolution, Pike grew up an Army brat and gave up school at 15 to join his father's regiment. He was commissioned a lieutenant at 20 and was noted for his discipline, his marksmanship and the fact that he didn't drink, though some also noted he tended to be a bit self-righteous.

The young soldier was stationed along the Ohio River, not far from the Sugar Grove plantation near Cincinnati owned by his uncle John Brown. It was there that Pike fell in love with his cousin Clarissa "Clara" Brown, a beautiful, dark-haired teenager. In 1801, when he was 22 and she was 18, they eloped to Cincinnati. Uncle John was furious, not so much because they were cousins, but because he didn't want his Clara to live the lonely, difficult life of an army wife on the frontier – a life that, sadly, she learned about all too soon. Only one child of her six pregnancies lived to adulthood, while Pike was regularly transferred to various posts in Indiana and Illinois. She missed her home, her family and Cincinnati society. Pike wrote to Clara, urging her to "cheer up and try to be lively and laugh." That was asking too much, although the birth of their daughter in 1803 helped temporarily.

In 1805, when he was stationed in Illinois, eager for advancement and worried about his situation at home, he was befriended by Gen. James Wilkinson, who had served with Pike's father in the Revolution. This friendship would forever alter the course of Pike's life, plunging him into a web of treasonous conspiracies and international intrigue.

Wilkinson was a prominent man when Pike met him, but his

reputation has been greatly tarnished with time. "In all our history, there is no more despicable character," Theodore Roosevelt once wrote of Wilkinson. He was court-martialed twice, asked to resign from several Army positions and tried to sabotage the Lewis and Clark expedition. After his death, it was proved that Wilkinson had been a spy on the payroll of the king of Spain for most of his military career. But he was still respected enough in 1803 that President Thomas Jefferson appointed him governor of the new Louisiana Purchase, a position of enormous power and influence.

Wilkinson became an ally of Aaron Burr, who was simultaneously Jefferson's vice president and sworn enemy. Burr wanted to form a new country out of the Louisiana Purchase and the northern part of Mexico with himself as king. But first, Burr and Wilkinson needed to find out just where, in the 828,000 square miles of this new territory, the rivers ran, if they were navigable, what the terrain was like, where the Spanish forts were and precisely what the southern borders were. They needed an explorer. They needed Pike.

PIKE HAD JUST returned from a reconnaissance mission, sponsored by Wilkinson, to find the source of

the Mississippi. His trip had been fairly successful, although he missed the Mississippi's headwaters by 25 miles.

Pike was home for six weeks, reunited with Clara and working on his journals, when Wilkinson approached him with an even greater mission. Devotedly loyal to Wilkinson, Pike had been taught by his father to unquestioningly respect superior officers. He gladly accepted the assignment. Wilkinson might have filled something of a paternal role in the young family, as Clara – who had lost three babies, now had a small daughter and was pregnant again – had been disowned by her own father.

For an expedition into the unknown Southwest, Wilkinson gave Pike three instructions. (Although Jefferson signed off on the expedition after the fact, it was Wilkinson's show.)

First, Pike was to return 51 members of the Osage tribe to their village in what is now Kansas. Some had been freed from captivity, and some had been brought to Washington, D.C., to meet with

The mountain Pike thought he could reach
in a day was actually 120 miles away.
It would take him a week to get there.

Zebulon Pike wasn't so presumptuous as to name Pikes Peak after himself. He called it Grand Mountain, while the Utes called it Sun Mountain and the Spanish called it El Capitan. However, to prospectors and settlers of the Colorado gold rush, it was simply known as "that peak Pike wrote about," and the name stuck.

Todd Caudle

Jefferson. They were all waiting in St. Louis to be taken home.

Second, he was to meet with representatives of various tribes, including the Pawnee, Kansa and Comanche, to discuss trade relations – something the Spanish were way ahead of him in doing.

And third, he was to find the headwaters of the Arkansas and Red rivers and find out whether an American force could invade northern Mexico via Santa Fe. Many people at that time were worried about war with Spain, so this request seemed to make sense.

He got the Osages home, where he was warmly welcomed and given 15 horses and an escort from the Osage and Kansa tribes. He met with the Pawnees, who were flying the Spanish flag and told him to go back where he'd come from. He had several encounters with Pawnees who outnumbered his group, but he blustered and threatened enough that they finally left the expedition alone.

What he knew about Wilkinson's and Burr's motives behind the third set of instructions is a question still awaiting an answer.

PIKE WAS ILL-PREPARED for his task. His little group was wearing summer uniforms in November as they rode their horses into Colorado. The only special equipment Pike had was a thermometer, a watch and an instrument to measure latitude. The Spanish had resisted all efforts to map the area, so the only map Wilkinson had given him, made by a German cartographer, was full of errors. Perhaps most importantly, he didn't have a Sacagawea, a mountain man or someone familiar with high mountains along on the trip. He'd grown up in the East and Midwest. The mountains he knew were the gentler Adirondacks. Ahead of him were the Front Range, the Sangre de Cristos and the Royal Gorge.

On Nov. 15, he wrote in his journal that he had seen what looked "like a small blue cloud" in the distance. It was his first sight of the majestic mountain that he neither climbed nor christened but that would put his name on America's maps forever.

In his journal he called it Grand Mountain. The Utes called it

Ta-Wa-Ah-Gath, or Sun Mountain. The Spaniards named it El Capitan. But it was "that peak Pike wrote about" to gold seekers and settlers in the 19th century until it officially became Pike's Peak – or Pikes Peak, as modern, apostrophe-averse cartographers call it.

But in 1806, looking through his spyglass, he didn't foresee fame; he only thought it was a climbable mountain that was maybe a day away. In reality, it was 120 miles away, and it took the group a week to reach it.

On Nov. 27, after climbing in snow up a lower adjoining peak, probably Mount Rosa, he wrote that he "believed no human being could have ascended to its pinical." In their climb of the lower mountain, he and three companions left their blankets, food and water at its base, expecting to return to camp that evening. Instead, having no idea of the terrain they were dealing with, they spent the night in a cave on the mountain.

"Arose, hungry, dry and extremely sore ... but were amply compensated by the sublimity of the prospects below," Pike wrote. "The unbounded prairie was overhung with clouds which appeared like the ocean in a storm; wave piled on wave and foaming while the sky was perfectly clear where we were." He wrote that the temperature was only 4 degrees.

Instead of opting to sit out the winter, as Lewis and Clark had done, the inflexible Pike wanted to press on. Going up the Arkansas River, they reached the Royal Gorge in December. After he correctly identified the South Platte River, he went across a mountain pass and thought he had found the Red River. In fact, he'd gone in a circle, traveled by what is now Leadville and was back on the Arkansas. His search for the Red River was doomed from the outset – its headwaters are in Texas.

Pike, not for the last time, admitted he had been lost. "This was a great mortification," he wrote. He felt "at considerable loss as to how to proceed," as their horses had become too exhausted to continue the journey. Leaving the horses and two men behind at present-day Cañon City, the expedition walked on through snow drifts in thin linen uniforms and improvised shoes of buffalo or deer hide. They had used up their blankets to make socks, and now those socks were worn out. "My poor fellows suffered extremely with cold, being almost naked," Pike wrote. He was wearing only a thin overall, as he had assumed they would be out of the mountains before inclement weather arrived. They had only what they could shoot to eat. But he wouldn't stop. Wherever he was, he wanted to keep going.

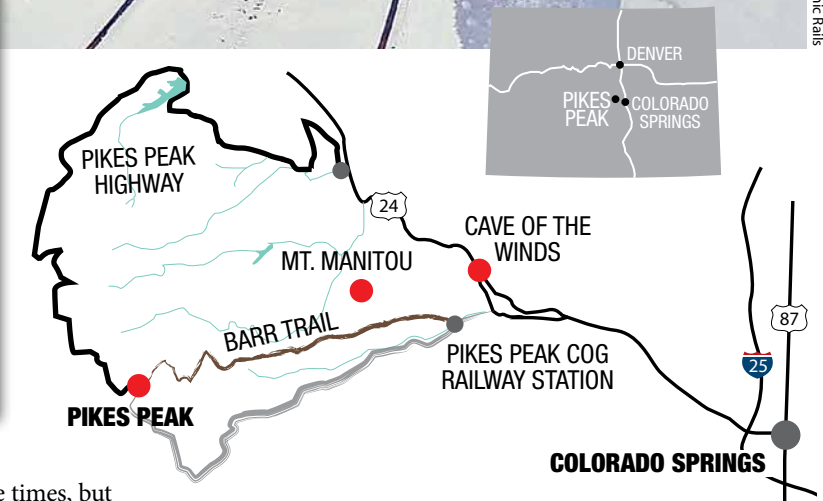
IN JANUARY THE group set out once more to find the headwaters of the Red River. By Jan. 17, they reached the valley between the Wet Mountains and Sangre de Cristos, near present-day Silver Cliff, where they ate the last of their food. They crossed a creek through deep snow in temperatures well below zero, and by nightfall most of the men's feet had become too frozen to walk. The next day, Pike and one other man, John Robinson, left their miserable group behind and went hunting, looking for anything that would allow them to "preserve existence."



Colorado Scenic Rails

Peak Adventures A TRIP TO THE TOP

Modern explorers have it a lot simpler than Zebulon Pike did: They can drive the Pikes Peak Highway, ride the Pikes Peak Cog Railway or hike Barr Trail to the top of Pikes Peak.



Pike and Robinson spotted a buffalo and shot it three times, but it galloped away, and the men were too weak with cold and hunger to give chase. They spent the night alone, without food or shelter, barely sleeping. They found more buffalo the next day, shot at them, but were horrified to see them run off, too. The hunting partners hadn't eaten in four days, and they couldn't bear the thought of returning to their comrades with no meat. Just when Pike and Robinson had decided "to remain absent and die by ourselves rather than return to our camp and behold the misery of our poor lads," a group of buffalo appeared in the distance. Pike crept up behind some trees and fired. His first shot felled one of the beasts.

Giddy with joy, the hunters brought the buffalo meat back to their starving friends. Pike soon learned that two men, John Sparks, the group's best hunter, and Thomas Dougherty, Pike's personal assistant, had such severe frostbite that they might lose their feet. They would have to remain at their camp. Pike gave them as much food and ammunition as he could spare and promised to send help as soon as possible. "We parted but not without tears," he wrote. They also left a third man to guard their cache of buffalo meat.

The remaining group crossed the Sangre de Cristos into Spanish

territory and went by the Great Sand Dunes, which may have inspired his remark, expanded later by explorer Stephen Long to include all the plains, that the country was a "great desert." They arrived near present-day Alamosa, where the soldiers built a small fort, or stockade, from cottonwood logs. Thinking the Rio Grande was the Red River, he wrote that he had found the river he was looking for and was still in American territory.

Pike sent a rescue party to recover those left behind, but Sparks' and Dougherty's feet were too badly frostbitten to go anywhere. To give Pike something to remember them by, the stranded men handed the gangrenous remains of their toes to their would-be rescuers.

While at his stockade, Pike allowed Robinson to set off alone, ostensibly to go to Santa Fe to collect a debt for a merchant in Illinois. Predictably, the Spanish authorities in Santa Fe did not welcome the news of American trespassers.

Alerted to Pike's presence by Robinson, the Spanish found the little American fort on Feb. 26, 1807, and told the wayward explorers they were actually in Spanish territory. "What? Is this



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Above: Denver Public Library/Right: Todd Caudle

not the Red River?” Pike asked. When he was informed it was not, Pike once again admitted he was lost. A 100-man Spanish force was deployed, rounding up all Pike’s men, including the frostbitten troopers he’d left in the mountains, taking them all to Santa Fe. In capturing them, the Spaniards may have saved their lives.

The Spanish fed them, gave them warm clothes and treated them well. Pike was shown respect as an officer. From Santa Fe, they took the Americans to Chihuahua, Mexico, a 550-mile trip that enabled Pike to see everything – forts, roads, rivers in the borderland – that Wilkinson had wanted him to see. Some have suggested Wilkinson arranged for Pike’s capture so he could survey the country, but there is no proof. In any event, the Spanish figured out that Pike was seeing too much and, after confiscating his papers, turned him and his men loose in Louisiana in July 1807.

PIKE CAME HOME to sadness. His baby son had died a few months after he left. Clara, he wrote in letters to his family, was “miserable, nervous and lonely.” That wasn’t the only bad news that awaited Pike. Burr and Wilkinson’s plot to invade Spanish territory to forge their own country had been discovered. Burr was on trial for treason, and Wilkinson, to save his own skin, was testifying against him.

Pike was officially exonerated of wrongdoing, even though he remained loyal to the traitorous Wilkinson, never speaking against him. Congress, however, refused to award Pike compensation of pay or land as other explorers had received, although President James Madison eventually promoted him to brigadier general. The Spanish had kept most of his papers, but he reconstructed the journey from memory, publishing his account in 1810.

His journals were criticized for inconsistent spelling, poor grammar, poor organization and geographic misinformation. Still, they were very popular, translated into German, French and Dutch, and were widely read in London. Some of the maps were inaccurate, partly because his notes were still in Mexico and partly because the map he had used to guide his expedition was inaccurate. He was still convinced the headwaters of all the region’s major rivers – the Arkansas, Platte, Rio Grande and Red – were concentrated on the top of just one mountain, most probably Pikes Peak.

Pike stayed in the military. His and Clara’s only surviving child,

Clarissa, eventually married a son of President William Henry Harrison. In the War of 1812, Pike commanded the land force that attacked Fort York in Canada. The overwhelmed British troops abandoned the fort, and to prevent it from falling into American hands, they blew it up by igniting its stores of gunpowder. Falling debris struck Pike in the back, mortally wounding him, although he lived long enough to request the captured British flag be used as his pillow. He was 34. Clara survived him by more than three decades. Remembered by a niece as “an intelligent, austere lady, always in black,” she also outlived her daughter and son-in-law and raised their six children.

IN 2006, CELEBRATIONS marking the bicentennial of the Pike Expedition were held in Pueblo and Colorado Springs, with members of the Pike Family Association in attendance as honored guests. The El Pueblo History Museum put on an exhibit that examined Pike’s motives for his expedition. After seeing the exhibit, people were asked to vote whether Pike was in league with Burr and Wilkinson in their plot or was an honest explorer who got lost. Most voted for his honesty.

“I can’t believe he’d be part of something like that,” one Pike family member said. “I’m sure he wasn’t that devious.”

“Or that smart,” her husband, not a Pike, said.

Another part of the bicentennial celebration was the re-dedication of the larger-than-life bronze statue of Zebulon Pike in downtown Colorado Springs. Pike strikes a heroic pose, his foot upon a rock, spyglass in hand, head erect, gazing steadfastly – in the wrong direction.

Pikes Peak, rising 14,115 feet, is behind him.

“With the site we had for the statue, if we’d turned him around, he’d have been looking right into the windows of City Hall,” city officials told the Pike family. “We figured it would be better if he were looking forward, even if it is the wrong direction.”

“Well,” said one of the Pike cousins, smiling, “he’d have understood that.” 🍷

About the author: Nancy Pike Hause, a Colorado-born writer now living in Kansas, is related to Zebulon Pike and attended the 2006 bicentennial celebrations with the Pike Family Association.

In taking Pike and his men prisoner, the Spanish may have saved their lives.

A plaster statue of Pike was erected in Colorado Springs in 1901 to mark Colorado’s 25th anniversary of statehood. The plaster Pike was soon lost to the elements, but a bronze sculpture now stands outside City Hall. Pike is remembered in Colorado Springs, but his personal popularity is dwarfed by that of his peak.