

Expedition of excess

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It was by all accounts the most outrageous of slob hunting trips.

European nobleman Sir St. George Gore's expedition out West from 1854-1856 was so extreme on so many levels that it went down in history, even though his written account of the journey did not survive.

"He was extravagant, just outrageous and in so many ways," says historian Dave Walter of Helena.

Walter wrote about Gore in the book "Speaking Ill of the Dead, Jerks in Montana History." Gore earned top billing for his unsaintly behavior and was dubbed by Walter a "slob hunter extraordinaire." Tale of senseless slaughter Gore's trip took him into Colorado, Wyoming, Montana and the Dakotas. Along the way he shot at just about everything that moved.

On the scale of mass killers of wildlife, Gore may rank even lower than buffalo hunters. Although they managed to almost wipe out an entire species, at least they made use of the hides. Gore often shot just to kill, and only took the best of trophies, often leaving the rest to rot.

Aside from the senseless slaughter, though, the tale of Gore's trip is nonetheless interesting for its sheer extravagance and because, in the

end, Gore got his comeuppance. The story also stands as a stark contrast to modern conservation ethics, showing how far we've come in consideration of wildlife resources. Launched from St. Louis Gore left Brighton, England, for America, starting his expedition upon his arrival in St. Louis where he purchased goods and hired men for his caravan. This was no small operation. Walter called it the "largest private expedition ever funded into the Rocky Mountain West." The estimated cost: \$250,000 (over \$2 million today).

Through his contacts with the American Fur Company, Gore purchased Conestoga wagons, Red River carts, draft horses, mules and oxen and hired men to tend all the gear and livestock. Two wagons alone were filled with firearms and fishing equipment.

Gore didn't want to be caught short of fire power. So he brought along 75 rifles, more than a dozen shotguns in addition to pistols and revolvers. These were top-drawer firearms, made by the finest English craftsman.

To ensure his angling success, Gore even brought along his personal fly tyer.

Topguides To guide the expedition, Gore hired famed scouts Jim Bridger and Henry Chatillon. (Chatillon was later immortalized by author Francis Parkman, who he guided, in Parkman's book "The California and Oregon Trail.") The guides were paid \$5 a day, a sum Walter calls "astronomical" for the time.

According to Walter, Gore also hired "40 experienced woodsmen, as well as laborers, cooks, camp tenders, interpreters, hunters, teamsters, bullwhackers, wheelwrights and blacksmiths." This was indeed hell on wheels.

The men would tend to gear that included trade goods for the Indian tribes; French wines, British gins and Irish whiskeys for Gore; and barrels of gunpowder along with lead and bullet molds. He even had an inflatable India rubber raft.

But what set Gore apart on the prairie was his finery. This dude was definitely not roughing it. He had a brass bed frame and feather bed, a fur-lined commode, fine pewterware for dining and a bathtub emblazoned with his family's coat of arms. The bedroom was set up inside a green and white linen tent, its floor covered with French carpets over a rubber pad.

Loaded down with all this gear - the freight wagons were estimated to be carrying 10 tons each - the caravan of 28 carts and wagons set out for the 6,000-mile odyssey in mid-June of 1854, traveling along the Oregon Trail.

Leading the entourage that stretched out over the prairie were Gore and his buddy, William Thomas Spensor Wentworth-Fitzwilliam, 39. Fitzwilliam's father was considered the richest of British nobles at the time. The two rode in a bright yellow carriage that had been freighted over from England. It had a canvas sunshade, padded seats and coil springs. Bridger, 50, drove the carriage.

Running around the caravan were 50 hunting hounds - 18 English foxhounds and 32 greyhounds.

What an incredible sight the caravan must have been.

Since this was a "sporting" expedition, Gore took every opportunity to stop and shoot or fish.

Walter writes, "Upon reaching a stream that he wished to fish, Gore would detail the (fly tyer) to check the hatch on the water and then to fashion feathered lures to match."

When he stopped to shoot, an attendant would hand him a loaded firearm. Gore never loaded his own gun, and he shot a lot.

It is estimated that Gore killed more than 4,000 bison, 1,500 elk, 2,000 deer, 1,500 antelope, 500 bear and hundreds of smaller animals and birds. Walter writes that about half of those were killed in the Yellowstone River Valley during Gore's 10-month stay on the Tongue River.

There's no telling how many animals he wounded. By one account, he was a "rather indifferent" shooter when not using a rest.

Just to give Gore's slaughter some perspective, in 1999 state officials busted Montana's biggest illegal hunting operation (coincidentally in the Yellowstone River Valley's Rosebud County). Two landowners and 29 others were fined \$144,000 and lost hunting privileges exceeding 47 years. A total of 55 illegally taken animals were

recovered, mostly whitetail, mule deer and antelope mounts. That was probably one day's shooting for Gore.

That Gore left many animals to rot even angered some of his own entourage.

Walter writes, "His prairie hunting behavior proved so extreme that it offended both local native bands and many of the frontiersmen whom he had hired for the expedition."

Certainly the Indians in the regions he hunted frowned upon the waste. The Yampas reportedly told him to leave their Colorado lands. The Crow complained to their Montana Indian agent, but it did no good.

In his first summer, Gore, 43, and Fitzwilliam toured through Colorado's Arkansas and South Platte river valleys and Wyoming's Medicine Bow Mountains after setting up camp near Fort Laramie. For some reason, maybe because he was almost larger than life, there are quite a few Colorado places that still bear his last name, such as the Gore Creek Valley where (maybe appropriately) the ritzy Vail ski resort is located.

(It's also reported that the Eastern Montana town of Glendive is a corruption of Glendale. Gore named a Yellowstone River tributary Glendale Creek because it reminded him of a similar place in Ireland. The name somehow got changed to Glendive and became attached to the town site, as well.)

After touring Colorado and wintering near Fort Laramie, (Fitzwilliam, the wimp, left before winter), Gore resumed traveling in mid-May of 1855, this time heading toward the Powder River in northeastern Wyoming. He followed the Powder downstream into what is now Montana and turned up the Yellowstone River to the mouth of the Tongue River. Near what is now the intersection of state routes 59 and 32, where Pumpkin Creek joins the Tongue River, Gore built a 100-foot by 120-foot fort and spent the winter of 1855-56.

During his stay there, he traveled upstream as far as Forsyth and downstream as far as Terry, shooting things along the way. Walter writes, "During the summer and fall of 1855, the Englishman devastated local herds and flocks and individual trophy beasts."

In May of 1856, Gore burned down his fort and had rafts built to float his trophies down to Fort Union, located near the confluence of the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers.

Riding horseback, with Bridger again guiding, Gore spent almost a month exploring the country from Miles City downstream to Fort Union, taking numerous side trips. But shortly after his arrival at the trading station, Gore's expedition took a turn for the worse.

Fort Union was an outpost of the American Fur Company, run by Alexander Culbertson and staffed by senior trader James Kipp. Gore's agreement with the company was that he would sell all his surplus goods, livestock and wagons. Then, from Fort Union, he would float downstream to St. Louis with limited supplies, a few men and his trophies.

But the 70-year-old Kipp angered Gore by offering him what he thought was too little money for the goods. Gore, after stewing over the incident and tossing back a few shots of his fine liquor, ordered his men to pile the goods near the fort's gate. He then put a match to the supplies. In a fit of rage, he even tossed his journal into the flames.

"His journal from that trip would have been priceless," Walter laments. "He was an articulate guy."

After purchasing a map from a rival fur company downstream, Gore decided to explore the Black Hills on his way to St. Louis, again aided by Jim Bridger. The area was marked "unexplored" on Gore's map for good reason, the Sioux didn't take kindly to white men trespassing onto their hunting grounds.

Gore's arrogance soon cost him dearly.

Southwest of present day Sundance, Wyo., a party of 135 Teton Sioux surrounded Gore's party of 13. The Sioux, led by Bear's Rib, gave Gore and his men a choice. The group could either die fighting, or give up all their possessions - including their clothes - and start walking.

"Well, Gore may have been an arrogant aristocrat, but he was no fool," Walter writes.

For five weeks, the naked men walked about 300 miles down the Little Missouri River, mostly at night to avoid any further run-ins with natives. They ate bugs, birds and berries.

My, how the mighty had fallen. No more fur-lined commodes for Sir Gore. He was reduced to squatting in the bushes.

Gore ended up wintering in a Hidatsa village near Fort Berthold in present-day North Dakota. In July of 1857, he and two servants boarded a steamboat for St. Louis, ending his western expedition a good bit poorer and with little to show. Gore, who never married, died 21 years later in Inverness, Scotland.

Walter says he has a suspicion that the 1970 movie "A Man Called Horse," starring Richard Harris as Lord John Morgan, borrowed a bit from Gore's travels and travails.

But why there's never been a movie made about Gore's trip is a mystery. As Walter points out, "Gore's a perfect movie character." And the story of his trip is a "Greek tragedy if you ever saw it."

Although Walter has been to the site of Fort Gore several times, he said he has no knowledge of archaeologists ever exploring the area for artifacts. He said the land most likely to have held the fort has been plowed hundreds of times making finding any relics problematic.

Maybe it's fitting that there is no physical evidence left of Gore's trip. After slaughtering thousands of animals and living high on the hog, he walked out of the wilderness naked.

If Gore hadn't been such an over-the-top character, and his journey so unusual, his expedition probably would be forgotten. But given his excesses, Gore's a perfect poster boy for today's conservationists and sportsmen as an example of all that is wrong with slob hunting. It's

also worth noting that even without prosecution, scofflaws sometimes get their just desserts.

Just to make sure slobs do pay, however, phone Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks' tip line at (800) TIP-MONT when you see game law violations. Don't let today's imitators of Sir Gore get away.

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For more information Dave Walter's story on Sir St. George Gore can be found in the book "Speaking Ill of the Dead: Jerks in Montana History." The book was published in October 2000 by Globe Pequot Press, Guilford, Conn., and costs \$14.95 for the softcover.

Walter cites Jack Robert's book, "The Amazing Adventures of Lord Gore," as one of the best sources of information on Gore's trip. The book is probably out of print but may be found through the library exchange program. Robert's book was published in 1977 by Sundance Publishing Co. in Silverton, Colo.

There's also scattered information on the Web, including a 1997 Salt Lake Tribune article that can be found at <http://historytogo.utah.gov/21697sir.html>.

The U.S. Geological Survey has short stories and references to books about early expeditions out West, including Gore's, on its Web site at: www.npwrc.usgs.gov/resource/literatr/presettl/expedit/