

# **Fremont's Cannon**

**By Carl P. Russell**

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## Frémont's Cannon

By CARL P. RUSSELL\*

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INCLUDED IN THE EQUIPMENT which the topographical engineer, John Charles Frémont, obtained from the arsenal in St. Louis (maintained there by the Mississippi Valley department of the U. S. army) was his echo-producing howitzer. It proved to be echo-producing not only in its percussive effects on the atmosphere at the time, but also in the 100-odd year stimulus it set up in the minds of historians to pursue the subject of its fortunes to the, so-to-speak, last ditch.<sup>1</sup> Frémont took the gun with him to Great Salt Lake, to the Snake and Columbia river valleys, the Klamath Lake country, through western Nevada to the vicinity of Bridgeport, California, and part way up the eastern ascent of the Sierra Nevada in the neighborhood of Sonora Junction. There he abandoned it on January 29, 1844.

According to one authority,<sup>2</sup> the U. S. government had decided, as early as 1835-1836, to adopt for use on the frontier the 12-pounder brass howitzer referred to by Frémont in his report as "the kind invented by the French for the mountain part of their war in Algiers."<sup>3</sup> With this in view, Cyrus Alger & Co. of South Boston, Mass., who had already made iron guns for the army and navy, is said to have begun manufacture of brass howitzers on the French model between October 1836 and September 1837, and that between those dates 12 were cast. Complaints were voiced by some of the commanding officers because of the howitzer's alleged tendency to overturn when crossing especially-rough stretches of the American frontier,<sup>4</sup> but Frémont did not hesitate to

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\*In his *Guns on the Early Frontiers: a History of Firearms from Colonial Times through the Years of the Western Fur Trade*, recently published by the University of California Press, the author provides a synthesis and an interpretation of scattered records pertaining to all types of trail-blazer and fur-hunter, etc., firearms, more complete than anything previously available. For the account of Frémont's 12-pounder howitzer presented here, Dr. Russell made use of those portions in his chapter on "Small Cannon of the Traders and the Military" which relate particularly to this historic piece of ordnance. [Ed.]

commend its performance for his party during their march to the west coast. "... the distance it had come with us," he wrote, "proved how well it was adapted to its purpose."<sup>5</sup>

It appears that the cannon almost cost the expedition the services of its leader before it actually started. Frémont's superior officer, Col. J. J. Abert, could not understand why such a punitive mechanism should have to accompany a peacefully-intended scientific expedition. But connubial wit moved faster than official calling-down, and Frémont's departure occurred just in time (May 29, 1843) to avoid the latter.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the day-to-day records of the expedition show the wisdom of their having taken along a cannon as part of their "peaceful" outfit. Only a short time after leaving Missouri, they had encountered a series of Indian tribes, mounted and otherwise, and equipped as usual with a terrifying variety of yells, red blankets, and "heads shaved to the scalp lock," in which emergency the "display of our little howitzer" contributed, according to Frémont, to the dissuading of the Indians "from their marauding intentions." In the vicinity of Klamath Lake, the bursting of one of the howitzer's shells delighted the 2 friendly Indians who were acting as guides. "It inspired them with triumphant feelings"; but fortunately the effect on an encampment of hostile Indians was such as to make the smoke of their fires disappear immediately.<sup>7</sup>

Occasional firing of the howitzer was also useful in guiding back to camp those foraging groups that had remained out after dark. However the emphasis in his report is generally upon the psychological value of having a piece of artillery in readiness—all of which made it cherished both by Frémont and by members of his party.<sup>8</sup> When it was at last apparent that the howitzer must be given up, Frémont's own words show how reluctantly he and his fellow engineers acted on this conviction: "We left it," he said, "to the great sorrow of the whole party, who were grieved to part with a companion which had made the whole distance from St. Louis, and commanded respect for us on some critical occasions, and which might be needed for the same purpose again." What disposition was made of ammunition and other impedimenta pertaining to the gun is not explained.

The checking of Frémont's map and text against the terrain of the West Walker region seems to show that on January 28, 1844, the cannon was taken to the vicinity of present-day Sonora Junction. When the detachment of the expedition that had it in tow reached the steep slopes of the West Walker Canyon wall—up which Frémont and

his main party had climbed because of the impossibility of traveling along the stream courses—the end came to the “light” (some  $\frac{3}{4}$  ton) howitzer, so far as its usefulness to the engineers was concerned.<sup>9</sup> As nearly as can be figured, the precise spot of its abandonment was south of Coleville, probably only a few miles north of Sonora Junction. Here, the snow fields still ahead, and the “inevitable detention” to which its presence would have subjected them, had led to the decision.

After they had traversed the canyon nearly to Coleville, an Indian from a nearby village guided the party and its equipage, *minus* the howitzer, to a pass over which they could cross the Sierra. The route followed in leaving the West Walker corresponds, on modern maps, to California state-highway No. 89 from Topaz westward to the Carson River at Markleville.<sup>10</sup> Arrangements made there for further guidance enabled them, after 18 days of exhausting effort on the part of themselves and their animals, to attain the pass—where Kit Carson carved his name on a tree, thus leaving irrefutable evidence of their whereabouts at that moment in history and constituting a marker which is now partly preserved in the state museum at Sutter's Fort, Sacramento.<sup>11</sup>

Conflicting stories have arisen as to the subsequent history of the Frémont howitzer: it was said to have been discovered in 1859 by 2 miners, in the place where Frémont's party had left it some 15 years before; another story says that during the Civil War it was impounded by the government as U. S. property; one hears of it as having been in private hands again; to be followed by Virginia City, Nevada, as its next claimed resting-place; in succession came Lake Tahoe, where it is said to have been given chances to speak for itself during patriotic and other celebrations; controversy, sometimes heated and persistent, occupied the next several years, leading, at last, to a final solution with respect to its whereabouts, namely, in Carson City.<sup>12</sup> One fact to emerge from the welter of pros and cons seems to be that the mountain howitzer in the Nevada State Museum, Carson City, is one of the 12 howitzers made for delivery to the U. S. war department by Cyrus Alger & Co.<sup>13</sup> The recorded explanation for its presence in the snow-laden West Walker River region is to be found in Frémont's account of his own whereabouts in the winter of 1843-44.

By way of solid ground, among the mists of debated details respecting one particular gun's career, are the following statistics taken from *The Ordnance Manual for the Use of Officers of the Confederate States Army*<sup>14</sup>—statistics that relate to the mountain howitzer objectively, its

use and care: wheels, 38 inches in diameter; axletree, 38 inches long; charge detonated by a fuze inserted into the touch-hole at the moment of firing; shells, spherical cases (78 musket balls), and canisters (148 balls), used as projectiles; weight of shell with its explosive charge about 9 pounds; weight of other 2 projectiles about 11 pounds each; range, 150-1005 yards according to elevation.

On the western mountain trails, fur traders used 2 horses, hitched tandem, to pull guns weighing less than did the 12-pounder howitzer of the army. (Total weight of the latter, including carriage, ammunition, tools, and portable forge, about  $\frac{3}{4}$ -ton; the barrel weighed 220 pounds.) Over rough terrain, the gun and its carriage could be packed on the back of a horse for which purpose there was a special army pack-saddle. There is no evidence that Frémont used such a saddle in transporting his gun during the 1843-44 expedition; but there were times when the barrel was dismounted from its carriage to facilitate travel. The ammunition chest ordinarily was packed with 2 shells, 5 spherical cases, and 1 canister. Fuses, primers, priming tubes, port fire, and slow match made up the inside contents of the chest while the linstock was carried on the outside, the total load weighing 112 pounds. A second chest, packed on the opposite side of the saddle, served as balance.<sup>15</sup>

Cannon balls do not figure in any of the discovery and salvage stories relating to Frémont's howitzer. Were they dropped at the time that the gun itself was abandoned? Did one or another of them find a warm spot beside an Indian's or a miner's fire? Or have they now become wedged between the rocks as impromptu reinforcement to the wall of West Walker Canyon?

#### NOTES

1. Among comparatively recent studies of the howitzer's history are: "The Frémont Cannon," *Sacramento Bee*, Sept. 20, 1941, magazine section, p. 3; Irene D. Paden, *The Wake of the Prairie Schooner* (New York, 1943), p. 437; Irving Stone, *Immortal Wife* (Garden City, N. Y., 1944), p. 104; George Hinkle and Bliss Hinkle, *Sierra Nevada Lakes* (New York, 1949), pp. 1-383 *passim*. H. H. Bancroft had discussed the subject earlier (1886) in *Hist. of Calif.*, IV, 438, ft. note, citing Thomas C. Lancey, "Cruise of the Dale," *San Jose Pioneer*, 1879-81.

2. Arthur Woodward to Carl P. Russell, letter, 1948, "Notes on the 12-pounder brass mountain howitzer."
3. John Charles Frémont, *Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains . . . and Northern California . . . 1843-1844* (Washington, D. C., 1845), p. 226.
4. Woodward, *op. cit.* See also note 13 below.
5. Frémont, *ibid.*
6. Thomas H. Benton, *Thirty Years' View . . . from 1820 to 1850* (New York, 1856), II, 578-80, describes how Mrs. Frémont, being requested to examine her husband's mail and forward the items which he should see, had "read the countermanding orders, and detained them!" In the opinion of H. H. Bancroft (note 1 above) she had acted "shrewdly." See also Frémont, *Memoirs of my Life* (Chicago and New York, 1887), pp. 167-68; and Stone, note 1 above, p. 89.
7. Frémont, note 3 above, pp. 107, 126, 204.
8. *Idem.*
9. *Ibid.*, p. 225.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 227.
11. Phil Townsend Hanna, *Dictionary of California Land Names* (Los Angeles, 1951), p. 57.
12. Paden, note 1 above, p. 437; Bancroft, *op. cit.*, p. 438.
13. Harold L. Peterson to Carl P. Russell, letter, May 28, 1954, giving results of search of "Statement of Contracts, Ordnance Department, Book 26," war records division, national archives, Washington, D. C.; delivery of 12-pounder mountain howitzers to U. S. government by Cyrus Alger & Co. as follows: 12 on June 11, 1836; 12 on May 16, 1837; 3 on Dec. 8, 1837; 4 on March 13, 1838; and 5 on April 28, 1838.
- A. Mordecai, compiler, *The Ordnance Manual . . .* (Charlestown, S. Carolina, 1861), p. 19, specifies the contractors' marks placed on howitzers made for U. S. war department; the Nevada State Museum specimen is marked in accordance with these specifications.
14. Mordecai, note 13 above, pp. 131-48.
15. *Idem.*