

The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth, As Told To Thomas D. Bonner. Introduction, notes, and epilogue by Delmont R. Oswald. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972. Illustrations. 649 pp. \$9.75.)

Reviewed by RICHARD H. DILLON, *head librarian of the Sutro Branch, California State Library, San Francisco.*

THIS EXCELLENT EDITION of a classic of Western Americana has appeared at an opportune time—virtually coincidentally with Elinor Wilson's biography of Beckwourth (or Beckwith) for the University of Oklahoma Press. Used together, the volumes should constitute at long last a definitive biography of the mulatto mountain man.

Beckwourth was the natural son of a Virginia planter and a Negro slave girl. Emancipated by his father and encouraged to seek his fortune in the West, he did just that in the face of great odds. (Only one other black, Ed Rose, became a major figure in the Rocky Mountain fur trade.) From the time that he served in General Ashley's 1824 expedition until his death in 1866, he was a prominent figure in the western mountains and plains. His one major absence was during Florida's Second Seminole War in which, typically, he claimed to have served as a captain of scouts but was, more likely, a muleteer, packer, or something of that sort.

For years, Beckwourth's reminiscences have, understandably, been heavily discounted by historians, because the man was such a liar and braggart. When he was not rescuing General Ashley three times over from death, he was telling-off or bluffing-down the likes of Tom ("Broken Hand") Fitzpatrick. Had shrinks or trick-cyclists been the vogue a hundred and forty years ago, they would have had a field day with Jim. It was as if Beckwourth's ego, suffering from a psychological tape worm, needed constant stuffing.

Early on, however, scholars like Charles Camp and Dale Morgan realized that there was about as much truth as fiction in Beckwourth's accounts. He was imaginative, but he was not a novelist. And, above all, he *was* there. Now we have a detailed going-over of the incidents of his career which makes the *Life* much more useful to those of us concerned with the facts of history, as opposed to folklore and legend. Oswald might have been even tougher on Jim, but he probably became too fond of his subject to be as ruthless in his third-degree as he might have been.

Life is substantially more important to historians of the Rocky Mountain West than to those interested in the Pacific littoral. Beckwourth's role inland was larger. He was a "chief" (subchief, probably) of the Crows, not the Modocs or Mojaves. Not until page 503 of some 535 pages of narrative does he arrive in California, alas. And, for a plowhard, he is close-mouthed indeed about his role as horse rustler on the coast with Pegleg Smith and the Ute renegade, Walkara. Although Oswald supplies an epilogue which carries forth Beckwourth's career from the time he dictated the book

to T. D. Bonner in Indian Bar *circa* 1851, it contains just the bare bones of the dozen and more years remaining of his career.

An undependable book can become a classic of Western Americana, *vide* James Ohio Pattie's narrative. This is the case with Beckwourth's *Life*. Jim ignored time, geography, and cast of characters if he could make a good story better. And he could not abide being on the sidelines in any incident; he had to hog the limelight—even if he was not there. And, finally, he had an expansive way with figures. If he led fifty Crow warriors on a raid, the number in imperishable print had to become 500. Yet he was a great character in the heyday of beaver trapping, and his account is a great source of information when used with care. He met and knew practically every important member of that "reckless breed of men" who pioneered fur trading (and horse stealing) in the West. While not the gospel truth, the memoir seldom contains incidents which Beckwourth and editor, co-author, or ghost Bonner scissored out of whole cloth. As literature, the endless raids and counter-raids of the bloody Crow *v.* Blackfeet campaigns become a bore. But as history, even flawed history, this is a book of great importance to an understanding of the mountain, plains, and Great Basin West.