

John Frémont: The Pathfinder

by Tom Smith

10-page script sample

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CHARACTERS

John C. Frémont (and others)

TIME/PLACE

1829-1890

The United States



JOHN FRÉMONT: THE PATHFINDER

JOHN FRÉMONT

A journey is a wondrous thing. You think that the purpose of it is to get where you're going. But then, by the end of it, you realize the journey was how you got there.

I've taken a lot of journeys in my life. I took one here, in fact. A pretty long one, from 1890 to today. And I've seen a lot of changes in that time. But I've also seen a lot of things that are the same.

My name is John Charles Fremont. But you can call me John.

Now, I'm assuming, because I'm here at your school, that most of you live around here. Probably in a house or an apartment. Close to a grocery store and a restaurant. A gas station or two. Well, when I lived here, there weren't any of those things. Instead, there were just trees and rocks and a whole bunch of people trying to scare me away. That's the California I know. And when I saw the California flag being made for the first time—this was before I ran for president—I never thought that one day I'd— Well, now I'm getting ahead of myself. Every journey's gotta begin at the beginning. And I suppose this one does too. So let me go back—to the early 1800s.

(Shows map of America in 1812.)

This is what America looked like around the time I was born. We had just made the Louisiana Purchase, which is this whole area here. But no one had ever traveled through it to see what was where. We didn't know if the land was good for farming, or mining, or what. We just knew that America had too many people and not enough space so we needed to expand to the West.

In fact, here's what Senator Crittenden from Kentucky said.

SENATOR CRITTENDEN

Capitalism is why we founded this country! Our fathers left England to forge a better life, free of kings. But the only way to have a better life is to live a better life, and we can't do that if we don't find and use the riches of the land! We need to send parties of men west to discover this vast unknown so we can get those riches! That is our manifest destiny!

It will not be easy. Lives will be lost. A few men will be sacrificed to explore this continent and make

it our own, but so be it! The future of our great nation is in our hands! We must expand our country for Capitalism!

JOHN FRÉMONT

And so it was. Explorers were sent out to not only look to see what was there, but to map out the area so others could follow.

At that time, I was still pretty young. Only 16. I went to college to study... Well, I didn't know what I was studying, really. I was too busy writing poetry and drawing in my sketch pad. I guess I was a bit of daydreamer.

(Talking to his professor.)

"What? Oh, the answer? It's, uh... It's... 14?"

(Notices people laughing at him.)

Oh. 'Paris?' I'm sorry, sir. Yes, I know this is History. I brought my Math book by mistake. Sorry."

I just couldn't seem to focus! I'd be sitting there in class looking out the window, imagining what the world looked like in different places: whether trees and lakes looked differently somewhere else; if there were people of different colors and beliefs; if there were animals I'd never imagined. And when I snapped out of it, class would be over and I hadn't taken a single note! It got to the point that rather than go to class, I'd just go for a walk through the woods instead. Or lie down in the meadow and write a poem and sketch the landscape.

I didn't mean to be a bad student, but school just seemed really hard for me! Too hard, it turns out. Because one day I got called into the office of the Head of the College.

HEAD OF REGENTS

John Charles Frémont: you have blatantly neglected your responsibilities as a student of this school. Although your grades are average, your attendance record is appalling. You have been given many warnings, all of which you chose to ignore. A boy with talent and intelligence like yours is an asset; a boy who squanders opportunities is a liability. Charleston College cannot afford such a liability. You are suspended from this school forever. I hope you find your path in life. Good day.

JOHN FRÉMONT

Now what!?! Kicked out of school. No job. Nowhere to live. And I couldn't go back home—not after getting suspended from school!

"I'd like to join the Naval Academy as a teacher of mathematics."

The good thing about the military is that they teach you discipline, and believe me, I needed it! They told me when to get up in the morning, how long I had to shower and get dressed, what to eat, when to go to bed at night. And so even though I still found moments to daydream a little or write a quick poem in my journal, I had so much structure that I was able to be successful.

It seems odd, doesn't it, that I could do better by having a busier schedule? I guess because I didn't have to think about things like when to get up or what to do next, I was able to get more work done. You think that having all the time in the world to do, say, your homework would be a good thing. But because you have all that time you sometimes think, "I'll do it later." And before long, it is later and you still haven't done it.

But if you have a schedule and you think, "I have thirty minutes to do this before I can go out and play," you'll get it done in thirty minutes, guaranteed! Anyway, that's why the military turned out to be such a good thing for me: because I needed that structure to my day to get things done.

But even though I felt like I could focus on things better, the best part of being with the Naval Academy was that I got to travel. Seeing another part of the world—in my case, South America—finally satisfied that part of me that felt so restless. And I knew that I wanted to do it some more!

"I'd like to join the Topographical Corps."

Topography is map-making. All day long I got to explore new places and draw maps of them. It was the perfect job for me!

While I was doing that, I became friends with Joel Roberts Poinsett, who was the Secretary of War. In fact, although most of you probably haven't heard his name before, you probably do know the flower

that was named after him. You see it every December—it's called the poinsettia. Anyway, Mr. Poinsett said the most inspirational thing to me one day:

JOEL ROBERTS POINSETT

John, the only reason I am successful is because I always believed I could be. I took advantage of every single opportunity and forged a path into uncharted areas. I want you to do the same. That is the greatest gift you could ever give me, and yourself: forge your own destiny.

JOHN FRÉMONT

"Forge my own destiny."

Mr. Poinsett convinced me that I could do whatever I wanted with my life as long as I worked hard and focused—and that's pretty much what happened. I want all of you to remember that, because I believe every great person—every person who's famous or successful or important—has done that very thing: they've taken advantage of opportunities and followed their dreams.

The other thing Mr. Poinsett did for me was introduce me to a lot of important people. One of these was Thomas Hart Benton, a Senator from Missouri. I told him I was a topographer.

SENATOR BENTON

I have the utmost respect for explorers and mapmakers. You are the ones that will make this country great by finding its riches and increasing its size. The country needs more space, and you boys are just the ones to get it for us!

JOHN FRÉMONT

One night, Senator Benton invited me over for dinner and introduced me to his daughter, Jessie. She was very beautiful and smart and funny and nice. And when I looked into her eyes, it was love-at-first-sight. So, I did like Mr. Poinsett taught me—I followed my dream. And my dream was to marry Jessie.

But the Senator and Mrs. Benton thought I was not good enough for Jessie. I was poor, and didn't have a college education. So they asked Mr. Poinsett to send me off on a year-long mission to map out the Des Moines River in Iowa territory,

(Pointing to it on the map.)

thinking that Jessie and I would eventually fall out of love with each other. But we didn't! In fact, as soon as I got back, we eloped and secretly got married!

That probably wasn't the smartest thing in the world. The Senator and Mrs. Benton were really upset with me. But once they saw how in love Jessie and I were, they eventually forgave us.

By this time, my career as a topographer was beginning to take off! People liked my work. In fact, I was given my first big assignment: to map out parts of the West. And the United States government chose me to lead the expedition!

I was gone for a long time and I missed Jessie very much. I wrote many letters home on my trip.

(Reading letter one.)

Goodbye, Jessie. The world as we know it will be different when we meet again!

(Reading letter two.)

I'm taking 22 men with me, including a guide by the name of Kit Carson. I'm in St. Louis now, where our journey will begin. St. Louis is the threshold to the West and its rivers will lead to riches we can only dream about!

(Reading letter three.)

By my calculations, we're progressing about 24 miles a day, walking for almost 20 hours. We should make it to the mountain range in a few weeks at most.

(Reading letter four.)

I've named a mountain! Frémont's Peak, which I estimate at 13,730 feet! Jessie, please tell your father that I'm finally getting somewhere in the world!

(Reading letter five.)

In order to get as much information as I can, I'm going to split my expedition into two teams. I'll lead one through the waterways while Kit Carson will lead the rest on foot.

(Acting out the following.)

"Look out!"

Suddenly, our boat struck a rock hidden beneath the water. Three of my men could not swim.

"I'm coming! Try to grab onto that branch!"

I tried to save them but realized I myself wasn't safe yet.

"There! Now hold on! We'll make a human chain and I'll pull you all across the current. Whatever you do, don't let go of me. Hold tight. And..."

(He pulls them to shore, exhausted.)

I eventually made it to shore, as did my men. But we had lost all our food, extra clothing and equipment. We were wet, exhausted, and lost.

"We must push on at once to join Carson and the others! The longer we hesitate, the less chance we have of making it. It'll be rough, but it's the only way to survive. Now move out!"

(He begins to hike, shivering and sore.)

And so we went, pushing through our pain until we met up with our party. Traveling through Sioux, Blackfeet and Cheyenne, any of which might have attacked us. But we made it.

Luckily, my mapping materials had survived the rough conditions. I spent days mapping out what I had seen.

(Goes to the map and begins to add detail to it.)

It was an amazing feeling knowing that I and my men had seen things that no one else had ever seen before.

We rested a bit, and then began the long journey home. There were times some of the men felt exhausted, like they couldn't go on. And it was my job to cheer them up.

"You can't give up now! We've done a remarkable thing—we've mapped out land so that whomever

follows us will know where they are. That ridge doesn't exist to people back home—they've never seen it before. But it will exist to them soon; look, here it is on our map! It has a name, because we gave it one. And that river, and that bluff. They all exist now because we found them!

I know you're tired and I know you're sore. But soon we will be home again and we'll be heroes because of what we've done! We've opened up parts of the West! So now matter how badly you feel now, just know that soon you'll feel joy ten times bigger! Now, let's go. We have a hero's welcome awaiting us!"

And we did.

That first expedition was the most exciting thing I had ever lived through! Yes, it was hard. My feet were blistered and sore. I had a hacking cough. All my muscles ached. But I had seen a part of the country that no American had ever witnessed before, and I drew pictures of it so everyone in the world could see what I saw!

What could be better than that!?!

After I got back home and rested for a few weeks, I decided I wanted to write a book about my experiences on the expedition. I'm not a very good writer, so I talked the words while Jessie wrote them down for me. Sometimes, I would get so excited I'd talk like this:

Mounted on a fine horse, without a saddle and bareheaded, Kit Carson was one of the finest horsemen I have ever seen.

And Jessie would be writing like this—

(Demonstrates Jessie writing fast.)

—trying to keep up with me. It was exhausting, but amazing at the same time! And before you know it, I had written my very first book!

When my book was released to the public—1000 copies of it!—it was a hit! People were not only fascinated by what I described, but how I described it. Some of them even decided to pack up their homes and settle in the West!

(Adds color and/or houses to the Iowa territory on the map to indicate settlers.)

Well, this was exactly what the U.S. government wanted people to do, and they were thrilled that my book helped make that happen. So they sent me back out on a second expedition, hoping I'd write

another book and that more people would settle in the West!

I left in May, 1843 for my second expedition. My mission was to seek out Oregon and explore the coastline south of the Columbia River.

(Pointing it out on the map.)

Here. I was joined by 40 men. But this expedition was different. This time, we brought cannons for safety and protection. Now, the government didn't want us to do that. They felt they were:

GOVERNMENT

Completely unnecessary! A physical burden to your men, and a possible declaration of war to the Native Americans!

JOHN FRÉMONT

But Jessie agreed with me that even though we may never fire them, the cannons would stand as a symbol of strength and scare off possible attacks. So when she received a letter from the government telling me to leave the cannons behind, she sent word to me to begin my expedition immediately, before the letter from the government could be forwarded to me.

Her plan worked! We began the great journey—with the cannons! We went here—

(Pointing it out on the map.)

—to the Great Salt Lake and Bear River Valley. But this trip brought an unexpected surprise: early winter. It set in almost three months before we thought it would. The cold was fierce and unrelenting.

(Acting out the following.)

"Men, I am giving you the opportunity to return home. The snows are going to be deeper, the winds colder and the trail far more treacherous than we originally thought. If you feel like the risk is not worth it to you or your family, then you may go back now.

(Looks around. No one leaves.)

Not one of you is leaving? All right then, let's go!"

(Starts to hike, shivering.)

The journey was rough. Days without a decent meal. Too cold to make a fire, yet too cold not to.

(He takes out his map and pencil, shivering as he tries to add to it.)

"Onward to southern Oregon and California!"

The weather was ruthless. Frost-bitten limbs... Feet so numb you couldn't tell that they had been rubbed raw... Hunger so powerful, we were forced to eat our dogs and mules!

"Over the Sierra Mountains!"

9,338 feet. Losing our Indian guide. Filled with fear.

"Onward! For this great nation! Onward!"

Finally into Sacramento, where we met up with Johann August Sutter, the owner of the largest ranch west of St. Louis. Mr. Sutter put us up, gave us medical aid, and fed us for two weeks. Two weeks to rest, ponder what we had been through, and what still lay ahead.

(Writing a letter home.)

"Dear Jessie. Well, we made it. I wish I could tell you the trip was easy, but it was not. I don't want to scare you with the details, but this is one trip I will never forget. We made it to Sacramento and we'll stay here until we are all strong enough to return home. Please know that I miss you and the children very much. Although I have many men on my expedition, I still get lonely sometimes. Since I'm the leader, I must always motivate them to be brave, even when I, myself, am scared. Anyway, I hope this letter finds you well, and please know that I think about you with every step I take. Sincerely yours,
John Charles Fremont."

We were only halfway through our journey—we still needed to make it back home. 2000 miles left to go. 16 to 24 miles a day.

(He travels back.)

We arrived back home one year and two months after we had begun. We lost some of our men to fear, some to attacks. We came back with 30 less animals than we went with. But we came back with our lives and our honor.

I want you all to think of the hardest physical thing you've ever had to do. The longest you've ever had

to run, or the heaviest thing you've ever had to lift. Now, think about doing it 24 hours a day for 420 days straight, sometimes in a hundred-degree heat, sometimes in pouring rain, and sometimes in sub-zero snow. That was what this expedition was like for me. But as hard as that expedition was, I was proud that I never gave up, and that I never quit what I started.

And that's what made other people proud of me too.

When I got back home, I decided I'd take it easy for a while. A long while. But soon I found myself itching to write another book, and Jessie agreed to help me again. So we did it. I wrote a second book that was just as successful as the first! The newspapers gave me great reviews, and soon people knew me as a great explorer and author. I was a celebrity!

Everyone wanted me to come to dinner and speak with them about my journey. Senators invited me to speak. Schools. Newspaper reporters did stories all about my life and my travels!

Before I knew it, it was 1845 and President James Polk was sworn into office. He had read my books, and decided to send me out on my third expedition. But this one would be special. Instead of mapping out a specific area, President Polk wanted me to explore the whole area and try to find the best path for a railroad that would connect the East to the West!

It was the most important assignment any topographer had ever been given. But it was also my most dangerous mission yet.

The land I was exploring was filled with enemies. Well, not enemies, really, just people who didn't want us to settle there. I call them enemies only because they were willing to do whatever it took to keep us out—even kill us!

There were three distinct groups to look out for: the Native Americans who were already living on the land; the Mexicans, who wanted the land for themselves; and the native Californians, known as rancheros, who didn't want anybody taking their land. I made the decision to split my party into two groups, to hurry the expedition along.

I discovered the city of Monterey, the liveliest and most important town in California at that time. General Don Jose Castro, the General of the Mexicans in the area, requested a meeting and gave me official permission to continue exploring the area. But there was something suspicious about the General that I did not like.