

**Volume 1**

**Number 108**

**Senator Benton's Conspiracy**

**Lead: Thomas Hart Benton had a vision of a vast expansion United States to the West, the problem was that nobody wanted to go there.**

**Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts**

**Content: Thomas Hart Benton, the Senator from Missouri in the 1830s, wished to push the border of the United States 1000 miles beyond the crest of the Rockies to the Pacific, unfortunately several things stood in the path of his goal. First, Native Americans had rather enjoyed their**

**homelands for centuries and didn't wish to be pushed aside. Second, Mexico controlled vast sections of southwestern North America and were understandably reluctant to turn it over to the United States. Finally, the British shared with the United States, joint occupancy of Oregon territory. The biggest problem however was American apathy. The risks associated with settling the west appeared too great.**

**This national hesitation was provoked in part by the writings of Steven H. Long who led an army expedition west in 1820. In his official report he labeled the high plains of eastern Colorado, the Great American Desert saying erroneously that "It is**

**almost wholly unfit for cultivation. Since most Americans were farmers they weren't interested and did not move.**

**To counter act this pessimism, Benton sponsored an expedition led by his son-in-law, John Charles Fremont, to cross this so-called desert, demonstrate its fertility and report back in a sort of early propaganda travelogue. Benton hoped this effort would make the wilderness more attractive to Americans.**

**Leaving in October 1841 Fremont, instead of following in the steps of Lewis and Clark on the Oregon Trail, headed straight for the Colorado Rockies. During 1842-1844, Fremont,**

**Kit Carson, and the rest of the party traveled 5000 in the mountains and prairies of the west. Fremont sent reports back to his wife Jesse who retold them in vivid detail for newspapers and books. The effect was electric. Millions of Americans, became excited about going west. The influence of her reports, combined with military gains during the Mexican War unleashed a flood of Americans heading west to seek a better life. Senator Benton's conspiracy had paid off.**

**At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.**

**Resources**

**Abbott, Carl. *Colorado: A History of the Centennial State*.  
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York, NY: Norton Publishing Company, 1976.**

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