

*Life Sketch - Benjamin D. Wilson
New Mexican Period*

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PROLOGUE

Don Benito Wilson chronicled ***Observations on Early Days in California and New Mexico*** following thirty-six remarkable years in Southern California where he achieved elite status. The original dictation to niece Mary Stone recorded in a hand-written copy. *The Bancroft Library* retain the original manuscript of ***Observations*** transcribed by Mr. Savage while in Los Angeles collecting historical material for Hubert H. Bancroft. Signed by Wilson December 1877, months prior to death March 1878.

Born December 1ST 1811 on his father's farm beside the Piney River five miles north of Centerville in Hickman County, Tennessee. Wilson's mother, Ruth Davis, died close to his birth as she is never mentioned, an enigmatic family member who remains in the shadows of Wilson history. Later he moved south to Hardin County, probably for financial reasons, with his remarried Dad and three step-siblings he never mentioned. Older brother Wiley was twenty one when assuming guardianship for Benjamin, Madison, Green and Columbia.¹

Six of Benjamin's aunt and uncles purchased farms on the Piney river contiguous to his grandfather, Adam William Wilson, the patriarch of the clan. Except for his father, John G Wilson, they succeeded in farming, cotton and grist mills, politics, brewing and distilling, land development. Benjamin's reference to his father in ***Observations*** suggest poor investments the cause of their misfortune.²

Within three years of his father's passing late spring 1823, Benjamin set off for his maternal uncle's, Wiley Davis, new farmland situated on the Yazoo river in Mississippi. Purchased from the federal government after Choctaw indigenous Americans were relocated west. In ***Observations***³ in two sentences Wilson describes seven years in Mississippi, neither of which is an accurate portrayal.

The Choctaws were removed from Mississippi in phases encompassing decades. They were gone from the Yazoo area prior to Wilson's arrival, he could not have traded with them. Not to mention a financial condition that left him unable to fund a trading business. That a young American born and raised in Tennessee could not handle the Mississippi climate or be under the care of a physician in the 1820s is absurd on its merits.

Wiley Davis could have used his teenage nephew's assistance clearing land and creating a functioning farm on his three hundred and twenty acre acquisition from the Bureau of Land Management.⁴ With horse, musket and a few dollars, Benjamin headed north late in 1832 or early 1833 crossing the Plains on the Santa Fe Trail to make his mark and fortune moving west.

PROVINCE of NEW MEXICO [1833 - 1841]

In 1821 following ten years of strife, insurrection and revolt the Spanish Crown capitulated to the will of the Mexican people. With independence the Republic of Mexico inherited a bankrupt treasury, a society composed of wealthy and impoverished, a distant northern border of provincial colonies at war with marauding Indians. Early on Mexico relaxed a Spanish ban on immigrants and imports in order to increase population and the variety, value of goods available to their northern frontier.

A torrent of traffic built the Santa Fe Trail that continued until locomotives pulled into Santa Fe six decades later. In addition to merchandise, hundreds of frontiersmen and merchants brought muskets, powder, shot and whiskey to another market. Foreigners, predominantly American traders and trappers, established clandestine relations with Native Americans in their homelands of high desert and forested mountains remote from government surveillance. These Americans furnished contraband mules in exchange for merchandise, weaponry and alcohol transported down the Trail by Missouri merchants.

Foreign adventurers strengthened the ability of Apache and other Nations to wage relentless war that kept the region unstable in turn weakening Mexican resistance during the war with the United States. The Mexican Government grasped the unintended consequences too late, there were too few resources brought to bear on trading activities too remote to patrol or administer effectively.

When dictating eight years of New Mexican adventure, Wilson concentrated on expeditions, assassinations, treks and near-death escapes. Unfortunately, the account reveals little how he worked, lived and earned his keep; he is narrating events that occurred earlier in life. Never intended as biography, *Observations* recalls experiences in New Mexico that occasioned courage, audacity, nimble heroism and an intrepid drive to survive and ultimately succeed.

He avoided recording key New Mexico experiences when dictating *Observations* during the last full year of his life in California. Don Benito Wilson a well-respected, wealthy pioneer made a brilliant contribution to the advancement of southern California before and following the Mexican American war. As we shall see in his California story, his experiences and accomplishments during three decades of California residence were stunning.

A circular published in 1835 by the State of Chihuahua further inhibited Wilson from identifying his New Mexico activities. Wilson could not own up to trading merchandise, bartering actually, for livestock stolen by indigenous Americans from Mexican ranchos,

*Chihuahua officials viewed Americans as a major source of the stepped-up raids, and prohibited all trade with Indians, warning specifically that Anglo-Americans found trading arms, powder, or lead with Apache's **would be executed.**⁵*

Following Mexico's Independence Americans surged into New Mexico some to trade others to trap virgin streams. Native Americans there now had access to high quality, greater variety, improved American merchandise for which they ramped up moonlight raids on vulnerable haciendas and ranchos on Mexican borderlands.

Ignacio Zuniga, commander of northern Presidios, reported five thousand citizens slain, nearly as many homes abandoned and a hundred settlements deserted along the northern frontier between 1820 and 1835.⁶

FIRST EXPEDITION TO APACHERIA FALL 1833 - SPRING 1835

On arrival in Santa Fe November 1833 the *penniless* Wilson was hired by James Kirker for an eighteen month expedition into Apacheria. Responsible for external security at Santa Rita del Cobre mine located fifteen miles from now Silver City in southwestern New Mexico, Kirker needed to augment mine protection. Mexican military staffed Santa Rita in a hap hazard fashion but never proved capable of restraining Apache's to allow copper production to satisfy demand from mints further south in the Republic.

Thirty years earlier the Apache led Spanish explorers to this site strewn with scattered, high purity, raw copper, some ingots weighing hundreds of pounds. After several ownership changes, two Americans took over operations a few years prior to Wilson's arrival.

Homelands of thirty to fifty Chiricahua Apache family groups, rancherias, surrounded the mine. They routinely raided and harassed operations external to the facility. Livestock required daily grazing and water; lumbering necessary for combustion to smelt ore into ingots; riding shotgun on wagon loads of copper each pulled by twelve to fourteen mules hundreds of miles into Mexican border states. Return trips hauled supplies necessary to maintain operations.

The mine lessee, Robert McKnight, paid a silver peso a day for their services.⁷ With no living expenses nor distractions eighteen frontiersmen accumulated almost ten thousand silver pesos.⁸ In *Observations* in a sentence or two, Wilson would have you believe he and seventeen colleagues spent eighteen months trapping beaver and touring the wilderness. The cost in today's dollars to McKnight would have been three hundred thousand for these services.⁹ These mercenaries were paid for their skill with a musket not a trap.

McKnight also engaged the Apache in trade designed to lessen hostile actions.¹⁰ These hired frontiersmen used winter down time to travel to rancherias developing relationships through barter. However, it never reached a level that eliminated all Apache assaults.¹¹

While returning to Santa Fe spring 1835 at the end of their first tour, Wilson and fellow frontiersmen herded livestock across New Mexico for rendezvous with Santa Fe Trail caravans returning to Missouri settlements.¹² After a summer in Santa Fe, Wilson returned to Santa Rita fall of 1835 but this time in a self-funded expedition accompanied by five fellow Americans.

SECOND EXPEDITION TO APACHERIA FALL 1835 - SPRING 1837

Utilizing resources earned in the first excursion, Wilson hired and outfitted a small party to a second eighteen month tour at Santa Rita providing security services direct to Robert McKnight. With just five hundred and forty pesos, or dollars, earned on the first trek, Wilson provisioned five Americans for a year and a half. Illegal barter with native Americans must have been the reward that incentivized frontiersmen to risk their lives in Apacheria, Wilson did not earn enough his first tour to pay five men a peso a day. And it turned perilous as we shall see.

FIRST TREK ACROSS NEW MEXICO HERDING LIVESTOCK TO SANTA FE TRAIL SPRING 1836

As soon as possible in the spring of 1836 to herd livestock across New Mexico, Wilson and colleagues set off from Santa Rita to rendezvous a Santa Fe Trail caravan forty miles east of Santa Fe. It was necessary to deliver animals safely to Missouri to realize compensation for their efforts and pay for merchandise exchanged in barter.

Midway on the three hundred mile journey Wilson lost his bearings and after five or six days without water or food the party stumbled on a source of water at Gran Quivira, an abandoned Pueblo community. The livestock did not survive but Wilson and party returned to Santa Fe with their lives intact. The saga is described in detail in ***Observations***.

SECOND TREK ACROSS NEW MEXICO HERDING LIVESTOCK TO SANTA FE TRAIL SPRING 1837

Returning to Santa Rita, Wilson's party took up security and barter trade efforts until once again set off to rendezvous a Trail caravan east of Santa Fe. This time his party split, three members successfully made their way to Missouri with 'property' while Wilson and two colleagues drove livestock to the rendezvous too late to meet the caravan. In an attempt to catch up they were captured by Apache's enraged over an assassination of chiefs, women and children by American provocateurs. Wilson describes in detail in ***Observations*** his ordeal of evading Apache slow death by fire.

In an almost miraculous scenario, Wilson and colleagues survived their Apache captivity, each colleague reached Texas or California while Wilson retired from frontiersmen endeavors joining a Santa Fe merchant business operated by Josiah Gregg.¹³ Back in Santa Fe, penniless once again, Wilson soon acquired the inventory assets and prospered as merchant his final years in New Mexico. Wilson clerked for Josiah Gregg, author of *Commerce of the Prairies*, the first year or so. The last time in Benjamin Wilson's lifetime, at age twenty six, he was in the employ of others.

SANTA FE MERCHANT SUMMER 1837-FALL 1841

Both self-funded treks lost livestock taken in barter transactions, the risks far outweighed the returns, a merchant life offered financial and personal security. Wilson offers no specific detail concerning his merchant businesswarehouse, inventory, customers, payment terms, merchandise offered etc suggesting, once again, the principal trade was barter with indigenous Americans. From a Santa Fe location, with the effort of five frontiersmen as agents, Wilson traded with all southwestern nations surrounding Taos and Santa Fe; four Apache tribes, Navaho, Ute and Pueblo.¹⁴

In ***Observations*** he relates his relationship with the head of all Pueblos, Chief Pedro Leon , as responsible for saving his and his agents lives during Santa Fe riots of 1837. As they sheltered in Wilson's warehouse cellar for a week, chief Leon stood outside his establishment convincing rioters the store was empty. Leon was protecting his source of American trade goods; merchandise, alcohol, and armaments crucial to indigenous nations. Another near-death experience, he was to experience at least five more his first six years in California.

Success as Santa Fe merchant may be drawn from his investments in land, ranch development, cattle raising that occurred on arrival in California. His purchase of six thousand, five hundred

acres of Rancho Jurupa, now Riverside, California; creation of home and ranch; cattle purchase etc were only possible with funds from New Mexican endeavors.

The fact that he successfully asked for the hand in marriage of a teenage Latino daughter of don Bernardo Yorba cemented his status as don Benito Wilson while still in his thirties. His neighbor Yorba's Rancho Santa Ana is now, essentially, Orange County, California.

Wilson's thirty six year life in California is depicted in *BDWilson Life Sketch, California Period* found on benjamindaviswilson.com

END NOTES

1 (Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions 1823, October Term)

2 For a complete biographical sketch of Wilson's Tennessee and Mississippi years see *Benjamin Davis Wilson A Unique 19th Century Tennessean*. Available at benjamindaviswilson.com.

3 B D Wilson's *Observations on Early Days in California & New Mexico* at benjamindaviswilson.com

4 (Bueche 2015)

5 (Weber 1981) See below, note 10..

6 (Worcester 1985) *Apache and Comanche Plunder Trails*.

7 (McGaw 1972) *Savage Scene*, Kirker.

8 The Mexican silver peso and the United States silver dollar were within a few grains the same weight of silver. The peso and dollar were interchangeable in commerce.

9 "Value of 1835 dollars today | Inflation Calculator." Official Inflation Data, Alioth Finance, 14 Sep. 2021, <https://www.officialdata.org/us/inflation/1835>.

10 (Weber 1981) pg. 97, *The opening of the trail between Missouri and Santa Fe to legal trade in 1821 facilitated the importation of American guns and munitions to Taos, Santa Fe, El Paso, and more remote locations. As early as 1823 New Mexicans had learned that North Americans had furnished guns and ammunition to Navajos, and by the late 1820s New Mexicans recognized that American armaments had shifted the balance of power to the Indians.*

By the early 1830s attacks by armed nomads intensified to the south of New Mexico, prompting officials of Chihuahua to ask that their state be converted to a federal territory so that the central government would assume responsibility for military operations against Apache's and Comanches. Chihuahua officials viewed Americans as a major source of the stepped-up raids, and prohibited all trade with Indians, warning specifically that Anglo-Americans found trading arms, powder, or lead with Apache's would be executed.

11 (Weber 1981) pg. 87, *Each family forms a rancheria [a community] and all live independently of one another without recognizing a government. Hence, war with this horde of savages never has ceased for one day, because even when thirty rancherias are at peace, the rest are not.*

12 In *Observations* Wilson references Mexican mule herders accompanying the party on a journey spring 1835. He neglects to confirm the purpose of the trip.

13 (Gregg 1954) *The Commerce of the Prairies*, Josiah Gregg's essential recording of the B D Wilson era in New Mexico during the Mexican Period [1821 - 1848].

14 (D. J. Weber n.d.) *New Mexicans thought of themselves as surrounded by hostile Indians, and indeed they were — Navajos to the west, Utes to the northwest, Comanches to the northeast, Apache's to the south. One could go on and break these groups down into still smaller entities as the New Mexicans did, who understood Apache's, for example, by many different names — Gileños, Mimbrenos, Lipanes. These totaled 20 or 30 different groups of hostile Indians that surrounded New Mexico.*

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