

Patching up the Mountaineers

In 1835, two Protestant missionaries traveling to the Oregon Country stopped at the Green River Rendezvous. Before volunteering for missionary service, Marcus Whitman had been a doctor who had practiced medicine in Canada. His training came in handy at the rendezvous. Jim Bridger asked Whitman if he would extract an arrowhead lodged in his back. Three years earlier, Bridger and Thomas 'Broken Hand' Fitzpatrick had led a party of trappers to the Madison River. Here, they encountered a band of Blackfeet Indians and, in the skirmish that followed, Bridger received two arrows in his back. After the battle Fitzpatrick dug one arrowhead out with his knife, but could not remove the second.

The report on Dr. Withman's removal of the arrowhead explains why Fitzpatrick could not pull it out. "It was a difficult operation, because the arrowhead was hooked at the point by striking a large bone." The three years following the injury, a "cartilaginous substance had grown around it. The Doctor pursued the operation with great self-possession and perseverance; and his patient manifested equal firmness." A large audience, including many Indians, looked on in awe as Whitman successfully extracted an iron arrowhead three inches in length from Bridger's back. Afterwards, another trapper asked Whitman to remove an arrowhead that had been stuck in his shoulder for two and a half years. Whitman's reputation as a surgeon quickly spread throughout the camps at the rendezvous and, as a result, he received numerous requests to give medical and surgical assistance.

