



Fuel For Thought

Landspeed Louise

Benjamin Louis Eulalie Bonneville

It always bugged me that the Bonneville Salt Flats were named after a guy who never bothered to see the place in person. Throughout the research and interview phase of developing my book, *Bonneville: The Fastest Place on Earth*, I kept hoping some factual morsel would shed light on why Bonneville deserved the absentee honor.

Finally, in early 2009, I remembered he once lived where I now live and discovered he was buried locally. Off I went to the Bellefontaine Cemetery in the north of St. Louis where I was met by the most congenial, helpful staff a historian could ever wish for. They produced a file more than an inch thick on the entire family and I was consumed for four hours.

The following day I parked myself at the Missouri Historical Society and spent another full afternoon sifting through an

owed much.

Some say the multi-year affair was cover for scouting on behalf of the US government, others maintain it was simply a less-than successful fur trapping expedition financed by Alfred Seton and John Jacob Astor of Hell's Gate, New York. There are numerous conflicting reports that to this day foster damn fine gossip and debate among historians.

What is undisputable are the topographical maps Bonneville produced, tracings of mountain routes and passes along with reports on trading practices, geology and other natural resources that were later prized by the War Department.

Bonneville was also the first to blaze wagon trails across various prairie lands where countless Conestoga wagons filled with pioneers would soon follow.

Unfortunately, Bonneville was a year late getting back from his "adventures" and returned to discover the Army now thought him dead and had removed him from the payroll. President Jackson personally ordered that he be restored to active duty.

Admired by General Ulysses S. Grant for his military conduct, Bonneville was

also despised by others with most of the criticism from the civilian sector with a small measure of jealousy noted from fellow officers as well. It is unclear if any is warranted or deserved. More mystery.

It is well documented that in 1833 Bonneville sent veteran Tennessee trapper and frontiersman, Joseph Reddeford Walker, and a party of 60 westward beyond the Salt Lake to trap and eventually locate a trail to California.

It was Walker who strode across the salt flats with his company of men and was simultaneously impressed by the geography, and the man who sent them out that he declared the future raceway would henceforth be called "Bonneville."

Walker's party needed more than a month to travel across the "barren plains west of the Salt Lake. They were also the first "civilized" men to see the spectacular waterfalls in what today is Yosemite National Park

The local trappers, oblivious to the highly strategic location for a military observer, called his permanent base of

operations in the mountains along the Green River five miles above the mouth of Horse Creek in Wyoming, "Bonneville's Folly."

Due to his premature hair loss at age 35, the Indians dubbed him "Baldhead." From here Bonneville was able to keep an eye on the British, French, Mexican and Spanish of the day while going about his fur trapping efforts. Who can say what took precedence?

So valuable were Bonneville's services that the War Department also added the Bonneville Dam and ancient Lake Bonneville to his honor. When he fought in the Mexican War he received serious injuries and further commendations.

The period newspaper accounts of the Bonneville's life fortify him as an unwavering emigrant son of the young nation. For instance, he was known to possess "qualities of bravery and enterprise which constituted him a great explorer noted for amiable and kindly qualities of head and heart."

Born in 1796 in France, Bonneville's grandfather, Pere, was the Grand Chamberlain at Versailles serving King Louis XVI. His father, Nicholas, denounced Napoleon Bonaparte in print calling him the "Cromwell of France" which naturally landed him in jail.

Forced to flee to the colonies, the family took up residence in New Rochelle, New York on Tom Paine's farm until dad was released and followed some years later. Of his brother, Thomas, little is known and he was thought to be lost at sea sometime in the early 1800s.

Mother, Margaret, was once charged with "adulterous prostitution and swindling" after living with Paine and accused of bearing him children, one of whom he adopted. It is unclear where the charges were made – in France, or America.

In the photo taken of the de Bonneville family burial plot, the gravestones left-to-right belong to: baby son Nicolas, Mother/first Wife Ann, daughter Mary, General Bonneville, mother Margaret, sister-in-law A.E.D. Stiles. The General and his wife lost their first-born son one short month after birth.

More tragically, daughter Mary, upon which the General doted, died of yellow fever at age 18 and the newspaper report remarked, that her mother was so consumed with grief that she followed a few days later, but it was more likely her own battle with yellow fever that was lost.

Bonneville remarried in 1870, at age 75 taking Susan Neis, 22, as his second wife. At age 82, tuberculosis ended his life June 12, 1878 at Fort Smith Arkansas and he

was buried in the family plot at the Bellefontaine Cemetery – as much an outdoor museum and remarkable arboretum as it is a burial ground – on June 16th after two funerals with "full military honors including a procession, marching band and fully caparisoned (elaborately decorated) war horse." He was the oldest serving military man at the time.

It struck me that Bonneville was the kind of person constantly searching for new frontiers, the next horizon, ever curious about what lie down the next path. Land speed racers are possessed of similar qualities, crafting a goal built on a dream enlivened by tenacious spirit and dogged hard work.

I admit this column sprang from my selfish curiosity about why Bonneville received such honors. After digging into Benjamin's life it is clear the honors given were well-deserved and hard earned.

From Bonneville's own hand will this little history lesson conclude. In an early journal published in the Historical Society of Montana, he wistfully declares his love of the land beyond. The comments (in parentheses) are mine to explain the background:

"To those of us whose whole lives had been spent in the stirring excitement and perpetual watchfulness of adventures in the wilderness, the change (returning to city life) was far from promising an increase of that contentment and inward satisfaction most conducive to happiness.

He (anyone) who, like myself, has roved almost from boyhood among the children of the forest, and over the un-furrowed (never plowed) plains and rugged heights of the western wastes, will not be startled to learn that notwithstanding all the fascinations of the world on this civilized side of the mountains, I would fain (happily) make my bow to the splendors and gayeties of the metropolis and plunge again amid the hardships and perils of the wilderness."

Geez, just like a racer who gets a record, the longing for another isn't far behind. Bonneville was a kindred spirit.

Note: Photojournalist Louise Ann Noeth is the authoress of the award-winning book, *Bonneville: The Fastest Place on Earth*, a complete historical review of the first 50 years of land speed racing now in its 7th and final printing. Publisher MBI has informed Noeth when the current inventory is sold the book will not be reprinted. For more details and to order, go to: www.landspeedproductions.biz.



incredible array of documents, reports and news clippings more than 125 years old. Just to make sure I'd covered all the angles, I verified a great deal at the central St. Louis Library.

It's time we all learned a little bit about the man who has given the honor of having not only the salt flats, but an ancient Lake and a dam named after him.

If you have read Washington Irving's "Adventures of Captain Bonneville" first published in 1837, then it's fairly clear what the man was occupied with, but for those who missed thumbing through the tome, that's most of us, here's a quick study.

In Benjamin's day the fur trade was big commerce and he wanted a piece of the game so Bonneville asked for, and was granted, a two-year furlough from his military duties to investigate the west. You could do that back then, especially if you were a West Point graduate who called General Lafayette "friend" and had been raised and protected by Thomas Paine upon whom the young nation