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Great Sand Dunes National Park

Colorado National Parks

GSD National Monument Wayside Exhibit Memorandum

United States National Park Service

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In Reply To:
D6215-11

GREAT SAND DUNES NATIONAL MONUMENT
Alamosa, Colorado

October 18, 1954

To: Regional Naturalist
From: Superintendent
Subject: Material for Wayside Exhibit at Great Sand Dunes

The following material is submitted for possible use in preparation of a wayside Exhibit for Great Sand Dunes:

- a. One picture of Captain John W. Gunnison
- b. One picture of General Zebulon Pike
- c. Sketches of typical Indian artifacts from Great Sand Dunes
- d. Suggested material

It is understood that some of the material is too lengthy but is submitted in its entirety so that the main essence may be gleaned therefrom. The following interesting paragraph contains the description of the Great Sand Dunes taken from "Report of Explorations for a Route for the Pacific Railroad By Captain John W. Gunnison."

August 25, 1853 - "The examination of Roubideau's Pass being completed this morning, the main body of the party proceeded up the valley, under the command of Lieutenant Baker, while Captain Gunnison, Captain Morris, and myself, after leaving this pass, rode to Williams Pass, the approach to which from the San Luis Valley is through a grove of pitch-pine, behind most gigantic sand hills, rising above the plain to half the height (apparently, at least, 700 or 800 feet,) of the adjacent mountain, and shaped by the winds into beautiful and fanciful forms with waving outlines, for within certain limits this sand drifts about like snow. These immense hills are from eight to ten miles in length, lying along the base of the mountains, and four or five in width, and therefore constitute a great barrier to the western approach to Williams Pass, directly before which they stand. The stream which flows from it is turned immediately southward, and soon sinks in the sand plain.

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Great Sand Dunes

(1)

These hills are so steep and smooth on the side towards the creek, that the smallest pebbles started at their summits roll uninterruptedly into the creek, leaving their paths distinctly marked from the summits to the bases. High up on the sides are seen, at half a dozen points, single bushes of artemesia - the only vegetation seen upon them, and the only change discoverable since they were visited by Captain Pike, fifty years ago, when they were entirely destitute of vegetation, and "appeared exactly like the sea in a storm, except in color." ----

The following is taken from Pike's Journal as published in 1811.

Wednesday, 28th January 1807. --- "Followed down the ravine, and discovered after some time that there had been a road out out, and on many trees were various hieroglyphics painted. After marching some miles we discovered, through the lengthy vista at a distance, another chain of mountains, and nearer to us at the foot of the White Mountains, which we were then descending, sandy hills.

We marched on to the outlet of the mountain and left the sandy desert to our right; kept down between it and the mountain. When we encamped I ascended one of the largest hills of sand, and with my glass could discover a large river, flowing nearly north by west and south by east through the plain which came out of the third chain of mountains about north 75° west. The prairie between the two chains of mountains bore nearly north and south: I returned to camp with the news of my discovery. The sand hills extended up and down at the foot of the White Mountains about fifteen miles, and appeared to be about five miles in width. Their appearance was exactly that of the sea in a storm, except as to colour, not the least sign of vegetation existing on them. Distance advanced, fifteen miles."

NOTE:

The White Mountains are now known as the Sangre de Cristos.
Roubideau's Pass is now Mosca Pass.

A panel could be used showing the pioneer starting to cross Mosca Pass, with his team of horses, household goods and family. The V-shaped canyon could be shown with the log cabin post-office, a cottonwood bordered creek to its left. The period about 1890.

If needed, a black-and-white photo of Mosca Pass can be supplied.

The Indian period will have to be drawn from supposition with respect to his attire and habits. Folsom man, for example, was probably a nomadic hunter, moving with the changes in season and the migration of game. The Utes, as they fitted into the Great Sand Dunes picture, could also closely fall into this description.