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Fat Buffalo and Frazzled Tails

LIFE IN THE FAR WEST. By George Frederick Ruxton. Edited by LeRoy R. Hafen. 252 pp. Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press. \$3.75.

By J. FRANK DOBIE

BORN in 1821 on an estate overlooking the Thames River, George Frederick Ruxton was at 15 a soldier of fortune in Spain. During the next ten years he was soldiering in Ireland, riding in Morocco, walking in other parts of Africa, and living with Indians in Canada. At 25, in Mexico City, he bought a horse of character, whom he named Panchito, and rode across the Republic, through El Paso, Santa Fé and Taos. He spent the winter hunting alone and camping with mountain men in the Rockies. The next summer he rode Panchito to the Missouri and found that indoor living almost smothered him.

Back in England, he published what may be the best book on travel in Mexico ever published: "Adventures in Mexico and the Rocky Mountains." Shortly after, he began writing "Life in the Far West"—a book that reflected his own desire to get back to the West again. He died in St. Louis in August, 1848.

Although issued in various editions, "Life in the Far West" was out of print for years until



Detail from jacket design for "Life in the Far West."

its present republication as part of the American Exploration and Travel Series of the University of Oklahoma Press. It is illustrated with reproductions of the paintings by A. J. Miller, who was in the West at about the same time as Ruxton. An introduction and notes by LeRoy R. Hafen, Professor of History at the University of Denver and editor of the recently published "Ruxton of the Rockies," add to the informative quality of the book.

RUXTON himself is far more than informative. Some writers have the words and some the tune, some the life and some only the ingredients of life. Ruxton had them all. He had the one thing needful to all vivid writing—vitality. He may be careless about a trapper's name; he can make a mountain man talk in the way that Stephen Vincent Benét's "The Mountain Whippoorwill" makes a fiddle talk. For a hundred years nobody has written about Old Bill

Author of "The Voice of the Coyote" and other books, Mr. Dobie is an authority on the lore of the West and Southwest.

Williams, Kit Carson, or the mountain men as a class, whether in history, fiction or ballad, without going to Ruxton's "Life in the Far West." The best talk in all the fiction is that of the trappers in Harvey Fergusson's "Wolf Song," and the best of this expands some Ruxton passages; while Stanley Vestal's "Fandango Ballads of the Old West" is a translation of Ruxton's description and diction concerning a Taos fandango in which he took a hand.

Ruxton was so restless to get back to buffalo doin's and the gusto of "digestive pipe" in mountain air and the camaraderie of mountain men that he shortened his book and wound it up with a fictional twist. It

is not fiction and it is not history. It is a pattern of pictures—pictures of actual characters like "Black" Harris and Bill Williams and of composites named Killbuck and La Bonté; of Indian warriors who stole their horses and Indian lasses, "as happy as paint can make them," who warmed their beds; of hunger and thirst as their companions; of great feasts of fat buffalo washed down with Taos lightning; of tale-tellers aglow with genius; of their Indian horses with tucked-up flanks and frazzled tails gnawed by starving mules; of Bent's Fort on the Arkansas and stark camps where the coyote of "mournful and unearthly chiding keeps unremitting watch."