

MOLLHAUSEN, HEINRICH B.

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MOLLHAUSEN, HEINRICH BALDUIN, born near Bonn, Rhine Province, Prussia, January 27, 1825; son of Heinrich Mollhausen, and Elizabeth Baroness von Falkenstein; married Carolina Alexander Seifert, a foster daughter of Alexander von Humboldt, in Berlin, February 6, 1855; participated in the abortive Revolution of 1848 and left for America in the fall of 1849; joined the expedition of Duke Paul William of Wurttemberg to the Rocky Mountains, 1850-51; returned to Germany in January 1853 but came back to the United States in May of that year; appointed Topographer and Naturalist to the Pacific Railroad Survey Expedition commanded by Lieutenant A. W. Whipple which explored the Country from Fort Smith, Arkansas, across what is now northern Arizona to Los Angeles, 1853-54.

In his diary, an English translation of which was published in London in 1858, he gave the Petrified Forest its name and was the first to describe it.

"The valley is called by the Americans the Rio Secco, or Dry River, though at this part it might deserve the name of the Petrified Forest.

"As we proceeded further we really thought we saw before us masses of wood that had been floated hither, or even a tract of woodland where the timber had been felled for the purposes of cultivation. On a closer examination we found they were fossil trees that had been gradually washed bare by the torrents and had broken off by their own weight, and that, singularly enough, in logs of from one to three feet in length. Many looked as if halfburnt, and they were mostly of a dark colour, but not so much so as to prevent the bark, the burnt places, the rings, and the cracks in the wood from being clearly discernible.

"In some of the blocks appeared the most beautiful blending of agate and jasper colours; and, in others, which had yielded to the influence of the weather and fallen to pieces, there were bits so brilliantly tinted that if polished and set they would have made elegant ornaments; others, again, had not yet lost the original colour of their wood, and looked so like decaying beams of deal that one felt tempted to convince oneself, by the touch, of their petrification.

"The evening, as usual, was cold, and so much the more disagreeable, as we were in want of fuel; for though there lay near us what looked like enormous masses of wood they were of the kind that one could only get a spark out of by means of a steel."

No other early explorer in the Southwest wrote a better description of the Giant Cactus.

"The Cereus giganteus, the queen of the cactus tribe, is known in California and New Mexico under the name of Petahaya. We touched, on our journey, the northern limit of this peculiar kind of cactus, which from there extends far to the south across the Gila. When you see them rising from the extreme point of a rock, where a surface of a few inches square forms their sole support you cannot help wondering that the first storm does not hear them from their airy elevation.

"Inside the fleshy column, however, it is provided with a circle of ribs, each from an inch to an inch and a-half in diameter, reaching to the summit, and of as close and firm a texture as the wood of the cactus usually is; and these enable it to defy the storm. When the plant dies, the flesh falls off from the woody fibers, and leaves the skeleton of the giant standing sometimes for years, before it too becomes the prey of corruption."

"Wonderful as each plant is, when regarded singly, as a grand specimen of vegetable life, these solemn, silent forms which stand motionless even in a hurricane, give a somewhat dreary character to the landscape. Some look like petrified giants, stretching out their arms in speechless pain, and others stand like lonely sentinels, keeping their dreary watch on the edge of precipices, and gazing into the abyss, or over into the pleasant valley of the Bill Williams Fork, at the flocks of birds that do not venture to rest on the thorny arms of the Petahaya; though the wasp, and the gaily variegated woodpecker, may be seen taking up their abode in the old wounds and scars of sickly or damaged specimens of this singular plant."

He returned to Germany in August, 1854, and at the suggestion of Baron von Humboldt, was appointed by King Frederick William IV of Prussia as Custodian of the royal libraries near Potsdam, a position which he held for the rest of his life; on invitation of the American Government he accepted an appointment as artist and collector in natural history to the expedition to explore and survey the Colorado River under Lieutenant J. C. Ives 1857-58; numerous excellent drawings that he made in the field were used to illustrate both the Whipple and Ives reports when printed; Lieutenant Ives makes the following mention of their contact with the Chemehuevi Indians:

"Mr. Mollhausen has enlisted the services of the children to procure zoological specimens, and has obtained, at the cost of a few strings of beads, several varieties of pouched mice and, lizards. They think he eats them, and are delighted that his eccentric appetite can be gratified with so much ease and profit to themselves."

He returned to Potsdam in 1858 and afterwards wrote many novels based upon his American experiences becoming "the most prolific and at the same time the last exponent of transatlantic fiction in Germany"; died in Berlin, Germany, May 28, 1905, aged 80.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

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