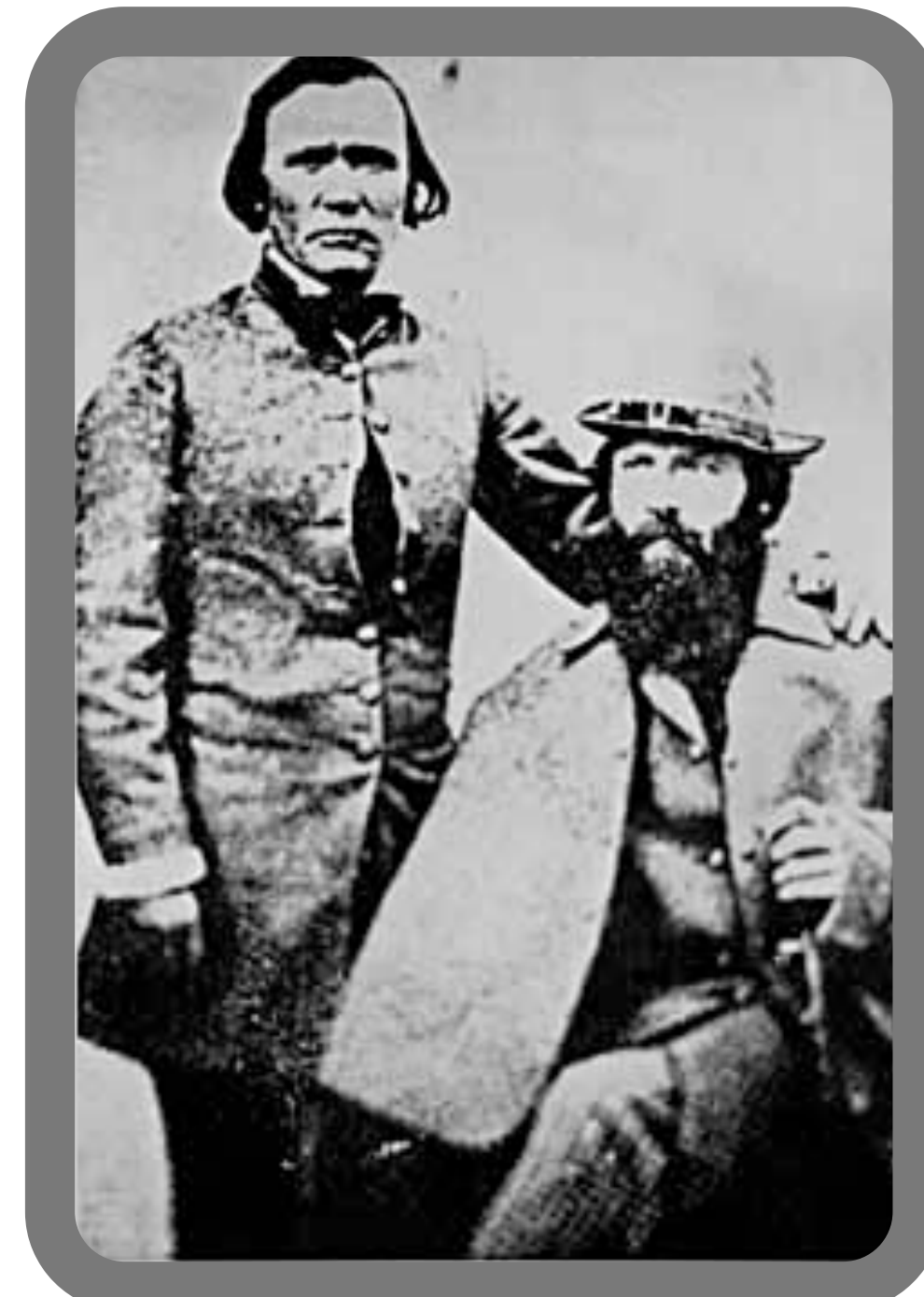


First Contact

Western Europeans Meet the Paiutes

The Expedition



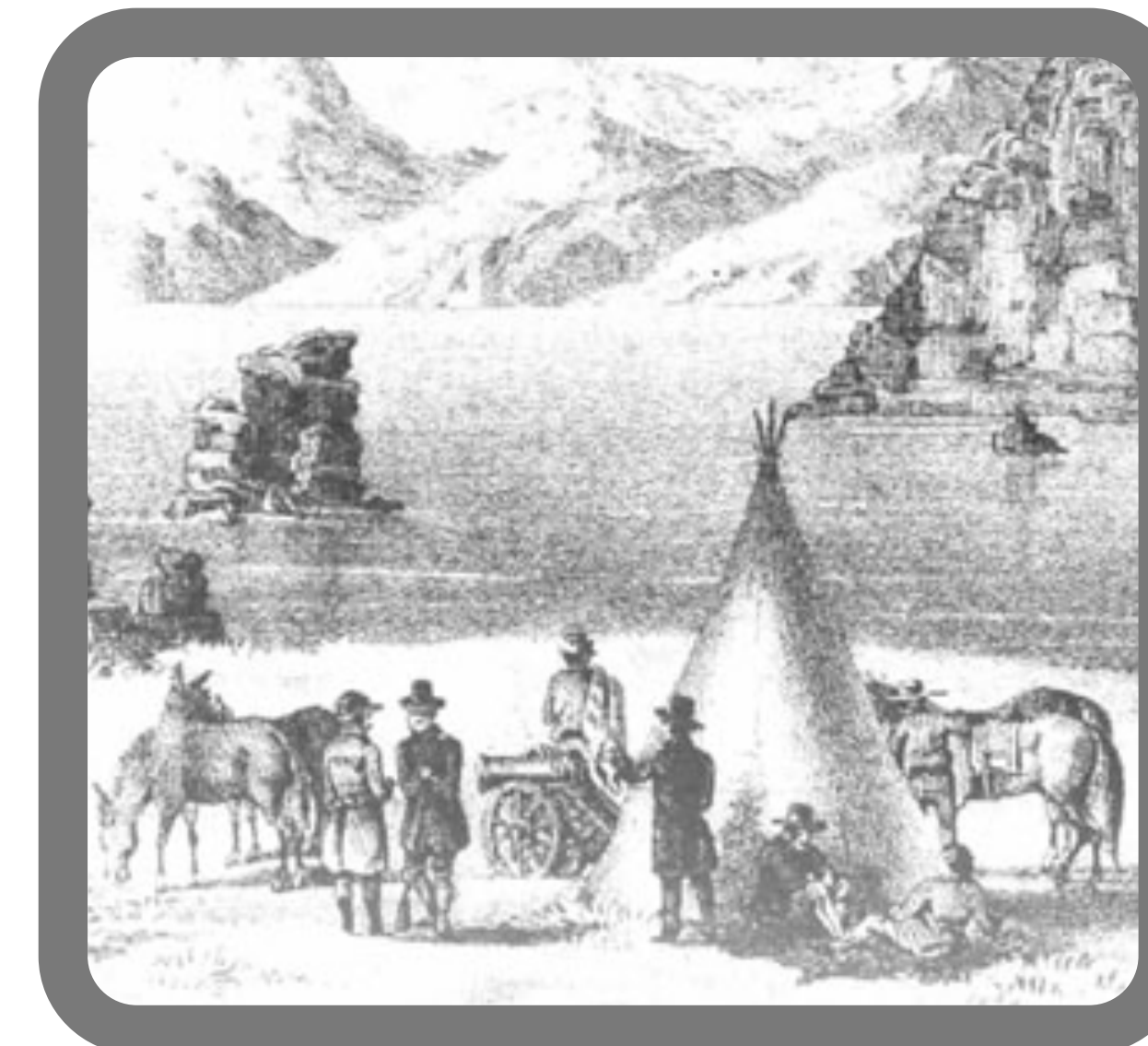
John C. Frémont and Kit Carson

In late 1843, an expedition led by John C. Frémont explored the Great Basin and found the Black Rock Desert, Pyramid Lake and the area that came to be known as Gerlach. In their party was noted explorer Kit Carson who, from previous expeditions, was most capable of navigating the uncharted territories surrounding the playa.

During this expedition, Captain Frémont and his men came down from High Rock Canyon, believing that they had found the Buenaventura River. This river was believed to connect the Great Lakes to the Pacific and its existence was accepted as scientific fact. However the river was never (and would never be) found. Following the path of a stream through the canyon as it opened into the playa here is what they described:

"We came out of this singular place, freeing ourselves from the earth. We came out of the chasm and into the void. Where we encamped on the bleak sandy plain, the Indians had made huts or circular enclosures about four feet high and twelve feet broad, of artemisia bushes. Whether these had been forts or houses, or what they had been doing in such a desert place, we could not ascertain. Where we had halted, appeared to be a favorite camping place for Indians."

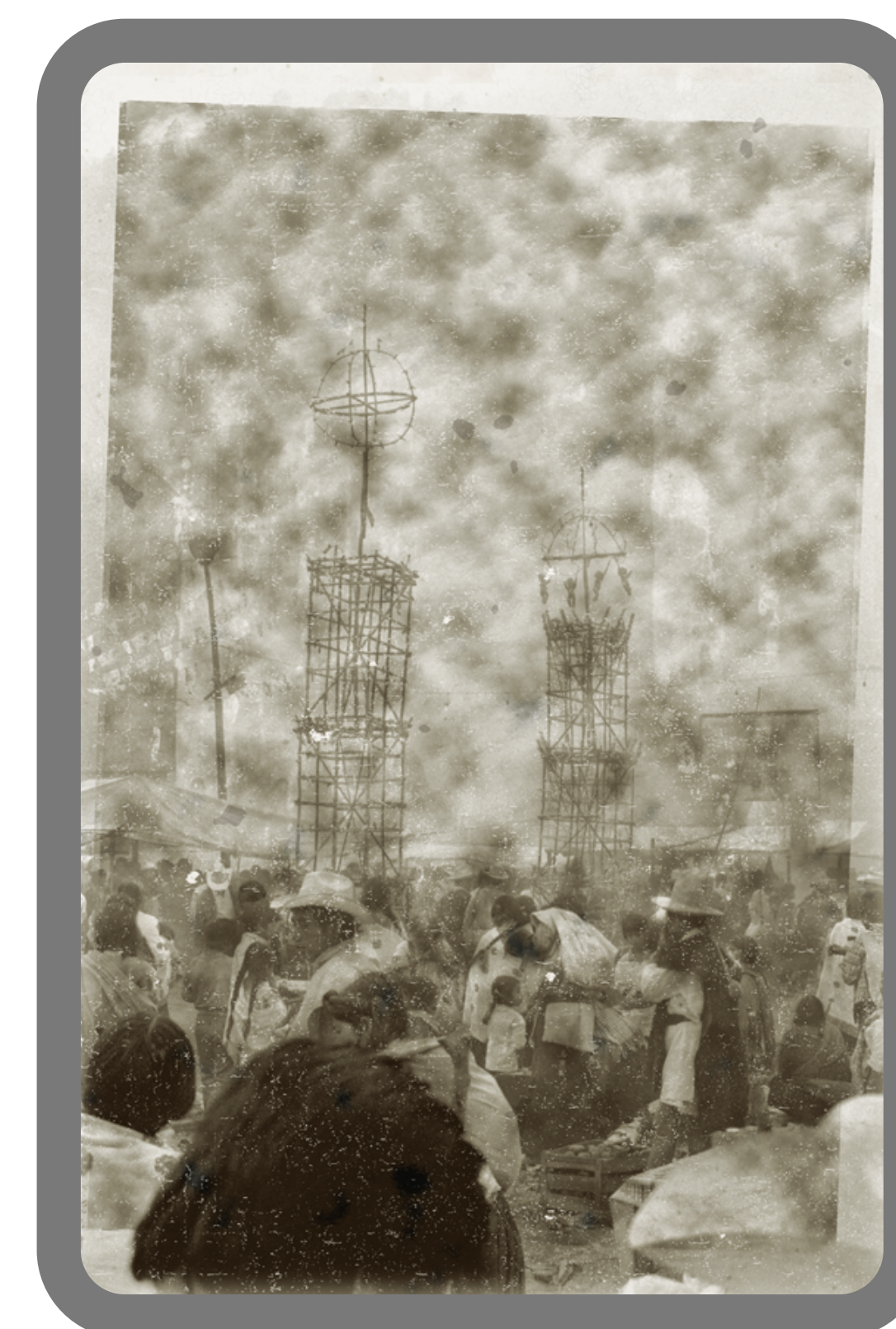
These were the first white men on record to see the playa and to encounter what would become known as Black Rock City.



Camping near Lake Pyramid

The Paiute Gathering

As the party came back down into the Great Basin from the Northwest they found a gathering of local tribes. Most of the people were Paiutes of the Snake tribe though members of other tribes such as the Washoe and Shoshoni were observed. Expedition members' journals suggest that Mexicans ("of a roguish or native nature") may have been in attendance. The city in this year consisted of 150-200 people, who had all arrived either on foot or horseback, and who dispersed after the gathering ended.



Gathering at the center of the Indian camp

Some eyewitness testimony from the Frémont expedition:

"Just about noon, as we arrived, a great many Indian men came to meet us, all on their horses. Oh, what a beautiful song they sang for us as they came near us! We passed them, and they followed us, and as we came near to the encampment, every man, woman, and child were out looking for us. They had a place all ready for us. Oh, how happy everybody was! One could hear laughter everywhere, and songs were sung by happy women and children.

Someone stood up and told the people to be merry and happy for five days. It is a rule among their people always to have five days to settle anything. Another voice told them to dance at night, and that the men should hunt rabbits and fish, and some were to have games of football, or any kind of sport or playthings they wished, and the women could do the same, as they had nothing else to do. The people were so happy during the five days, — the women ran races, and the men ran races on foot and on horses.

On that last day of celebration a great bonfire was lit and some of the people wailed and other laughed and danced like the whirling dervishes of the Moorish countries. Yet others stood with mouths agape staring into the fires like some poor soul lost to the opium dens of Bourbon street. All in all we felt as if we were sharing some soul-affecting moment that scarred us like birthmarks."