

Expedition to the Black Rock Desert

1843

Fire and Gifting

Expedition members observed the extensive use of fire for celebration and ritual during the gathering, at a much larger scale than the usual cooking fires expected at any encampment. In addition to the great bonfire on the last night, there were many fires used as the central focus for dancing on the other nights.

The explorers were particularly amazed by one dance where the dancer was clad in a burning costume, yet emerged unsinged afterwards. The next day, they inspected a similar costume before it was used and



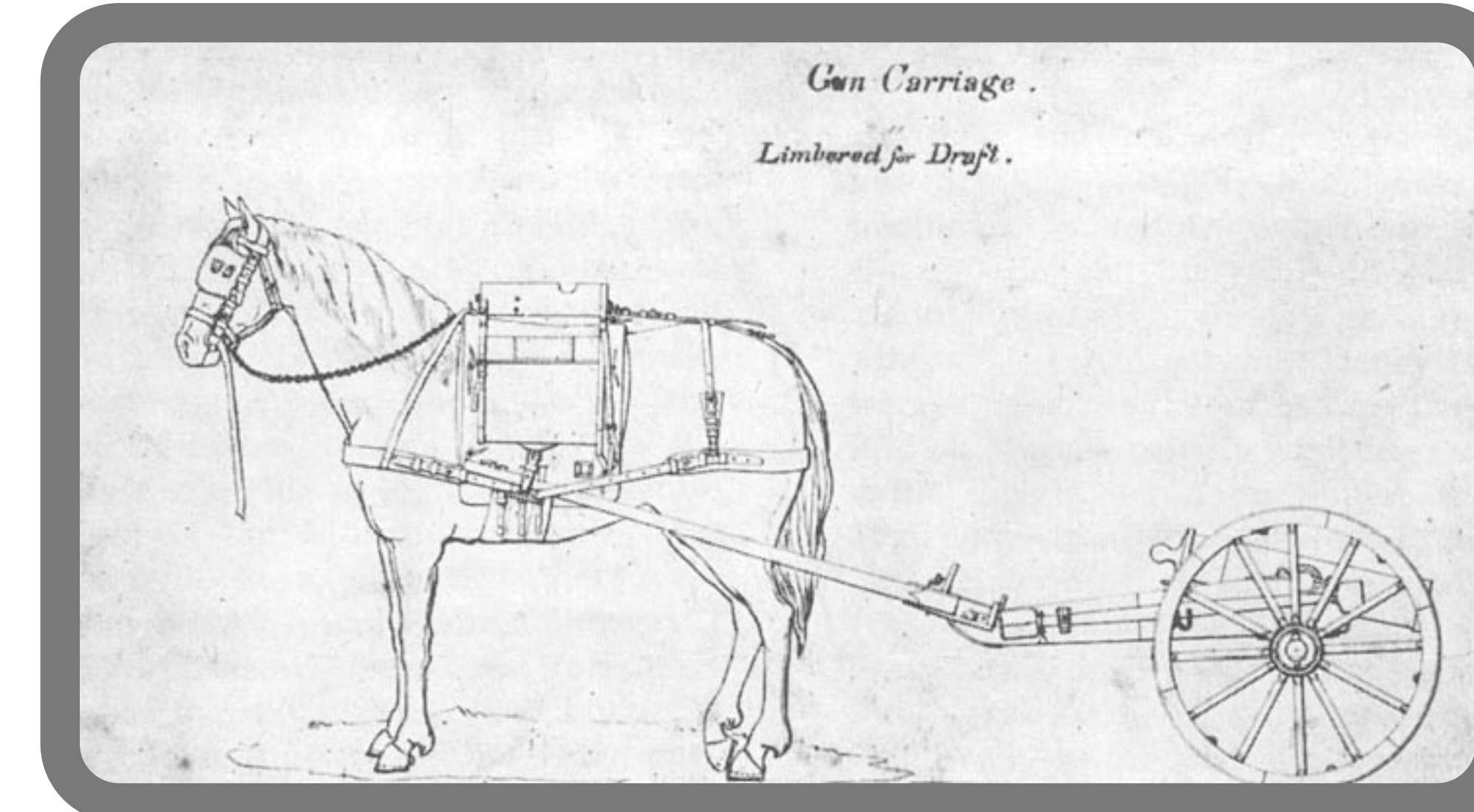
Dance ritual with a burning costume

they saw that it incorporated a wooden frame. Both sage and tobacco were burned when small groups gathered around personal fires. One journal notes that a group from the south was smoking a plant with "a sweet and and cloying odor", which was probably marijuana.

The members of the expedition noted how often food, drink, furs, and other items were given away at this gathering, without any apparent bargaining. Westerners of this era often recorded surprise when confronted with a potlatch/gift culture, where status accrues to the giver of a desirable gift, rather than to somebody who has accumulated unspent wealth.

Gunpowder As Spectacle

Included in Frémont's party was a horse-drawn artillery piece known as a mountain howitzer.

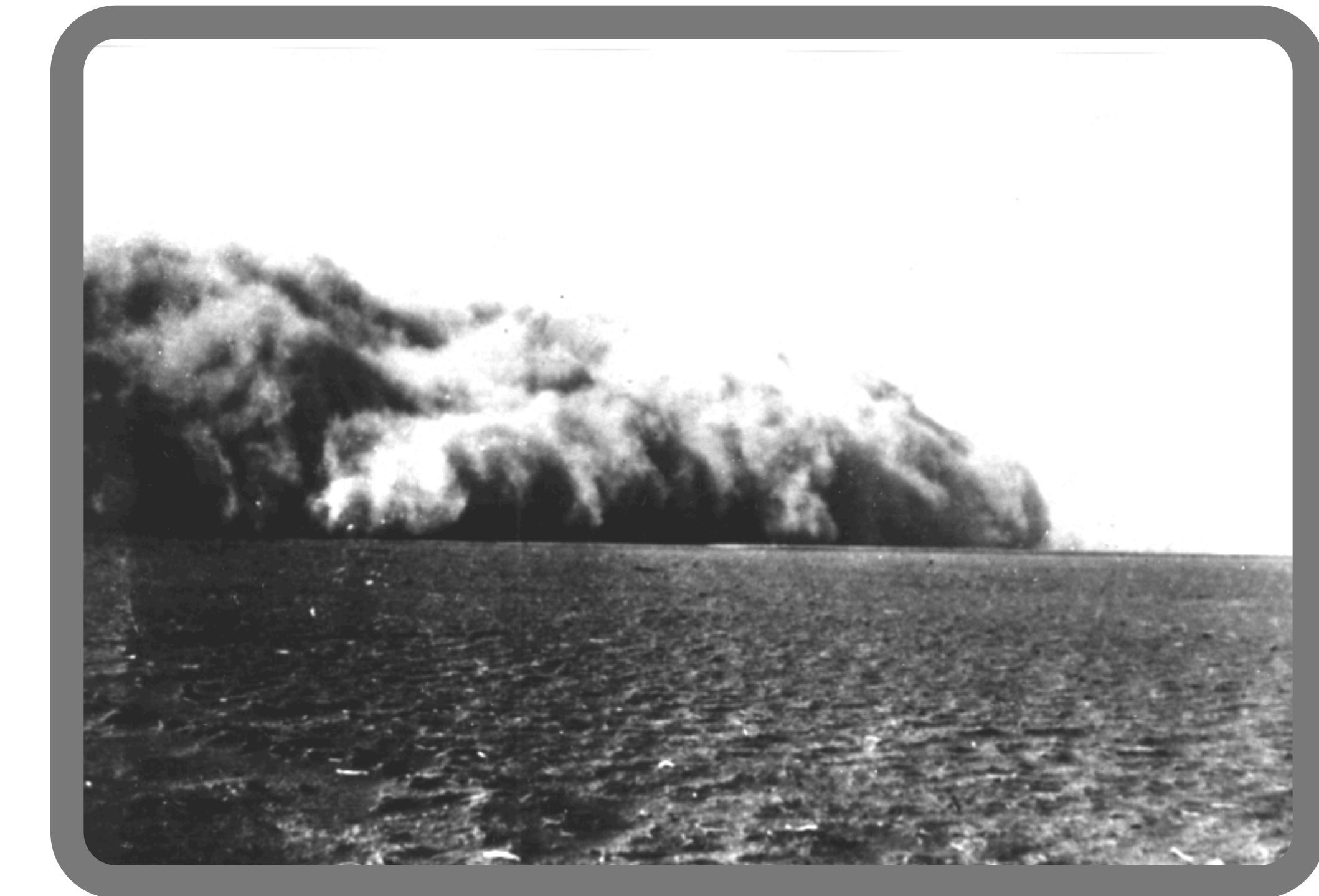


Horse-drawn howitzer intended for defense against buffalo and raids, used for the first large-scale gunpowder spectacle on the playa

The presence of the howitzer outraged some of the more scientifically minded members of the party. However, Frémont had considered it useful for firing upon buffalo and scaring off aggressive native raiding parties. After observing the enthusiasm of the celebrants for fire-related displays, including a dance ritual with a burning costume, Frémont decided to add to the spectacle with a peaceable discharge of gunpowder. The horse-drawn howitzer was brought to a suitable position: near the gathering, but pointed away from the inhabited regions. Its firing was met with mixed reactions. Frémont records the following events:

"...I directed the howitzer to be fired. It was the first time that many of the natives camped on the dusty plain had seen it discharged; and the bursting of the shell at a distance, which was something like the second fire of the gun, amazed and bewildered them with delight. It inspired them with triumphant feelings, but on the camps at a distance, the effect was different, for the smokes in the remote parts immediately disappeared."

The Dust



1843 Playa dust storm

During the expedition's stay on the playa they experienced a common Black Rock Desert event.

"The wind... increased to a heavy gale, and I shall never forget its withering effect.... Everything both animate and inanimate gave way before it; the horses stood with their backs to the wind and their noses to the ground, without the muscular strength to raise their heads. At noon I took a thermometer graded to 127 deg., out of my box, and observed that the mercury was up to 125."

"After the effects of a shower of rain have passed away the surface of the ground crumbles into a thick layer of dust, and occasionally, when the wind is in a particular quarter, it is lifted bodily from the ground in one long opaque cloud. In the midst of such a storm nothing can be seen a few yards ahead, and the unlucky person who happens to be out at the time is compelled to seek the nearest retreat at hand."