

ART REVIEW

They Went West: Explorers, Traders, Miners, Thieves

By GRACE GLUECK

With the 200th anniversary of the Lewis and Clark expedition coming up next year, the time is ripe for an advance briefing about the opening of the Great American West that the expedition helped make possible. And the Grolier Club's staging of "The Western Pursuit of the American Dream: Selections From the Collection of Kenneth W. Rendell" will do as a lite curtain-raiser.

Packed with official documents, letters, diaries, maps, books, artifacts, coins and art that ranges from the late 15th century to the 20th, the show is considerably abridged from its first presentation in 2004-5 at the National Heritage Museum in Lexington, Mass. Still, it succeeds in giving a sense of the struggle to tame the gorgeous wilderness that stretched beyond the tidy civilizations of the East. Although it is not meant as a celebration of the Lewis and Clark feat, "Western Pursuit" does have, as one of the highlights among its nearly 150 objects, a very rare first-edition map of the expedition and a first-edition official account of it — not published until 1814 — along with signed letters by Lewis and Clark.

(A brief refresher: the expedition, initiated by President Thomas Jefferson in 1803 as a needed survey of the West, particularly in light of that year's momentous Louisiana Purchase, took three years to complete. The party, led by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, set out from St. Louis in May 1804, made its precarious way to the Pacific coast, and arrived back in St. Louis in September 1806. Its explorations opened vast new territory to the United States and heavily influenced the history of the West. The two leaders were each paid a total of \$7,262 for their efforts.)

This show, with an informal catalog by Mr. Rendell, a collector and dealer in historical documents and author of several books, begins with early European explorations in the New World from the time of Columbus and winds up with, well, a poster for the 1939 movie "Stagecoach" starring John Wayne and a cowboy hat signed by members of the cast of another big-budget western, "Virgin-

"The Western Pursuit of the American Dream: Selections From the Collection of Kenneth W. Rendell" remains at the Grolier Club, 47 East 60th Street, Manhattan, (212) 838-6690, through July 30.



From the collection of Kenneth W. Rendell

Gold pan and mixed placer gold recovered from the S.S. Central America and, left, gold nuggets found in the California gold rush.

ia City" (1940). But why not? If the saga of the West hadn't happened, Hollywood would surely have made it up (and sometimes it did).

A major westward thrust was made in 1775 by the frontiersman Daniel Boone, who had spent several years exploring Kentucky. In that year he cut the Wilderness Road through the Cumberland Gap of the Appalachians and founded Boonesboro. The steady stream of settlers who followed him soon overwhelmed the hostile Indian tribes who saw Kentucky as their hunting grounds. "Thus we behold Kentucke, lately an howling wilderness, the habitation of savages and wild beasts, become a fruitful field," Boone later boasted in John Filson's "Discovery, Settlement and Present State of Kentucky," published in 1793.

But turf wars with Indian tribes continued as a major block to westward expansion, and in 1779 the Continental Congress sanctioned an expedition against the powerful and troublesome six-nation Iroquois Confederacy (Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca and Tuscarora). On view here is a letter of that year from George Washington to a brigadier general approving the general's ideas for a viable way of penetrating Indian-held territory. "The more suddenly a Blow of this kind can be struck especially against the Indians, the more will the weight of it be felt," wrote Washington. The expedition succeeded in eroding the power of the confederacy, largely freeing the frontier at the time from the threat of Indian attack.

A major element in the opening of

the West was the fur trade, early dominated by the English Hudson's Bay Company. It was chartered by King Charles II in 1670 for the purpose of seeking a Northwest Passage and acquiring pelts in the fur-fertile territory of the vast region northwest of Lake Superior. But after the Louisiana Purchase and the Lewis and Clark expedition, Americans began to weigh in, establishing trading posts up and down the Mississippi and Missouri rivers.

One powerful player was John Jacob Astor, whose American Fur Company and subsidiaries had by the 1820's established a virtual American trade monopoly — and still held it when he retired in the 1830's. A letter from Astor in 1823 to a partner, Robert Stuart, warns him: "Go on steadily & as sparingly as possible. Perhaps next season our hatters will use Raccoon and that some of them may com your way to buy them at 40 cents. I would rather sell than purchas. Otter are allways good & worth from 3¼ to 3¾ or even 4\$ to us. Beare 3\$."

Tokens of the trade include guns, Bowie knives, a ferocious-looking animal trap and a perfectly preserved specimen of a .49 caliber Plains rifle made by J.&S. Hawken of St. Louis around 1840, a favorite of the mountain men. Hardly overlookable is the classic stovepipe beaver hat that for years was a big source of revenue for the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, a later entrant in the field. But in the mid-19th century a rage for silk hats in Europe set in, and the company's fortunes declined.

Other aspects of the Western expe-

The Western Pursuit

Grolier Club

rience touched on by the show (the crowded vitrines only allow for a small selection of Mr. Rendell's voluminous material) include the California Gold Rush, Texas, Outlaws and Lawmen, Indians, the Mormons and the Overland Trail.

A letter from Stephen Austin, one of the founders of Texas, accompanied by land grant documents and maps help trace the gradual emancipation of that state from its Mexican rulers. A pan holding a big hunk of mixed gold elements rescued from the S.S. Central America, a ship sunk by a hurricane in 1857 en route to New York from San Francisco, gives graphic evidence of what prompted the big stampede to California in the 1840's.

That the West was expanding and ever more reachable is confirmed by photographs showing the Golden Spike ceremony at Promontory, Utah, in 1869 when the tracks of the Union Pacific Railroad, coming west from Omaha, and those of the Central Pacific, heading east from Sacramento, met, creating the first transcontinental railroad line in the United States.

Cops and robbers loomed large in the West, where everything seemed bigger. Many of them, Mr. Rendell notes in his catalog, began their careers during the Civil War, often as part of the Confederate guerrilla forces. The section devoted to them in the show includes a photograph of and a letter by Wild Bill Hickok, the gunfighter and sheriff of Abilene, Tex., shot in the back in 1876 while playing poker in a saloon in Deadwood, Dakota, then a territory; and material on Billy the Kid and the James brothers, Jesse and Frank. A photo of Jesse after his murder in 1882 by members of his own gang shows him calm and peaceful — gone straight at last. A handwritten letter by Frank, no date, advises the recipient: "No matter what business you're engaged in at this time or thereafter, give faithful service, don't drink & tell the truth."

The opening of the West is a vast topic, and this show of one man's collection — as opposed to the scholarly overview of a museum survey — is bound to leave many gaps. It is also a bit too curtailed for cogency. But as an informal roundup of the trials, tribulations and amusements of America gone west, it's worth spending time with.