So far as I know, the first definite reference to Bill Williams is that made by one of his associates—Biggs by name. He says Williams was employed as a guide by the Sibley expedition which made a survey for a road between Independence, Missouri, and Santa Fe in 1825. He comes into view next in 1832, as an independent trapper on the upper waters of the Yellowstone. In August of this same year he is at Taos, New Mexico, a favorite rendezvous for trappers. From here, he went with a large number of other trappers, headed by John Harris to trap on the streams of northwestern Texas. It was at about this time that Albert Pike made his acquaintance.

In 1833, Joe Walker led a party of which Bill Williams was a member, from the Great Salt Lake to California. Walker was at this time serving as guide to Capt. Benj. L. Bonneville, in the various expeditions that officer was directing throughout the Rocky Mountains between May, 1832, and July, 1835. On this exploration into California under Walker, Yosemite Lake and Valley, and the Walker River were discovered. Mr. Joseph J. Hill, in his article on Bill Williams in Touring Topics, March, 1930, quotes from an article written by T. J. Beall and published in the Lewiston, Idaho, Tribune, of March 3, 1918, in which is reported an account of this expedition from the lips of William Craig—a member of the Walker party. Craig declared that the real object of this was to steal horses from the Californians. He says:

"Walker's party got away with five or six hundred head of the Spaniards' horses and they drove them through what is known as Walker's basin and Walker's Pass of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, which is south of the Truckee Pass where the Central Pacific Railway now traverses. The most of these horses were traded to the different tribes
of Indians they encountered, for furs, buffalo robes and such other things as they wished to barter."

It is impossible to give a full and orderly account of Bill Williams' activities. In July, 1838, we strike his trail again when he is on a buffalo hunt with Kit Carson and others. Their horses are stolen by Crow Indians while they are in pursuit of a grizzly that has taken to a rocky trail so steep that the horses cannot follow. By 1841, trapping had ceased to be a profitable business. In the spring of 1841, Bill Williams, Kit Carson, and several companions went to trap in the Ute country. They secured few furs, and could get little for what they did take. So in the fall of 1841 Williams made a trip back to Missouri.

Periodically, after long solitary trapping expeditions, Bill Williams would resort to Taos—fair Taos—the remote outpost of semi-civilization, meeting-place of trappers, scouts, and mountain-men of all breeds and varieties, where dark-eyed Mexican women were more than willing to assist the masterful Americans in the disbursement of their riches on these rare occasions when they came in to exchange their peltry for gold, and drink, and arms, and ammunition, and the witchery of the dance hall. An occasional glorious spree—this was all that Bill Williams got out of his strenuous and dangerous labors! Once he came to Taos and in three or four weeks spent $6,000, the reward for many months of trapping, and then went back to his lonely haunts in debt. He would gamble sometimes until he had lost all his money and his animals, and then borrow enough to make a new start. If he could not dispose of his money fast enough in drinking, gambling, and carousing, he would sometimes buy whole bolts of gorgeously printed calico—as costly then, and as attractive to the feminine eye as silk or satin now—and holding the end of the roll, and throwing the bolt as far from him as his powerful arm could send it, he would display the bright patterns to the dazzled eyes of the senoritas, and take hilarious delight in seeing them scramble to get, each, her share of it. His spree being over, he would outfit, and back
again he would go to the mountains, after a long absence reappearing—always loaded down with beaver skins.

In Mr. Hill's very interesting article mentioned above, two documents are introduced that testify to the fact that he was at that date, March 13, 1843, operating on very flat tires. One is a promissory note for $300.00 in favor of Bent, St. Vrain and Company, and the other is a promise to pay to them for four beaver traps they had loaned him a pound of beaver, each, or, in case they are not returned thirty-two dollars for the four. In the spring of 1843, Williams, with others trapped on the Snake River, where they had trouble with the Bannock Indians. For a short time they were at Fort Walla Walla. They spent the summer on the Des Chutes River, moved southward, trapping as they went, and spent the winter among the Klamath Indians. In the summer of 1844 they went to the Modoc country where they lost three of their number in a battle with the Indians. During the winter of 1844-45 the company trapped on the Carson River. Very likely during the next three years, the old trapper spent much time in Arizona and New Mexico, though there is no certain record of his activities during these years.

In Ruxton's *Life in the Far West*, we get vivid pictures of "Old" Bill Williams as Ruxton, a young Englishman, saw him in 1847. This has become the classic passage descriptive of the old trapper at the height of his fame:

"Williams always rode ahead, his body bent over his saddle-horn, his keen gray eyes peering from under the slouched brim of a flexible felt hat, black and shining with grease. His buckskin hunting-shirt, bedaubed until it had the appearance of polished leather, hung in folds over his bony carcass; his nether extremities being clothed in pantaloons of the same material (with scattered fringes down the outside of the leg—which ornaments, however, had been pretty well thinned to supply 'whangs' for mending moccasins or pack-saddles), which, shrunk with wet, clung tightly to his long, spare, sinewy legs. His feet were thrust into a pair of Mexican stirrups made of wood, and as big as coal-scuttles; and iron spurs of incredible propor-
tions, with tinkling drops attached to the rowels, were fastened to his heel—a beadwork strap, four inches broad, securing them over the instep. In the shoulder-belt which sustained his powder-horn and bullet-pouch, were fastened the various instruments essential to one pursuing his mode of life. An awl, with deer-horn handle, and the point defended by a case of cherry-wood carved by his own hand, hung at the back of the belt, side by side with a worm for cleaning the rifle; and under this was a squat and quaint-looking bullet-mold, the handles guarded by strips of buck to save his fingers from burning when running balls, having for its companion a little bottle made from the point of an antelope's horn, scraped transparent, which contained the 'medicine' used in baiting the traps. The old coon's face was sharp and thin, a long nose and chin hobnobbing each other; and his head was always bent forward, giving him the appearance of being hump-backed. He appeared to look neither to the right nor left, but, in fact, his little twinkling eye was everywhere.

"His character was well known. Acquainted with every inch of the Far West, and with all the Indian tribes who inhabited it, he never failed to outwit his Red enemies, and generally made his appearance at the rendezvous, from his solitary expeditions, with galore of beaver, when numerous bands of trappers dropped in on foot, having been despoiled of their packs and animals by the very Indians through the midst of whom Old Williams had contrived to pass unseen and unmolested. On occasions when he had been in company with others, and attacked by Indians, Bill invariably fought manfully, and with all the coolness that perfect indifference to death or danger could give, but always 'on his own hook.' His rifle cracked away Merrily, and never spoke in vain; and in a charge—if ever it came to that—his keen-edged butcher-knife tickled the fleece of many a Blackfoot. But at the same time, if he saw that discretion was the better part of valor, and affairs wore so cloudy an aspect as to render retreat advisable, he would first express his opinion in curt terms, and decisively, and, charging up his rifle, would
take himself off and 'cache' so effectively that to search for him was utterly useless."

"Old" Bill Williams had been known as a hunter, trapper, guide, and mountaineer for forty years when, in the late autumn of 1848, John C. Fremont engaged him to guide his Fourth Expedition over the highest and wildest ranges of the Rocky Mountains. Three survivors of this terrible experience have left records of what was suffered and endured: Fremont, himself, Thomas E. Breckenridge, and Micajah McGehee. Fremont and McGehee tell their stories in the Century Magazine of March, 1891, and Breckenridge's narrative appeared in The Cosmopolitan of August, 1896. In addition to these accounts by men who were members of the party, there is contemporary allusion made to Bill Williams and his connection with the expedition in Ruxton's Life in the Far West. I attempt here to combine in the most condensed form the tragic facts as they are related by the writers named.

From the first, Bill Williams was of the opinion that the route Fremont insisted upon taking was not practicable at that time of year. Both McGehee and Breckenridge state that Williams was unwilling to take this route and was with great difficulty persuaded to do so. The old trappers of Pueblo were all agreed that it was foolish to attempt this route in winter. At Wet Mountain, Dick Wooton, an old Colorado mountain man, took a look across the frightful cold and desolation of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains ahead and then deliberately took the back trail, saying:

"There is too much snow ahead for me."

Bill Williams wanted to take a route farther to the south along the Colorado and the New Mexico border, but Fremont persisted in his decision to cross the high ranges. It was now early December. The weather grew colder and the snow deeper as the company advanced. All game had left these icy regions, and there was nothing for the mules to browse on. Man and beast were put on short rations. The mules finally huddled together and froze in their tracks. "Old" Bill declared that he had never before
known the snow to be so deep and the weather so cold in this region. It became utterly impossible to make further progress; so for days the men slept, lived, and ate in the deep snow-pits made by the swirling winds and their own tramping and pounding. They lived almost wholly on mule meat; and after the animals had all frozen to death, they lived on frozen mule meat and tallow candles. After eight days of this, being on the verge of starvation, Bill Williams and three others volunteered to go to Taos, the nearest settlement, one hundred and eighty miles to the south, to secure relief. Fremont sent for Breckenridge on Christmas eve and said to him:

“I have decided to send yourself, Kreutzfeldt, and Bill Williams, under King, down the river for relief—now, will you go?”

“I will go. If anyone can make the trip, I can.”

The four men started on Christmas day with a blanket each, their rifles, a pound of sugar, a few pounds of frozen mule meat, some tallow candles, and a meager amount of macaroni. Within three days the food was all gone. The next few days they subsisted on a hawk, a frozen otter, the leather from their shoes, browned to a crisp over the fire. For eight days after that they lived on the parched leather of their boots, belts, and scabbards.

In order to avoid the Indians, they had to go out of their way many miles. At last King, overcome by cold and hunger, could go no farther. He laid down on the frozen ground and said:

“You three go on, and when I’m rested a little I’ll follow.”

The rest toiled on to a river a very short distance ahead, and after they had built a campfire and warmed themselves a little, Kreutzfeldt spoke:

“I’ll go back and help King in.”

“It’s no use, boys,” said Bill Williams.

“Why?” asked Breckenridge.

“Because I saw a raven circling round the spot where King laid down; and it went lower and lower, in smaller
and smaller circles. That’s a sign of death, and I’ve never known it to fail.”

But Kreutzfeldt replied, “Well, I’m going, anyway.”

The old trapper was right; King was dead. He had not moved after they had left him there. Kreutzfeldt returned exhausted and stunned. It had taken him two hours to go that little distance and return. He could talk of nothing but King’s death.

The next morning Kreutzfeldt was too weak to go on. Breckenridge started painfully ahead, and very soon had the amazing good fortune to kill a deer. He tore out its liver and devoured it as if he were a famished wolf. Then with strength and hope instantly restored, he cut off a good chunk of the flesh and took it back to the others. Williams seized the meat with his long talons and tore out great mouthfuls of the raw flesh with a wild light of joy in his eyes. Kreutzfeldt, too, awoke from his stupor and ate the raw venison. At once hope and strength came back to him, and he staggered to his feet and embraced Breckenridge as his savior. They cooked and ate pieces of the venison nearly all the night, and awoke the next morning to renew the feast throughout the day.

The second morning after the killing of the deer, when they were ready to start on again, four horsemen came riding toward them from the river.

“They’re Indians,” announced Breckenridge; and they all took the best positions they could for a fight.

“Well, boys,” said Williams, “do’ee hyar, now, when the fight’s over, the Indians’ll have more hair, or we more blankets.”

“Wagh! It’s Fremont, himself.”

Faced by grim despair, Fremont had left the camp in the mountains in the hope of meeting the relief party on the return trip. He had met six Ute Indians out hunting, and securing four old horses from them and meagre provisions, had pressed on this far toward the settlement. Forty miles more of agony—ten days of torture with frozen feet—brought Williams and his surviving comrades to a
little settlement where everything possible was done to save and ease their frozen limbs.

Mr. Joseph J. Hill states that in the spring of 1849, while Williams and several other members of the Fremont party were on their way back to the camp in the mountains to recover the abandoned baggage, the company was attacked either by Indians or Mexicans, and all the members slain. This tragedy occurred previous to April 6, 1849, as on that date R. H. Kern wrote to the army officer in command at Abiqui asking for assistance in recovering the body of his brother, Dr. Benjamin Kern, who had perished with Williams. Mr. Hill then quotes this passage from old Dick Wooton:

"They started out, and again took Bill Williams as guide. They found their way into the mountains all right, found the saddles, instruments, and accoutrements of all kinds where they had left them, and commenced the return trip, but they never reached Taos. Coming back, they passed a Ute village, and not knowing that this particular band of Indians was on the warpath, and had just been soundly whipped by a party of soldiers, they went into camp within half a mile of the savages. At daybreak on the following morning the Indians attacked them, and every member of the party was killed."

In my book, Arizona Characters, I quote from Ruxton's Life in the Far West, a vivid account of the supposed end of "Old" Bill Williams. But Mr. Hill shows that Ruxton's account of the old trapper's death was not based upon fact inasmuch as it was printed in Blackwoods, Edinburgh Magazine, November, 1848, previous to the time that Williams set out as Fremont's guide.

(To be continued)