



Lucien Maxwell

Harriet Freiberger

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As one hundred thousand gold seekers raced to California in 1849, thirty-one-year-old mountain man Lucien Maxwell had already crossed the Shining Mountains with John Frémont and chosen a different destiny: land, not gold. Far from the perceived glamour of California, he settled near a small river in northeastern New Mexico at the edge of the Santa Fe Trail. In the communities he built, Maxwell and his family thrived along with hundreds of Indians, Mexicans, and Anglos. Purchasing almost two million acres of land over the next two decades, he welcomed everyone to his home, and his hospitality became legend. But the gold that failed to charm Maxwell to California ultimately appeared very close to home: outsiders found it on his land and an invasion of New Mexico began. In the end, Lucien Maxwell, by then a millionaire when that word was yet new to America's vocabulary, sold everything he had built to speculators and left his beloved Cimarron country hoping to start anew two hundred miles south in Fort Sumner, New Mexico. Law and order swiftly deteriorated into murders, thievery, and squabbles over title to land grants. Indians were removed to faraway reservations. Railroad tracks replaced the Santa Fe Trail. An idyllic interlude in the chronicle of the American West came to a close. How is Lucien Maxwell to be judged: villain or visionary? This convincing biography builds a case for history's verdict. Harriet Freiberger lived down river from the town where Lucien Maxwell grew up, viewing the western horizon as he did from a high bluff that overlooked the mighty Mississippi. Not until moving to the same Shining Mountains where Lucien traveled with John Frémont did she realize whose footsteps she had followed. Then, from Cimarron to Taos, Saint Louis, and Bent's Fort, she pursued this man from an earlier time. Now, having returned from the nineteenth century, Harriet lives with her husband in northwestern Colorado's Elk River Valley.

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