

JEDEDIAH STRONG SMITH

A biography prepared for students

Jedediah Smith Society

University of the Pacific

This has been prepared by scholars as correct information for students inquiring about more "free" accurate information regarding this national figure who played such a prominent role in the early exploration of the west, traveling farther than any previous searcher. It is copyrighted but free for use and recopy by any serious scholar who wishes to use it.

As the Europeans left their homelands to seek a new life across the Atlantic Ocean, they faced many hardships in the unexplored lands in America. Generations of new settlers stayed in the coastal areas in the East and did not venture into the unknown lands to the west that were controlled by the First Nation people. Those who traveled first into these areas became heroes in their own time and earned a place in history. These were men such as Daniel Boone, Lewis and Clark, Jim Bridger, and Kit Carson. An overlooked, but very important early explorer was our Jedediah Strong Smith who was killed at the age of 32 without publishing his journals and maps. Therefore his story remains in the shadows of history.

Born in Jericho, New York (which has now been renamed Bainbridge) on January 6, 1799, Jed Smith had grown up hunting and trapping in the forests of New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. He had also learned to read and write, skills that not all had mastered on the American frontier. Aside from his Bible, which he usually carried wherever he went, Jed had also read about the Lewis and Clark Expedition. He dreamed about blazing new trails and exploring the unmapped lands in the West. He also knew that a fortune could be earned by being the first person into these wilderness areas.

In 1822, while hunting and farming in Illinois, Jed's dreams became reality thanks to a newspaper advertisement from nearby St. Louis. William Ashley was hiring one hundred men to go up the Missouri River to trap beaver in the new territory. Jed sold everything, sent most of the money home to his parents in Ohio, and set out for St. Louis. Experienced in frontier skills, this 6 foot-3 inches, powerfully built twenty-three years old was just what Ashley needed. He hired Jed on the spot to be a hunter for his party.

On the morning of May 8, 1822, Jed and the rest of the men loaded supplies on the riverboat, named the Enterprise and started their journey up the Missouri River. Three hundred miles up the river, the boat sank, and the men has to wait several weeks for another boat to arrive before they could continue their trip.

The boat was pulled upstream against the current by a long rope called a "cordelle". The men walked on the bank, waded along the shore, all the time dragging the boat. Sometimes oars or poles could also be used to move the boat along. Or if the wind were strong enough, a sail could be raised that would help provide power. It was hard work, and the progress was slow. The only advantage was that they did not have to fight with Indians as the tribes along the river let them pass without interference, in peace. Because of his skill as a hunter, Jed spent most of his time ashore bringing fresh meat to the camp to feed the hungry men.

It was October when they finally arrived at their small fort on the Yellowstone River above the Missouri. Ashley separated the men into small groups to trap the valuable beaver pelts. He then returned to St. Louis for more supplies. Jed's party went farther up the Missouri River; and set up camp on the Musselshell River (in today's Montana).

During this first winter in the Rockies wanting horses, several of the scattered trapping parties were attacked by unfriendly Blackfoot Indians. In June, Jed was sent downriver to find Ashley and tell him about the missing horses. He met Ashley at the Arikara Indian village, which was for a time a fortunate meeting place. These Indians had extra horses and were willing to trade. Jed and a few men spent the night on the riverbank to keep a close watch on the newly purchased horses. However, just before dawn the Indians began shooting at the trappers from inside the village. Soon the only cover Jed and the men had was their dead horses. To escape this dangerous situation Jed and the men dived into the river and swam to safety. In the battle, twelve men had been killed and ten were wounded.

When Ashley asked for a volunteer to go to the fort on the Yellowstone for help, Jed went and soon returned with reinforcements. While he was gone, Ashley had rounded up a party of Sioux warriors and a U.S. Army troop. Together, they formed a force large enough to defeat the Arikaras. The Indians agreed to repay Ashley for the horses and supplies the trappers had lost. Instead, during the night the Indians left their village and escaped without paying anything.

Before Ashley returned to St. Louis to obtain more supplies, he appointed Jed to be Captain as a reward for his leadership in the conflict with the Arikaras. Jed had proven his skill and trustworthiness. The new Captain led his men deeper into the Rockies in search of the wealth that the beaver pelts would bring to the company.

Along the Cheyenne River, as the men were pushing their way through the thick brush, a huge Grizzly bear attacked the party. The Grizzly, the most ferocious and dangerous animal in the West, could break a horse's back with one swipe of its giant paw. It was on Jed in an instant. The trappers watched in horror as their Captain fought the bear. Before Jed could fire his gun, the animal clawed him. It ripped open his side; and then the bear's huge jaws closed on his head. The Grizzly suddenly bolted back into the brush. The men gathered around their leader, sickened by the sight of blood that covered his body. Jed's left ear dangled from his head. His scalp had been torn and his forehead gashed by the teeth of the bear. He fought to keep his wits about him. Then ordered the men to get water, clean his wounds and sew up the cuts on his head. The trappers also bound up his broken ribs and repaired his ear as best they could sew. Ten days later he was out checking his traps; his wounds had healed quickly, but he had terrible scars for the rest of his life.

That winter Jedediah took his men into Wyoming, where they stayed with a friendly tribe of Crows. These Indians told the men that to the southwest there was a gap in the mountains that would allow them to cross easily. Jed knew that such a pass would make east-west travel much easier, especially by wagon. By February they were on their way to find it. The party went without food for several days because there were few animals to hunt in the deep snow. For over two weeks, their only water came from melting snow. Their southwest journey finally took them to a broad, level pass. Jed made a map and added notes so that he would be able to find it again.

This discovery would be known to the history of the West as South Pass. It became the single most important factor in the transcontinental movement of the United States to the Pacific Coast. The gap served as the passage through the Rockies for the Oregon, California, and Mormon Trails.

That spring Jed and his men trapped streams that no white man had seen, and they made a huge catch of furs. In June Jed returned to the fort to report their discoveries to Ashley and to get fresh supplies. It was at this point in time that his career was to make another change. Ashley's partner was quitting the business, and Jed was asked to take his place. Within a year Ashley also quit the business, and sold the company to Jed and two other men, named Sublette and Jackson.

The new partners decided to split up the duties of running the company into three jobs. Jed was to search for new beaver streams in the West. In August of 1826 Jed led seventeen trappers on a trip that would last over two years. This trip would open California and Oregon to the trade and also to future American pioneers.

The party left camp on the Green River near the Great Salt Lake, making their way south through deep canyons, towering peaks, and rushing streams and rivers. They crossed the Colorado River near the southern tip of what is now Nevada. Here they met a tribe of Mohave Indians and rested with them along the river several days. From the Indians they bought some horses and learned about the westward dry region of the Mohave Desert. By the time they reached the mountain ridge on the border of the desert, the men were thirsty and blistered. On the other side of the ridge, however, was the San Bernadino Valley. They had been the first white men to travel from the United States to California overland.

In 1826, California was part of Mexico, and that government did not want Americans to come from an overland route. The Mexicans were afraid that they would lose control if too many foreigners moved in to the country. They did not have enough soldiers and money to keep the Mexican government in control. So Jed's arrival was not a cause for celebration. The Mexican governor thought he was an American spy. He told the Jed that he had to leave the way he had come and not to go north.

Jedediah did not want to face the desert hardships again. He wanted to search for beaver streams to the north. The party left as if they were following the governor's orders, but when well out of sight headed north as originally planned. Although winter came on, the weather in California was mild. They were able to trap as they moved northward. In the spring they had a good catch of fur, but they were low on supplies and had only traveled half way up the Great Valley. Finding the snow too deep to cross the Sierra Nevada Mountains along the American River, Jed returned to the Stanislaus. There he left most of his men in camp. He took two men and headed east across the mountains into the unknown lands across Nevada. The snow was still very deep and it was very cold. Some days they could move only two miles through the deep snow drifts. They ran out of food, and grew weak from hunger. Finally they killed and ate a horse. On the eastern side they found more desert but there was no choice. They traveled many miles over sandy hills with few plants and fewer waterholes. One hot, miserable day followed the next. For six hundred miles the men stumbled through the desert wasteland. One of the men gave up - too weak to go any farther. Jed and the other man struggled on another two miles. Finding water, they returned

to revive their companion. They came upon the Great Salt Desert. In early July, 1827, the three finally reached the camp on the Green River and safety.

After ten days rest, Jed began his return trip to California with eighteen men and the needed supplies. He decided to follow the original southern route. But when they reached the Colorado River the Indians were hostile rather than friendly as before. After Jed and a few men reached the California side of the river, they realized that their companions had come under attack. Greatly outnumbered, the nine trappers were quickly clubbed or stabbed to death by the angry Mohaves.

The ten survivors gathered what supplies they could and headed west. Without horses or water and very little food it was again a struggle. Traveling at night, Jed could keep his men out of the killer sun and keep a watchful eye for any Mohaves that might follow. Ten tormenting days later they found themselves once again in the San Bernadino Valley. After resting, they headed north, carefully avoiding any Mexican settlements. There were very few settlers in the Central Valley, and they reached the camp without being seen.

Since the supplies had been lost, Jed took a few men and headed to Mission San Jose. There he was sent to Monterey and quickly arrested by the suspicious Mexican officials. Americans living in Monterey guaranteed the Americans led by Jed would leave Mexican property. He returned to Mission San Jose, purchased horses and supplies slipping away to the Great Valley on his way north.

Driving the valuable horse herd up the Buenaventura (Sacramento) River, they found that the spring snow melt had flooded the valley. They were forced to find and follow the coast, which Jed had always wanted to explore. The coast was rugged and wild, populated by unfriendly, often warlike people. Up the coast in southern Oregon, the party had an encounter or misunderstanding with a tribe near the Umpqua River. When a member of the Kelawatset tribe walked off with ax from the expedition, Jed had him captured and whipped. This was to "teach" him not to steal. The natives swore revenge for the insult. The next day, while Jed and two men were off scouting the route north, the Indians destroyed the camp. Their raid killed all but one man who pretended to be dead. They took all of the horses, supplies and fur pelts.

Separated, the four survivors struggled over one hundred miles to the British Hudson's Bay Fur Company post at Fort Vancouver on the Columbia River. The United States and Britain had agreed in 1818 that they would both occupy Oregon. The British were not hostile to the American fur traders. They even agreed to return to the Umpqua River to try to recover the goods from the Indians. Hudson's Bay people were able to recover only a small portion of the stolen supplies. In the spring Jed and his men left the northwest and headed back to the Green River Camp. Since many there had given the party up for dead, the sudden appearance of the men was cause for great celebration.

For the next year Jed worked the Bighorn Basin along the Wind River in Wyoming to the Musselshell River in Montana. It had been a successful trapping year. Jed decided that it was time to get out of the fur business and return to St. Louis. So in 1830 he sold his interest in the company to another trapper and he headed east. While in St. Louis his brothers joined him and wanted to start a trading business.

Jed helped them by leading a wagon train taking goods to California down the Santa Fe Trail in May of 1831. Three weeks into the trip they were caught in a fifty-mile stretch of sandy hills and desert. The wagons became stuck in the sand. The animals were dying because of the lack of water. Jed rode to the southwest in search of water. That was the last that his friends ever saw of him. Later, Mexican traders in Santa Fe told the tragic story of Jed's death at the hands of Comanche Indians. While he was scooping water from a small water hole, the unfriendly Indians came upon him. He shot the chief with his pistol after trying to make friends, thinking that would scare them away. Instead he died on the spot with a Comanche lance in his back.

Jedediah Smith's accomplishments during his thirty-two years certainly earned him an uppermost rank as explorer in this period of United States history. He led the first overland party from the east to California. He was the first to cross the Sierra Nevada Mountains going east. He had discovered South Pass from the east and was the first to bring wagons through it to the west which encouraged the Oregon Trail wagons to follow his exploit. His travels were over twice the distance of Lewis and Clark and covered a broader territory. He had covered both a southern route and a central route to the west coast. Also the Snake River from Oregon to the Great Salt Lake and Western Wyoming north to Montana had been viewed by his eyes and journaled by his pen. While his maps and oral stories were shared with many people, unfortunately he did not live long enough to have his journals and maps published.

Images of Jedediah Strong Smith

**By Daryl Morrison, Holt-Atherton Department of
Special Collections, University of the Pacific Library, Archives Corner**

The most frequent request asked of the Holt-Atherton Department of Special Collections is to supply a photograph of Jedediah Strong Smith. Those who understand the history of photography and the early demise of Jedediah Smith know that a photograph of the stalwart mountain man is an impossibility. The 32 year old veteran mountain man died on the Cimarron on May 27, 1831, when he was attacked by Comanche Indians. Although early experiments in photochemistry and the camera obscura were centuries old, the invention date of photography is considered to be 1839. This was the year two principal inventors of the art, Louis-Jacques-Mande Daguerre in France and Fox Talbot in Great Britain, made their techniques known to the public. Daguerre introduced his photographic technique using a silver-coated copper plate and the resulting photographs were named after him—the daguerreotype. Yankee ingenuity embraced the technique very quickly and the very first American daguerreotype was made in 1839. Samuel B. Morse, inventor of the telegraph, was one of the first to bring daguerreotype technology to America. [Floyd and Marion Reinhart, *The American Daguerreotype*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1981.]

The photographic studios were operational on the East Coast in cities like New York as early as 1840-41. They were viable businesses by 1843-44. Daguerreotypes quickly replaced the miniature painted portraits. St. Louis, the bustling fur-trade center and jumping-off-place for the western frontier, developed quickly in a boom city economy. Photography probably reached St. Louis about 1843, four years after the birth of photography, and still twelve years after Jedediah Smith's death. American heroes such as Davie Crockett and Jim Bowie are other major historical figures that were never documented by photography due to their early demise at the Alamo.

Without a photograph of Jedediah Smith, what images can we offer researchers looking for illustrations of Jedediah? There are photographs of his brothers and sisters. Photographs of three brothers, Peter, Ira, and Benjamin, and three sisters, Sally, Betsy, and Eunice are to be found in the Smith Bacon Family Papers. One can speculate on the similarities or differences so surprisingly evident one way or the other in families. We leave it to the researcher to ponder if Jedediah's brothers' images resemble Jedediah Smith (of course the siblings are much older in years than Jed's young adulthood).

A sketch identified by author Maurice Sullivan who had access to family papers is said to be a picture of Jedediah Smith "made by a friend from memory, after Smith's death." The sketch appeared in Sullivan's *The Travels of Jedediah Smith*, a documentary outline (Santa Ana, CA The Fine Arts Press, 1934). It is this sketch (see below) that has been used by several artists to develop their own inventive images of Smith in modern paintings and sketches rendered by artists imagining how Jedediah Smith might have appeared. Several of these have been given over the years to the archives at the University of the Pacific or appeared in *The Pacific Historian*.

Examples of sketches and paintings of Jedediah Smith



1. Early drawing, ca. 1835. This portrait is the only known with any claim to authenticity. It is said to have been done from memory by a friend after Jed died, so noted above. A later artist, Ruth Senf Framberg, used it for the basis of her oil painting at the Friends of the Middle Border Gallery, Mitchell, South Dakota. Both appear in *The Pacific Historian*, vol. 11, no. 2, Spring, 1967.

2. Sketch of Jed Smith escaping from the Mojaves on his return to California in 1827. The artist did this sketch for Colonel Frank Triplett's *Conquering the Wilderness*; new pictorial history of the life and times of the pioneer heroes and heroines of America. Engravings from designs by Nast, Darley, and other eminent artists, added a modish moustache of the 1880s. *Pacific Historian*, vol. 20, no. 2, Spring 1976.



3. Smith and men in the Mojave Desert in 1826, as imaginatively painted, ca. 1905 by Remington. *The Pacific Historian* vol. 10, no. 1, Winter 1966.

4. Harvey Dunn, Jedediah Smith in the Badlands, appeared on the cover of *Together* magazine, June 1960; as the cover of *The Pacific Historian* vol. 15, no. 3, Fall 1971; and the dust jacket of the



American Heritage History of the Great West. Original painting is a large canvas on display at South Dakota State College, Brookings, SD.



5. Don Prechtel, The Real Discovery of South Pass, Wyoming (Jed Smith and fellow hunter James Clyman), original oil painting. Creswell, Oregon, ca. 1975. A photograph of the painting appeared in *The Pacific Historian* vol. 20, no. 2, Spring 1976. Original painting -Special Collections, University of the Pacific Library.

6. George Mathis' pastel portrait of Jedediah Strong Smith, ca. 1970, appeared in the *The Pacific Historian*, Vol. 17, no. 3, Fall 1973. Original- Special Collections, University of the Pacific Library.



7. Of the 14 children of Jedediah Smith, Sr. and Sally Strong, there are six with photographs (in their later years) in the collection. The following copies of photographs are in MSS 20 Smith Bacon Family Papers in the Holt-Atherton Department of Special Collections.

Sally Smith (b. 1791), Betsy Smith Davis (b. 1796), Eunice Smith Beers (b. 1797), Peter Smith (b. 1810), Ira Gilbert Smith (b. 1811) with his daughter Libbie, (Benjamin G.) Paddock Smith (b. 1812)



8. Photographs of Peter and Benjamin Smith, may bear a reasonable likeness of Jedediah Smith.



STATUE: Entitled "A Welcome Sight"

Sculpted by Victor Issa, dedicated 21 November 1992. Located at City Hall, W. Bonita Ave., San Dimas CA Sponsored by San Dimas Festival of Western Arts, San Dimas Chamber of Commerce, Jedediah Smith Society and many local donors.

BRONZE STATUETTE: Model of "A Welcome Sight"
Victor Issa, Loveland Colorado, Pedestal by Gordon Martin, Located in Holt Atherton Special Collections, University of the Pacific





PISTOL: Jedediah Smith's Holster Pistol

Early percussion lock, not converted from flint, @ 50 caliber, single shot, Cap and Ball, 15 ½ inches long, 9 ½ inch octagonal barrel, muzzle load.

Recovered from Comanche Indians by Mexican traders after Smith had

been killed in 1831. Now lost, having been stolen in San Diego 1961. San Diego Historical Society in 1975 transferred title to JSS for the missing piece and the holsters.



SHAVING CASE: Jedediah's Shaving Case with Mirror

Donated by great grand nephew Julian Smith Bacon, Jr. to Society Archives March 23, 1974. Holt Atherton Special Collections, University of the Pacific

SIGNATURE: Jedediah S. Smith

Original signature appeared on the bond document posted in 1827, Monterey, California. Courtesy Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, Missouri.



LAPEL PIN: Jedediah Smith in the Rocky Mountains

Design based on sculpted medal panel by Laura Gardin for a door at the Library, West Point Military Academy, New York. Prepared and presented by Robert Bussman, Past President JSS in memory of his father.

SOCIETY SEAL: Jedediah Smith West of South Pass

Official corporate seal designed by graphic artist Irene Steiner, Soler Graphics - So. San Francisco, California from drawing by Jose Cisneros artist, commissioned and donated by James Shebl, PhD, Past President JSS.



Source: Jedediah Smith Society at <http://www.jedediahsmithsociety.org/bioforstudents.html>