

## Jedediah Smith and French Camp

The wandering spirit was planted deep in the heart of Jedediah Smith. Born June 24th, 1798 in Bainbridge, New York, Jedediah was a natural wanderer. His family moved several times in an effort to stay on the edge of the growing and little-explored western frontier. Young Jedediah read Biddle's 1814 edition of the Lewis and Clark journals and from that moment on was set on living the life of a wilderness explorer. "I wanted to be the first to view a country on which the eye of a white man had never gazed", said Jedediah, "and to follow the course of rivers that run through a new land."



In 1821, at the young age of 22, Jedediah Smith signed on with an expedition led by General William Ashley. The group was to travel the Upper Missouri region to trap for beaver pelts.

In 1822, Jedediah led another of Ashley's groups deep into the central Rockies where he rediscovered the forgotten South Pass, the key to the settlement of Oregon and California. During the trip, he was attacked by a grizzly bear and mauled. His ribs were broken and his scalp was ripped off of his head. Smith ordered a member of his party, Jim Clyman, to sew his scalp and ear back on. "I put my needle sticking it through and through and over and over laying the lacerated parts together as nice as I could with my hands." , wrote Clyman. After two weeks of rest, Smith resumed his duty as captain of the party.

In 1823, Jedediah and his men spent the winter with a band of Crow Indians who told him how to reach the Green River in what is now Utah. In March of 1824, his company rediscovered the South Pass, a lost passageway to the Northwest through present-day Wyoming. This passageway would lead Pioneers west to Oregon and eventually California. Smith and his men entered the Green River area and trapped during the spring of 1824.

In July of 1825, Jedediah was made a partner in the Rocky Mountain Fur Company by General Ashley, who needed to replace the retiring Andrew Henry. In 1826, he led a party of 17 men to explore the southern and western fringes of the Great Salt Lake in Utah. This led him down the Virgin River, which merged with the mighty Colorado River. He followed the Colorado south through the territory of the Mojave Indians, then headed west across the great desert. During the Mojave trek, the heat became so intense that it forced him and his men to bury themselves in sand to keep cool. Smith and his party emerged at San Gabriel Mission near Los Angeles, making them the first Americans to enter California overland from the east.

In 1826, Smith and his party explored the American River area near Sacramento, winding his way south to the Stanislaus river. In the spring of 1827, he left his party on the Stanislaus River with two of his men and crossed the Sierra Nevada Mountains over Ebbetts Pass and then crossed the Great Basin Desert through Nevada, making them the first Americans to return from California by an overland route.

In late 1827, Jedediah and his men returned to Southern California along the Colorado River route explored earlier, but the Mojave Indians attacked them killing 10 of the 18 men in the party and capturing all of their horses. The remaining 8 men made their way back to California where they were jailed for a short time by Mexican authorities. After being released, the party spent the winter in the San Francisco area.

In spring of 1828, Smith and his men headed up the coast to Oregon. Their encampment was attacked by Kelawatset Indians, killing all but four of the men. Smith and three other survivors made their way to Fort Vancouver, arriving in August, where they spent the winter.

While in Canada, Smith and his men told stories of the wealth of furs found along the central corridor of California. His tales led the Hudson Bay Company to dispatch fur trappers in to California's central valley. These French-Canadian trappers made their way to a location located just south of Stockton in the San Joaquin Valley. They set up an encampment, known today as the town of French Camp. These men trapped beaver, racoon and other pelts then floated them down the river to Yerba Buena (now known as San Francisco), where they sold the skins.

These Canadian trappers, who made their home at French Camp, were to encounter the [The Kelsey Family](#).

In March of 1829, Jedediah journeyed east to Pierre's Hole to attend the annual Mountain Man Rendezvous. After his mother died in 1830, and Smith grew weary of being away from his family, he and his two partners sold their trapping interest in the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. He purchased a farm and townhouse in the St. Louis area and settled in for a life of less-adventure.

In 1831, as fate would have it, Jedediah's final trip in to the southwest wilderness would prove tragic. When he sold his share in the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, Smith had agreed to help procure supplies for the subsequent owners. He left in the spring and, while looking for water on the Santa Fe Trail, he was killed by Comanche warriors at a water hole near the Cimarron River. His body was never found.

Jedediah Smith was an accomplished outdoorsman who never drank, smoked, nor chewed tobacco. He was very religious and did not have much of a sense of humor.

He had been planning to edit and publish his hournals, and construct a master map of the western frontier. Unfortunately, his knowledge never made it to print and died with him.

His career as an explorer and mountain man was best summed up in his own words . . . "I started into the mountains, with the determination of becoming a first-rate hunter, of making myself thoroughly acquainted with the character and habits of the Indians, of tracing out the sources of the Columbia River and following it to its mouth; and of making the whole profitable to me, and I have perfectly succeeded."