

Jedediah Strong Smith (born January 6, 1799 — presumed date of death May 27, 1831) was a hunter, trapper, fur trader, trailblazer and explorer of the Rocky Mountains, the American West Coast and the Southwest during the nineteenth century. He was the fourth of twelve children. Jedediah Smith's explorations were significant in opening the American West to expansion by white settlers.

According to Maurice Sullivan; Smith was the first white man to cross the future state of Nevada; the first to traverse Utah from north to south and from west to east; the first American to enter California by the overland route, and so herald its change of masters; the first white man to scale the High Sierras, and the first to explore the Pacific hinterland from San Diego to the banks of the Columbia River.

Prospectors and settlers later poured in to the areas that "Old Jed" Smith had trail-blazed as a trapper and fur trader, during the subsequent 1849 Gold Rush.

Smith was born in Jericho, New York on January 6, 1799. He is best known for leading the party of explorers who rediscovered South Pass, when the Crows, in 1824, showed the Americans where to shorten the time needed to get to the west slope of the Rocky Mountains from St. Louis, Missouri. He was the first explorer to reach Oregon overland by traveling up the California coast.

Smith was also a devout Christian from a Methodist background. His Bible and his rifle were said to be his closest companions. In his lifetime, Smith traveled more extensively in unknown territory than any other explorer.

First trip to California, 1826-1827

Smith made two expeditions to California in 1826 and 1827, which landed him in trouble with the authorities. As with the Zebulon Pike expedition two decades earlier, the Mexican authorities saw Smith's party as a harbinger of troubles to come. Unlike Pike's expedition, which was commissioned by the United States Army, the Smith party was involved in private commercial activity, but their excursion deep into Mexican territory was unauthorized, despite carrying United States passports for five members of the 1826 party.

In its first trip, the Smith party followed the Colorado River deep into the west in search of new beaver hunting grounds, and ended up in a harsh landscape. To gather supplies for its return trip the group sought help in California. After an arduous pass through the mountains into the Mojave Desert the party found shelter with a friendly Mojave village. The men recuperated and met two Tongva men, who offered to guide them to San Gabriel Mission from where they had earlier fled. The guides led them through the desert via a path that avoided Death Valley and which more or less follows the route of today's Interstate 15. From Soda Lake they followed the Mojave River into the San Bernardino Mountains, which they crossed, emerging at the point where today the Community of Etiwanda is, and into a vastly different landscape. Here at last was the paradisiacal California that sailors and newspapers talked about on the East Coast. Rather than head to the nearby mission ranch, they quickly made their way west (following the path of the future Route 66), arriving at the Mission on November 27, 1826.

At the Mission they were received warmly by the President of the Missions, José Bernardo Sánchez, who managed to hide any misgivings he might have had. (Several of the Smith party remembered Sánchez fondly in their journals.) Sánchez advised Smith to communicate with *Jefe Político* (governor) José María Echeandía, who was at San Diego, about his party's status in the country. On December 8 Echeandía ordered Smith to San Diego, apparently under arrest (there was one symbolic soldier accompanying the party of mission priests and a British sea merchant escorting Smith). The rest of the party remained at the Mission.

In San Diego Smith was interviewed several times by Echeandía, who never became convinced that Smith was only looking for food and shelter. Smith asked for permission to travel north to the Columbia River, where known paths could quickly take his party back to United States territory. Smith even handed over his journals in an attempt to prove his intentions. However Echeandía delayed a quick resolution, forwarding the issue for the authorities in Sonora to review, much to Smith's displeasure. After being hounded by Smith for a month, Echeandía released Smith and his men on the promise that they leave California by the path they entered and never return. Nevertheless, once released the party made their way to the San Joaquín Valley, which they explored. In the late spring of 1827, the main group was left behind in the Valley to hunt, while Smith and two others attempted to cross the Sierras twice in May and then in June. One of the men, Robert Evans, died in the tough desert crossing, but the other two eventually made it to their company rendezvous at Bear Lake.

CALIFORNIA EXPLORERS

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Second trip to California, 1827-1828

Despite Echeandía's warning, Smith returned to California the next year with eighteen men and two women following the Colorado River and Mojave Desert route he now knew well. At the Colorado River, the party was attacked by the Mojave, killing ten men and taking the two women. Smith and the other survivors were again well received in San Gabriel. The party moved north to meet with the group that had been left in the San Joaquin Valley. Unlike in San Gabriel, they were coolly received by the priests at Mission San José, who had already received warning of Smith's renewed presence in the area.

Echeandía, who was at the time in Monterey attending business, once again arrested Smith, this time along with his men. Yet despite the breach of trust, the governor once again released Smith on the same promise to leave the province immediately and not to return, and as before, Smith and his party remained in California hunting in Sacramento Valley for several months, before heading north to use the Columbia River to return to their headquarters. However, his second run-in with the authorities, in addition to the extreme hardships his parties experienced in both trips, convinced him never to return to California, and he devoted his next years to building up his fur company.

Trip to the Oregon Country

In the Oregon Country, Smith's party fell into conflict over a stolen ax with the Umpqua people near the Umpqua River. Smith's party had threatened to execute the man they accused of stealing the ax. Later, Smith's group was attacked and fifteen of Smith's nineteen men were killed. Smith managed to reach the Hudson's Bay Company post at Fort Vancouver, where he received aid. Governor George Simpson happened to be at Fort Vancouver at the time, and he dispatched Alexander McLeod to rescue the remnants of Smith's party and their goods. McLeod returned to Fort Vancouver with 700 beaver skins and 39 horses, all in bad condition. John McLoughlin, in charge of Fort Vancouver, paid Smith \$2,600 for the goods. In return, Smith assured that the Rocky Mountain Fur Company would confine its operations to the region east of the Great Divide.

Smith's Death

Later in his career, Smith became involved in the fur trade in Santa Fe. Smith was leading a trading party on the Santa Fe Trail in May, 1831 when he left the group to scout for water. He never returned to the group. The remainder of the party proceeded on to Santa Fe hoping Smith would meet them there, but he never arrived. A short time later, members of the trading party discovered a Mexican merchant at the Santa Fe market offering several of Smith's personal belongings for sale. The merchant indicated that he had acquired them from a band of Comanche hunters. The Comanches told the merchant they had taken the items from a white man they had killed near the Cimarron River, south of present day Ulysses, Kansas. Smith's body was never found.

Honors and namesakes

Smith's exploration of northwestern California is commemorated in the names of the Jedediah Smith Redwoods State Park and the Smith River.

Most of the western slope of Wyoming's famous Teton Range is named the Jedediah Smith Wilderness. The Jedediah Smith Memorial Trail runs between Folsom and Sacramento, California, through the former gold-dredging fields that are now the American River Parkway.

A street in Temecula, California is named for him.

A road in Colorado Springs, Colorado is named for him.



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