

Historical Notes

By MAX BRAINARD

TOURIST TRAVEL into this area was officially opened by Jedediah Strong Smith in June and July, 1828. It is possible that wandering Russians or shipwrecked Chinese may have preceded Smith but, of such, we have no record. There also may have been scattered fur scouts from the Hudson Bay Company.

Jed Smith was a systematic wanderer wherever he thought there might be beaver fur. That is why he was here

He was born at Bainbridge, New York, in 1799, and unlike most of his later associates, was a well educated man before he went to clerking on the Great Lakes at the age of 13. It was there, probably, that his interest in fur and the great west was hatched, shipments of pelts passing from the field to the central fur market, then at Montreal. In 1822 he was in St. Louis, heart of the western development and in April of '23 left there in a company of about 100, promoted by William Ashley. As each trapper had to be grub-staked to flour, tea, coffee, salt, powder, and lead with which to cast bullets, as well as with saddle and pack horses, this represented an expenditure of several thousands of dollars, the returns on which were very high, beaver pelts averaging five dollars each in St. Louis and three in the "field." The trapper had

to supply his personal requirements which included a 40 or 50 caliber "plains rifle" having a barrel from thirty to thirty-six inches long, which fired a long, heavy bullet and used much more powder than the Kentucky squirrel rifles. The favorite weapons were made by Jacob and Samuel Hawken in St. Louis.

Smith stayed in Ashley's employ for some three years during which time it is recorded that he was attacked, while on horseback, by a grizzly (numerous then). The bear bowled over horse and rider and badly chewed Smith's head. One Clyman, a companion, had to stitch Smith's scalp, cheeks, and ears back so as to cover his otherwise naked skull daubed him over with soap and sugar, helped him onto his horse Smith could ride on about a mile to a suitable camping place.

The party explored and trapped in an area extending from the present state of Wyoming, down the vast valley of the Colorado river, sending their packs of fur back to St. Louis. These packs consisted of one hundred pelts each, weighed 150 lbs., and packed two packs to the mule load.

Rivalry was intense. Indians were a frequent menace, and the whites were just as cruel as they, each side leaving records of beheading wounded. Occasionally, the parties encountered Indians

who would trade pelts for cloth, blankets, beads, tobacco, knives, and such materials as were packed out from Missouri—at a nominal one thousand per cent markup!

The principal objective of the Ashley-Smith combine was to find a usable waterway between the Great Salt Lake and the Gulf of California but when this was attempted, the adventurers ran into objections from the Spanish-Mexican authorities already established there. At San Diego, Smith contacted officers of American vessels engaged in the hide and tallow trade and Mexican officials were caught between orders from their government to prevent taking out of the pelts by foreigners and yet avoid friction with the United States.

Smith, wearying of the long negotiations, finally agreed not to take any more beaver in the Mexican domain and departed, northward, to renew his operations as soon as he was out of sight of the Mexicans, well knowing the Mexicans' inability to police such a large area.

The party's suffering in the wastelands was tremendous and some of them died. As was the custom of these expeditions, rendezvous were scheduled two or three years in advance, centering the region being trapped. Smith and his party were headed for Bear Lake, near the present junction of Idaho, Wyoming and Utah—remember—all the way from San Diego, going by the way of Bakersfield, San Francisco, Reno and south of the Great Salt Lake.

In the winter of '27, Smith was back in California, coming down through what is now Central Utah and again crossing the Mojave, and again pestering the governor, finally coming to an agreement, which the governor neglected to carry out.

On January 1, 1828, Smith's whole party reassembled in the San Joaquin valley, figuring on trapping to the east, toward the Great Salt Lake, but it was a very wet spring. They had a terrible time with flooded lands and sloughs, and they couldn't find a pass through the mountains so continued scouting the western slopes, which became more and more rugged, forcing them toward the ocean, which they reached, according to Smith's diary, on the eighth of June, after crossing high up on the Klamath river, May 28. On the 23rd of June, Smith figured he crossed out of the province of California into Oregon, and rafted the Rogue on the 27th. July 9, they were at Coos Bay, and a couple of days later, on the Umpqua.

While encamped on the latter, Smith and some companions were out scouting their route ahead when a party of Indians jumped their camp, killing fifteen men and taking all their possessions. Arthur Black, a huge man, beat off his attackers and made his way to Fort Vancouver, arriving there August 8. The next day Smith and two others who had been scouting with him, also arrived at the fort.

Although the company was competing with the huge Hudson Bay outfit, Dr. McLoughlin could not allow the Indians to sustain the idea they could plunder any trappers, so he sent a large expedition to the Umpqua. Smith, and the other survivors, went with the party and they recovered 700 beaver hides, 39 horses, and other goods, at a cost of thousands of pounds (in trapping time) to the Hudson Bay Company. Smith later sold the pack to McLoughlin for \$3,200.

Beaver were fast being decimated. Smith went into the horse and cattle business, after 1830, setting out from Missouri for Santa Fe with twenty-three wagons and eighty-five men. Lack of

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water overtook the caravan, north of the Cimmaron, in very dangerous Indian country. Smith foolishly went ahead alone to look for water. Comanches jumped him as he drank, and killed him, on the 27th day of May, 1831.

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