

2 Mountain Men

TO
Enterprising Young Men.
 THE subscriber wishes to engage ONE HUNDRED MEN, to ascend the river Missouri to its source, there to be employed for one, two or three years.—For particulars, enquire of Major Andrew Henry, near the Lead Mines, in the County of Washington, (who will ascend with, and command the party) or to the subscriber at St. Louis.
Wm. H. Ashley.
 February 13 — 1822

The ad in the St. Louis newspaper, in February 1822, called for men willing to try something new. Instead of buying furs from the Indians—as most American fur traders did—they were to live as the Indians lived and trap and hunt furs themselves. They were to go out into the unexplored West—to the Rocky Mountains and beyond—with a gun and a knife, some coffee and flour, to eat the game they shot and the berries they found, and to trap beaver for the fur market.

Rendezvous—say “RON-day-voo”—it means a meeting or get-together agreed on in advance.

To show their fearlessness, the mountain men wore their hair long. It proved they were not afraid of being scalped.

Ashley made a deal with the mountain men: he transported and outfitted them for a year; in return they gave him half the year's catch.

William Ashley, who put the ad in the paper, would arrange a once-a-year river-side meeting—a month-long rendezvous—where they could all get together, sell their beaver, feast, race on horseback, wrestle, trade stories, and have a fine time. If they wanted to, they could stay away from civilization for years. They would live with grizzly bears, rattlesnakes, mountain lions, blizzards, floods, and drought. They would share the land with the Native Americans, who would sometimes teach them the ways of the mountains and—sometimes—kill them.

Davy Crockett's Almanack told tall tales about mountain men and the frontier, excitingly illustrated. It had nothing to do with Crockett himself.





Some people like danger and adventure, some like to be free of civilization, and some like to live by their wits. It was those special people who headed west.

In the year 1832, a thousand men turned up for the rendezvous. Their skins were white, black, and copper, and they all got along, at what some say was the best party the West has ever seen.

If only Daniel Boone had been around—he died in 1820 at age 86—Boone would have loved being one of Ashley's Mountain Men. That was what they called themselves—"mountain men"—and they became a kind of brotherhood. Legends were told of them: of Jim Bridger, Jedediah Smith, James Beckwourth, Tom Fitzpatrick, and others.

A German fur trader (named Frederick Adolph Wislizenus) went to a rendezvous and wrote this of the mountain men:

In small parties they roam through all the mountain passes. No rock is too steep for them; no stream too swift. Withal, they are in constant danger from hostile Indians, whose delight it is to ambush such small parties, and plunder them, and scalp them. Such victims fall every year....But this daily danger seems to exercise a magic attraction over most of them. Only with reluctance does

The mountain men set beaver traps in streams. They smeared the bait with *castor*, taken from a beaver's musk glands, and tied the trap to a pole. They drove the pole into the mud by the bank, near fresh prints that showed beaver were around.



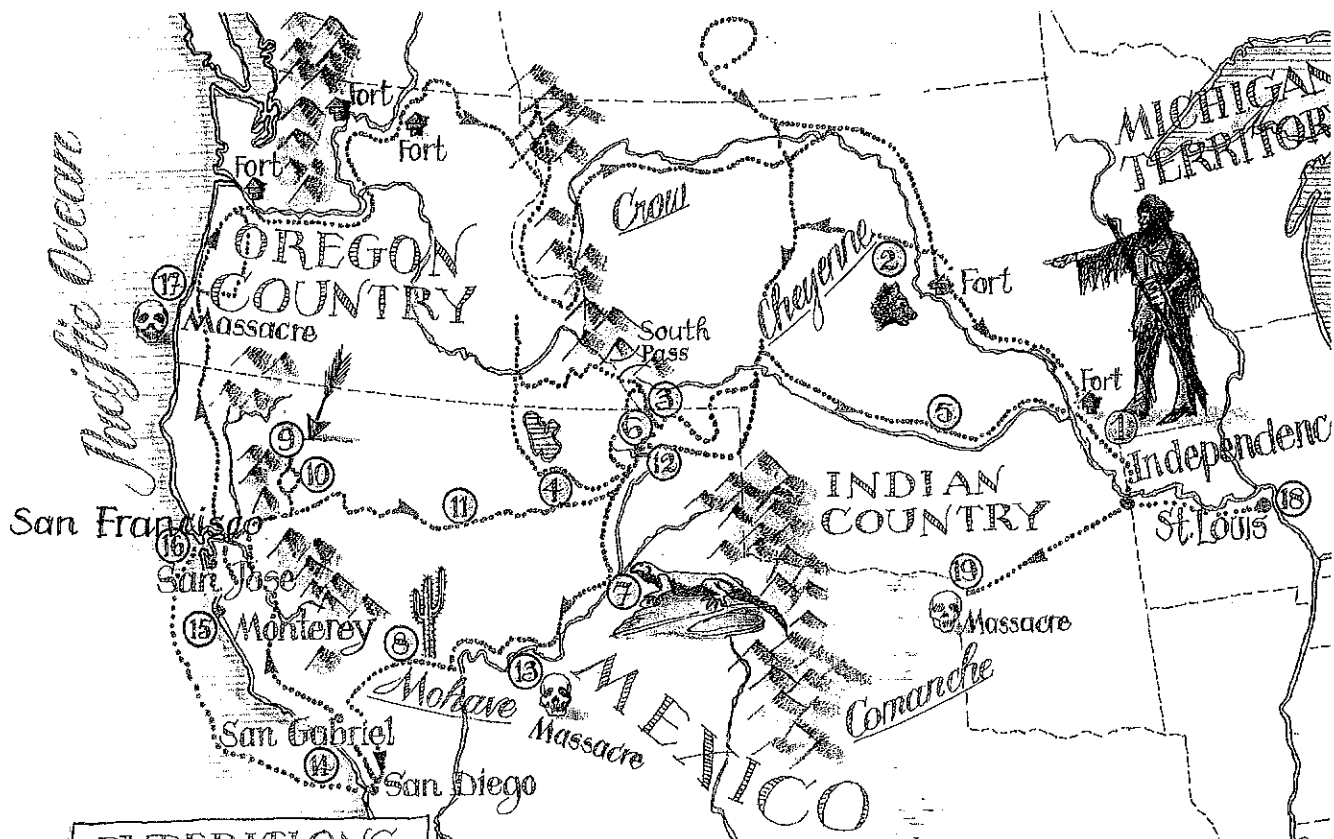
For a time beaver hats were so fashionable that in 20 years beavers were almost extinct.



Jedediah Smith

a trapper abandon his dangerous craft; and a sort of serious homesickness seizes him when he retires from his mountain life to civilization. In manners and customs, the trappers have borrowed much from the Indians. Many of them, too, have taken Indian women as wives. Their dress is generally of leather. The hair of the head is usually allowed to grow long. In place of money they use beaver skins.

Jedediah Smith looked like the other mountain men; he wore the same buckskin clothes, fringed at the seams, with buffalo-hide moccasins on his feet. Indian clothes they were, and if you wanted to



EXPEDITIONS
of
Jedediah Smith
1824-1831

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| 1. Smith sets out for "Fur Country." | 7. No food; lives on bugs and rodents. | Indians kill 10 of party |
| 2. Attacked by grizzly bear. Friend sews scalp and left ear back on. | 8. Mohave Indians help party cross desert. | 14. Sails to San Francisco |
| 3. Follows Crow directions and "discovers" the South Pass. | 9. Attacked by Paiute Indians. | 15. Party jailed under suspicion of being American spies. |
| 4. First trappers' rendezvous. | 10. Trapped by deep snow. | 16. Jailed again. Escapes 250 horses and mules |
| 5. Back to St. Louis with boatload of furs. | 11. Crosses the Great Basin in 32 days with little food or water.-- | 17. All but two of the party massacred. |
| 6. Second rendezvous. | 12. Third rendezvous. | 18. Smith retires. |
| | 13. Smith returns; Mohave | 19. Killed by Comanches business trip to Santa |

compliment a mountain man you could say you mistook him for an Indian.

But Jedediah Smith was different. He didn't drink, swear, or chew tobacco. His Bible was as important to him as his rifle. He carried it with him always and he knew most of its stories by heart. It was Smith who found the South Pass, a gap through the Rockies in the Wyoming region. He understood its importance. That pass (like the Cumberland Gap, where Daniel Boone cut a trail through the southern Appalachians) was a place settlers could use to get wagons through the mountains.

Jed Smith was guided by a feeling that what he was doing was important, that he was helping the nation grow. In a letter to his brother, he wrote:

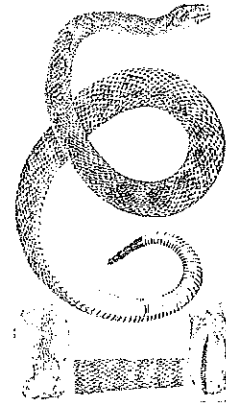
It is, that I may be able to help those who stand in need, that I face every danger—it is for this that I traverse the mountains covered with eternal snow—it is for this that I pass over the sandy plains, in heat of summer, thirsting for water, and am well pleased if I can find a shade, instead of water, where I may cool my overheated body—it is for this that I go for days without eating, and am pretty well satisfied if I can gather a few roots, a few snails, or, much better satisfied if we can afford ourselves a piece of horse flesh, or a fine roasted dog.

Jedediah was just getting started as a mountain man when he survived his first Indian massacre. Fifteen others didn't. A few years later, in 1826, Smith led a group of trappers across deserts and mountains toward California and the Pacific coast. There were two ways to get to California. You could go over the killer peaks of the Sierra Nevada mountains, or you could try the hot, parched, impossible desert. No white man had ever gone overland from the United States to California (which was then part of Mexico). When Mexican officials saw the bearded, wild-looking hunters (who had trekked across the desert), they didn't believe they'd come from the East; they didn't think anyone could make it. They decided they were spies and arrested them. Smith talked his way out of jail. He was told to leave the territory. He did. He headed back east. This time he went across the mountains; he got back in time to catch that year's rendezvous.

Before long he was ready to try for California again. When he did, Indians killed 10 of his men and captured all his horses. That



Samuel Woodhouse was a scientist who explored Indian territory in what is now Oklahoma. He and the mountain men endured the same hazards—Woodhouse lost the use of a hand from the bite of a rattlesnake (below).



The South Pass had been found in 1812 by fur trappers—but it was then forgotten. Jed Smith rediscovered it in 1824.



Jim Beckwourth couldn't read, but his story got written down. It is called *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth*.

The biggest petrified forest is in Arizona; the most famous hot geyser, Old Faithful, is in Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming.



Later on, Jim Bridger guided settlers, explorers, and surveyors. He was, said a historian, "an atlas of the West."

didn't stop Jed Smith. He made it to California and went up the coast to Oregon. There, more Indians attacked; only Jed Smith and two others escaped.

Then there was the grizzly bear who tried to scalp Jedediah. Jed pulled his head out of the grizzly's mouth, but half his ear got ripped off. One of his men sewed the ear back and a few days later Smith was on the trail again. Finally, in New Mexico, in 1831, Jed Smith's luck ran out. Comanche Indians are said to have caught him. His body was never found.

The mountain men and the Indians—sometimes they were the best of friends. Often they were mortal enemies. Consider James Beckwourth: he had been a slave, and at 20 had run away and made it to the mountains. Beckwourth had an Indian wife and was adopted by the Crow and became a chief. He learned to use a tomahawk as well as any Indian. But, like most of the mountain men, Beckwourth was restless. He didn't stay an Indian for long. He went off to California, where he discovered a pass through the Sierra Nevadas. That pass still bears his name.

Everyone who knew the mountain men had stories to tell of Jim Bridger; he was always getting in and out of scrapes. Actually, they didn't have to tell stories about Bridger; he told the best stories himself. He told of a petrified forest, where trees had turned to stone, and that story was true. Then he told of petrified birds who sang petrified songs and how he crossed over a petrified canyon without a bridge, because the law of gravity was petrified there. When he told of springs he had found whose water came out of the ground so hot it would cook your food—well, no one believed that, even though it was so. It was Bridger who discovered the Great Salt Lake; for a while, because it was salty and huge, he thought he'd found the Pacific Ocean.

Once, sitting around a campfire, an army officer told Bridger a story from Shakespeare. Bridger liked the story so much that when he learned there was a set of Shakespeare's plays on a wagon train, he bartered a pair of oxen for the books, although he had never learned to read. Then he hired a boy to read them to him. After that he told Shakespeare's stories in his own words.

But that was after 1840, when the rendezvous was finished and the beaver trade, too. In Paris they were wearing silk, not beaver hats. Besides, the beaver were mostly gone, from overtrapping. The mountain men became guides, taking wagon trains of pioneers across the mountains and deserts whose trails only they and the Indians knew. Now they had to deal with people, instead of rattlesnakes and bears—some of the mountain men preferred rattlesnakes.