

## Southwest Utah Explorations of Jedediah Strong Smith, 1826 and 1827

In the year 1826, Jedediah Smith and his partners, David F. Jackson and William L. Sublette, purchased the interests of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, previously controlled by General William Ashley. Ashley's company had been operating from the rendezvous near Bear Lake, in northern Utah. The new company had dreams of expansion into the unexplored Southwest. Smith led expeditions into the region in the years 1826 and 1827.

Jedediah Smith, a devout Christian, who it is said prayed like a Parson and yet was more daring than the tough old mountainmen, with his Bible and rifle as his constant companions, left the Bear Lake rendezvous in June of 1826 with fifteen men and fifty horses for the purpose of exploring the wealth of the Southwest. . . . [After] reaching Utah Lake the party proceeded south to the Sevier River, which Smith named Ashley's River. [Continuing] up the Sevier [and] reaching Clear Creek Canyon, the party traveled up that stream and over the mountain, passing near the present site of Cove Fort.



**Jedediah Smith, life portrait, said to have been drawn by a friend, from memory, after the 1831 death of Smith. From Wikipedia.**

Following the natural route to the southwest, the party reached Beaver River somewhere in the vicinity between Minersville and Milford, Utah. Smith gave the Beaver River the name Lost River because of the fact that it lost itself in the broad marshes on the edge of the desert. From Lost River their route led by way of Ash Creek to the Rio Virgin, to which Smith gave the name of Adams River in honor of John Quincy Adams, President of the United States.

Smith then directed his course down the Rio Virgin. . . . As the party reached the junction of the Virgin and the Santa Clara, they came in contact with a nation of Paiute Indians who wore rabbit skin clothing and raised a little corn and pumpkins.

Leaving the Santa Clara, Smith and his party followed the Rio Virgin through what is today known as the Virgin [River Gorge on I-15 in Arizona], a deep canyon with towering walls that rise some two thousand feet above the stream. So narrow was the gorge that Smith and party were able to make the passage only by following the stream channel. Evidently the passage through this canyon was not a pleasant task, or perhaps carried with it some dangers, as the next season when Smith made his second trip through the region he preferred to travel some twenty-five miles up the Santa Clara to the vicinity known locally as Jackson. From Jackson he crossed the Beaver Dam Mountains, and thence, by way of a dry ravine, to Beaver Dam Wash. From Beaver Dam Wash, or Pautch Creek, as Smith named it and which he said was ten miles below the Virgin Narrows, the party followed the Virgin to its junction with the Colorado. They crossed the Colorado and proceeded down stream for four days. Here they came in contact with the Mohave Indians.



**Jedediah Smith's party crossing the burning Mojave Desert during the 1826 trek to California, by Frederic Remington. From Wikipedia.**

The ten days down the Rio Virgin, a distance of perhaps one hundred fifty miles, and the four days down the Colorado must have been a fortnight of extreme hardship for both the men and the horses. Evidently many of the animals died, or were killed for food, while the men were forced to travel on a very limited diet, as upon his arrival in the Mohave Valley Smith said, "I was now destitute of horses, and had learned what it was to do without food."

“The party remained with the Mohave Indians for fifteen days in order that they might recuperate. After the trading of trinkets, the buying of horses, and the gaining of information concerning the country ahead of them, they proceeded across the barren desert for another fifteen days and entered California by way of Cajon Pass.”

The following spring, May 20<sup>th</sup>, 1827, Smith with two men, seven horses and two mules started on his return trip from California to the Great Salt Lake. This time they proceeded over the Sierra Nevada Mountains and across the Nevada desert. After the twenty-eight days they reached the Southwest corner of the Great Salt Lake. The days spent on the desert were days of suffering and privation. Smith says, “We traveled over a country completely destitute of game. We frequently traveled without water, sometimes for two days over sandy deserts where there was no sign of vegetation.” “We dug holes in the sand and laid down in them for the purpose of cooling our bodies.”

“When we arrived at Salt Lake we had but one horse and one mule remaining which were so feeble and poor they could scarcely carry the little camp equipage which we had along: the balance of my horses I was compelled to eat as they gave out.”

After a rest of less than three weeks, with a party of nineteen men and two Indian women, Smith set out on July 15<sup>th</sup>, 1827, for a second trip to California. With minor variations he proceeded over the same trail that he had followed the previous season.

Such, in brief, was the work of Jedediah S. Smith in exploring the great Southwest, the land of painted deserts and gorgeously colored canyons. Smith’s object was not, however, the discovery of scenic beauty. . . . His object was to ascertain the fur bearing resources of the heretofore unknown region, and perhaps, as Harrison C. Dale suggests, he may have had in mind the possibilities of shipping furs from Utah to the Pacific by way of the Colorado River.

During the years following Smith’s explorations the entire Southwest became known. Travelers and trappers began entering the region with considerable frequency. Frederick S. Dellenbaugh, in his “***Breaking of The Wilderness,***” says that “while no large companies operated, bands of traders for years ranged the Gila and its tributaries, the lower Colorado, the Virgin, and the Rio Grande, the Sevier, and other streams in the Southwest country where beaver abounded and where some rich hauls were made, sometimes to be confiscated by the Mexican officials or lost through the difficulties of travel in that country.”

(From ***Dixie of the Desert,*** by H. Lorenzo Reid, p. 19-22)

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