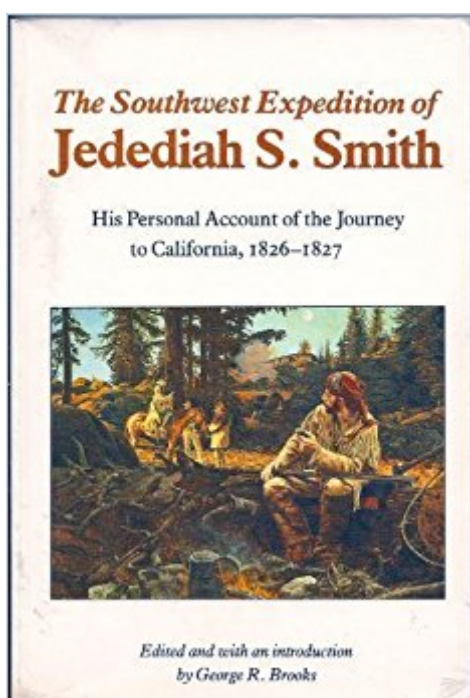




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# The Southwest Expedition Of Jedediah Smith: His Personal Account Of The Journey To California, 1826-1827



## Synopsis

Jedediah S. Smith was to western exploration what Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Edison were to the world of invention— a legendary figure kiting into the unknown, a lighter of the dark. No one did more to open the American West than this mountain man. His greatest exploring expedition came in 1826 when he looked to the Southwest for trapping grounds. Jedediah Smith's route ran, in modern terms, from Soda Springs in Idaho to the Great Salt Lake, southward across Utah, along the Colorado River to the Mojave Desert, and westward to California. When he reached the San Gabriel mission there, he could claim to be the first American to have gone overland through the Southwest. Then Smith marched northward through the San Joaquin Valley and, with two companions, embarked across the Great Basin. In traveling to the rendezvous of 1827 they became the first citizens of the United States ever to cross the Sierra eastbound and the Great Basin. That is the itinerary described in *The Southwest Expedition of Jedediah S. Smith*, which contains the mountain man's long-lost journals. After coming to light in 1967, they were edited by George R. Brooks and published in a limited edition a decade later. This Bison Book reprint brings a scarce historical record to a wider audience.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I don't think I'd be stretching things too much if I said these journals are almost as important as those kept by Lewis and Clark. Smith's expedition to California in 1826-27 had been known about, of course, but no written account ever appeared until the account presented here was discovered in 1967. (Later travel journals by Smith were discovered in the 1930s.) In Smith's eulogy in 1832, the

fact that Smith had kept notes of all his travels was mentioned. Interestingly, in 1840 the "Missouri Saturday News" reported that it was about to publish all of Smith's travel accounts in the West for subscribers, as compiled by one Alphonzo Wetmore, but it never happened. The final coming to light of this missing portion of Smith's adventures is a major find in Western exploration. Smith left the 1826 rendezvous on the Bear River in Idaho, heading to the southwest, to explore new territory and evaluate the country in terms of beaver productivity. He skirted the Great Salt Lake and headed toward Utah Lake. Here he turned to the southeast to the Price River, and then south to the Curtis. Turning west he struck the Sevier River and then crossed the Escalante Desert to the Virgin and the Colorado. He followed the Colorado to the Mohave Villages (near present-day Needles). Apparently his original plan was to return to the Bear Lake region, but believing the season too late to do so, decided to continue to California. Crossing the Mojave Desert he made his way to San Gabriel, sidetracked to San Diego, got in trouble with the Spanish governor, and hitched a ride on a ship back to near San Gabriel. Heading back toward the Mojave to appease the Spanish, he diverted north up through the center of California to the San Joaquin and then the American River. Backtracking to the Stanislaus River he crossed the Sierra Nevadas via Ebbetts Pass. Passing south of Walker Lake he crossed the desert wastes of Nevada, suffering great hardship (the first white to do so), then northeast across Utah, reaching the Bear Lake rendezvous in July 1827. As soon as the rendezvous ended Smith went back to California taking pretty much the same route, but that journey is not included here. As with the Lewis and Clark journals every mile traveled and described was new. But Smith wasn't just keeping an explorer's log, as important as that is. We also get his impressions - of the wealthy Spanish at San Gabriel, of the governor of San Diego, his description of a woodpecker south of the San Joaquin. Above all we get a strong sense of Smith's incredible bravery and perseverance, especially in crossing the Sierra Nevadas, when every passage he tried to get through was a dead end, and while crossing the Great Basin where he and his party almost died of thirst. It's a magnificent travel account. Also magnificent is the editing by George R. Brooks, which is very full and detailed. There are a couple of decent maps thrown in as well. This book is a major American document in the development of the country.

Few men parallel the exploratory achievements of Jedediah Smith in the western U.S. This journal, written by Smith, illustrates the many hardships and sacrifices one must overcome in order to accomplish those dreams of exploration. Extremes of desert heat, impenetrable mountain snow depths, thirst, hunger, fatigue, momentary disorientations, splatterings of Indian hostilities, indecisions of Mexican officials in Spanish California, etc. were all obstacles to conquer on the road

to uncharted territories. He attempted peace treaties between the Utes and Shoshonies, spent time with the Mohave Indians along the Colorado River (one of the first written accounts of their culture), describes Spanish mission life in southern California, the trek northward encountering Indian animosity, the first crossing of the Sierra Nevadas by a U.S. citizen and finally, the Herculean journey across the Great Basin to the 1827 rendezvous at Bear Lake. We are very fortunate that this journal came to surface as it is of major historical significance. Mr. Brooks' editing is exceptional.

If you like unprocessed, uninterpreted real history, you can't do better than reading original journals of people who experienced it. This treasure of a journal, discovered in an attic just a few decades ago, tells the day-by-day adventures of Jedediah Strong Smith, one of the greatest American western explorers. His travels are second only to Lewis and Clark's in significance for the opening the West. This book is the journal of Smith's first trek to California from the Rockies and back. It is filled with both the excitement of discovery, and the perils of horse-and-foot travel among potential enemies in inhospitable lands. You will read first-hand accounts of near starvation and thirst, of Indian attacks, of mountain blizzards and waterless deserts, of near drownings in rivers, of weary travels over wastelands and mountains, and other accompaniments of exploration in a day without roads, maps, telephones, electricity and fast food. What makes this account so valuable is Jedediah himself. Serious and unpretentious, devoutly Christian and a man of high integrity, Smith was not the stereotypical Mountain Man. In just eight years since joining William Ashley's band of trappers (1824), killed by Indians at age 32, he had traveled most of the Western United States, surviving herculean odds along the way. One unforgettable scene in this journal has Smith meditating to himself atop a peak in the Sierras, after having suffered severe hardships with his men against snow and Indians. He reminisces about the comforts and joys of his childhood home back East, but then in the spirit of true courage, faces the desperate reality of his situation and the fact his men are counting on his leadership. From there he faces several life-and-death struggles getting over the Sierra Nevada (first white man to make the crossing) and across the desolate Great Basin wastelands and back to the Rendezvous near Salt Lake. When he arrives, his friends, who thought him long dead, celebrate by firing a cannon they had carted over the Rockies from St. Louis. [Historical note: within days, Smith was off to California again, this time to suffer even more hardships all the way to Oregon, including two Indian massacres.] This was one of Smith's most important journeys; known previously only by some letters and pieces of the journal, we now have the full account! I'm surprised this book doesn't get more attention; I found it captivating. The

descriptions of Mission San Gabriel, early Pueblo Los Angeles and the Mexican-controlled early California culture are revealing. Having seen the mission today hemmed in by the city, I now have the eyes of Smith and his aide Harrison Rogers (who died the following year in the Umpqua Massacre in Oregon), to see how it must have appeared in 1827. George R. Brooks' helpful footnotes give background information and locations, so that you can follow the route on a map. I think it would make a terrific family vacation to retrace his journey. From your air-conditioned van, along I-40 in desolate eastern California, or along I-80 in Nevada, look out your window and imagine Smith and his weary men in a desperate search for water, as you cover in a half-hour what took them two days. In an age where history is processed through Hollywood tall tale tellers, who don't hesitate to rewrite what happened according to their politically correct biases, we need to get the story straight from the source. (Hmmm, this journal would make a great film epic, though.) We also need to appreciate the courage and fortitude of our pioneers, who accomplished great things with much less. Get a map of the Western states, open this book, and discover America with Jedediah Strong Smith!

Excellent read. A must for those who admire Jedediah Strong Smith. Very happy with this journal.

Excellent experience in every way.

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