



# CASTOR CANADENSIS

Newsletter of the Jedediah Smith Society • University of the Pacific, Stockton, California

FALL 2011

## The Avila Adobe, “The House Jedediah Slept In”

By Joe Molter

While stationed on the East Coast many years ago during my tour of duty with the U.S. Navy, I took advantage of my surroundings and toured as many historic sites as possible. In doing so, I was surprised by the number of plaques and signs I came across attached to various buildings which indicated that some person of historic notoriety had “slept in this house”, with Abraham Lincoln and George Washington having their fair share! Several years ago, prior to a planned visit to Southern California to see relations, I concentrated my research on places I wanted to see, which related to Jedediah Strong Smith’s visits to this area in 1826 & 27. Previously, I had toured the marvelous old San Gabriel Mission, where Jed, on his arrival on November 27, 1826, stated its building had an “ancient and castle-like appearance”<sup>1</sup> and it was here he would be put under house arrest, entangled in Mexican politics until January 18th, 1827. I had traced and followed many miles of the *El Camino Real*, (The Royal Road), the path Jedediah would have taken when summons by the Mexican Governor-General, José Maria Echeandia, to San Diego on December 9th, 1826. I’ve visited several of the same places Jed had visited & stayed, such as Mission San Juan Capistrano, where he and his escorts stopped for a short respite, obtained fresh horses and were “invited to take a cup of Chocolate which the Spaniards are very fond”<sup>2</sup> and the “handsome Mission San Luis Rey,”<sup>3</sup> where he spent the night.

Further research revealed that upon his arrival back from San Diego on January 9th, 1827, the following day at *El Pueblo de la Reina de Los Angeles* (the town of the Queen of Angels) or Los Angeles, Jed states that “I called on my friend Señor Abella and made arrangements for the purchase of horses”<sup>4</sup>. I asked myself, who was this Señor Abella or Avila? With a little back tracking using Jed’s journal, I discovered that he was someone Jed had previously met at San Gabriel Mission and had been invited to stay a night at his home on December 1st, 1826.<sup>5</sup> Jed would also stay with this same gentleman for another five nights from January 11th through the 15th, 1827, in the process of purchasing horses in preparation for their departure from Mexican territory.<sup>6</sup> Don Francisco Avila had

come to Los Angeles from Sinaloa, Mexico, sometime after 1794 and was a prosperous cattle rancher and owner of the *Rancho Las Cienegas*, near present day La Brea Tar Pits, and had become *alcade* (mayor) of Los Angeles in 1810. Seeking further information on Avila, an internet search revealed to my surprise, his adobe had survived up to the present day,



One of the earliest known drawings of The Pueblo of Los Angeles, drawn 20 years after Jed’s visit, but with very little change! Note arrow pointing to the Avila Adobe.

had been restored and was currently open to the public! This was something I really wanted to see and fortunately during that trip, I was able to make a visit!



Front of the Avila Adobe with an very old Pepper Tree.

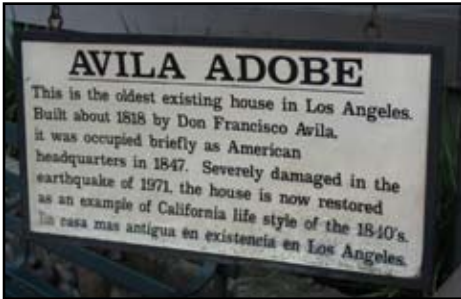
The Avila Adobe is the oldest existing house in Los Angeles, being constructed around 1818. Its location is in the oldest part, the birthplace of this city’s downtown, on Olvera Street, in the historic district of El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historical Monument. It’s a narrow, pedestrian only, Mexican market-place, containing 26 other historic buildings, including

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## The Avila Adobe...

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the 1822 La Placita Church located adjacent to the old plaza. This corridor is chocked with small booths where handcrafted Mexican wares, food and entertainment can be found, giving the visitor a taste of early California. I can remember visiting this street as a child and buying Mexican jumping beans and a brightly colored, small inverted cone of honey tasting candy on a stick!



Sign at the entrance of the Adobe.

but also setting the stage for visiting this historic structure. The Avila Adobe is maintained and managed by the City of Los Angeles and I was surprised to find they didn't charge an admission fee! The present structure has seven rooms surviving from what used to be a much larger building, all being furnished with period antiques or reproductions, with some original Avila artifacts on display. Its whitewashed walls are 2½ to 3 feet thick and are built from ancient, sun baked adobe bricks, with full length porches attached to the front and rear of the adobe. The restoration goal was to create an idea of what the original home was like and my visit gave



The Family Room, were Jedediah probably dined.



The Office, containing many personal belongings of Don Francisco Avila.

The Adobe sits in the middle of the block, but I enjoyed navigating through its maze of vendors, people, smells, and Mexican music, bringing memories of my past visits,

me that feel, not of a stuffy museum collection, but actually being a guest in this home of this warm and gracious family. The largest room, the family room, was a general area for dining, entertainment and social gatherings and I could imagine Jedediah experienced several pleasant moments, enjoying the hospitality of his hosts. The office was the main business room



The Living Room.



One of the sleeping quarters.



The Kitchen. The fireplace was added many years after Jed's visit.

This courtyard had a large garden area and was surrounded by outbuildings consisting of stables and workshops. A large glass covered display case is also a part of the present courtyard, which contains the interesting history of this long lived structure. As part of this display, was a timeline showing the significant, historical events occurring throughout the life of this adobe. I was most pleased when reading the line for 1826, which stated: Jedediah Strong Smith, the fur trapper, had "slept in this house"!



The Courtyard at the rear of the adobe.

for Francisco Avila and was probably where Jed purchased his horses. The *sala* (living room) was reserved for special occasions such as a wedding, baptism, or entertaining special guests.

There were sleeping quarters for the parents and children, as well as for guests, where Jedediah and others would have spent the night.

The kitchen was really more of a food preparation area, with cooking being conducted in domed shaped, earthen ovens located in the spacious courtyard out back.

*Footnotes on page 3*

## The Avila Adobe...

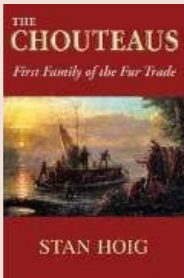
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- <sup>1</sup> Jedediah Strong Smith, George R. Brooks ed. *The Southwest Expedition of Jedediah S. Smith, His Personal Account of the Journey to California, 1826-1827* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 100.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid., 117.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid., 118.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid., 126. Jed was spelling his name exactly how he heard it, not how it really should be spelled, which is Avila.
- <sup>5</sup> Harrison G. Rogers, *Journal of Harrison G. Rogers, member of the company of J.S. Smith, Nov 27, 1826 through Jan 27, 1827*, December 1<sup>ST</sup> & 2<sup>ND</sup>, 1826. Jedediah's interpreter and member of his party, Abraham Laplant, also went along and is presumed to have stayed at Avila's home.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid., TUESDAY, 16<sup>TH</sup>, and Ibid., Smith, "The Southwest Expedition," 127. Harrison Roger, Jedediah's clerk and second-in-command, also stayed at Avila's home, during one of those nights.



The poster features a central illustration of a man on horseback, likely a fur trader, with a rifle. To the right, the text reads: "2012 Fur Trade Symposium. Mark your calendar! Wednesday, Sept. 5 - Saturday, Sept. 8. CELEBRATING THE 200TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE ASTORIANS." Below this, it says "Watch for updates and sign up for the symposium mail list: www.MMMuseum.com/2012". At the bottom right, it lists "MUSEUM OF THE MOUNTAIN MAN, SUBLETTE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY, P.O. BOX 909 • PINEDALE, WY 82941 • 307-367-4101". A small circular logo is also present.

## The Chouteaus: First Family of the Fur Trade By Stan Hoig



Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008. 337 pgs., illus., maps, index, biblio. ISBN 978-0-8263-4347-5. Hardcover, \$29.95.

Reviewed by Aaron Woodard, professor of American History and American and World Government at Kilian Community College in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, who is also the author of *Soft Fur* and *Iron Men: A History of the Fur Trade in South Dakota and the Upper Missouri* (Montgomery, Ala.: E-Booktime, LLC, 2006).

Every empire has founders. Rome had Julius Caesar, France hosted Napoleon and Great Britain featured Cecil Rhodes. Western America also had its share of dynasty makers, but none compares to the remarkable Creole family from St. Louis, the Chouteaus. This extended family of adventurers, entrepreneurs and fur traders forged a trading empire up and down the still unsettled Missouri River Valley, while unknowingly establishing many of the towns and cities that would later spring up to prominence once the fur trade era ended.

Stan Hoig, in what surely will become one of the definitive histories of this family, chronicles the unlikely rise of this biological phenomenon. The central players are two brothers, Auguste and Pierre and their progeny. These two men played central roles in a variety of early episodes in American history. Pierre's sons, particularly Pierre Jr., also known as Cadet, was instrumental in broadening and strengthening the young nations hold over the new western lands, including territory that would later become North and South Dakota. Cadet is regarded as the principal founder of the state capital of South Dakota, Pierre. He is also responsible for introducing steamboat travel into the Upper Missouri as a way to supply his distant fur trading posts such as Fort Pierre and Fort Union. These same steamboats, proved practical by Chouteau, would later carry thousands of settlers into the virgin lands of the Missouri River Valley.

The Chouteau family was not without its warts. Hoig notes that most of the Chouteau family owned slaves, whether African-American or Indians. They were utilized in many aspects of the Chouteau's lives from domestics to freight workers. The Chouteaus also produced a number of half-breed children in and out of marriage which as Hoig notes was a contradiction in character for these devout Catholics.

However, Hoig disagrees with the standard view of the Chouteaus as selfish, egotistical capitalists and notes that many of their ventures were conducted honestly and that at least one Chouteau, Auguste Pierre, was known as a friend to the Osage Indians with whom he dealt. Hoig notes that American society at this time was generally intent on exploiting Native Americans and that the Chouteaus were not any worse than many others who dealt with Indians in business. This is probably an apt observation.

The book contains a few chronological errors (the historic second trip of the steamboat Yellowstone is dated, correctly, as 1832 on p. 170, but incorrectly as 1833 on p. 173; the date a group of Osage Indians visited St. Louis is given as 1827 and again as 1927 on p. 113) but is historically sound despite them.

Hoig does an excellent job of fairly portraying this complicated family without exercising biased judgment, thereby allowing readers to make their own conclusions. One historic conclusion is inescapable however-England was hungry for these areas and the trade they offered and without entrepreneurs like the Chouteaus, who brought the power of the United States to bear on the desolate unsettled lands of the Missouri River Valley, the rise of the United States as a global power would have been doubtful.

## INVITE A FRIEND TO JOIN

Jedediah Smith Society membership is open to all who wish to join in support of research, preservation and information about the 1st American arriving overland 1826 and other California pioneers of the 18th & 19th centuries.

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### Jedediah Smith's Holster Pistol



In response to the article we ran in the last issue of the *Cas-tor* on the same subject, Jim Hardee, one of our members wrote that the Cody Firearms Museum/Buf-falo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming, has recently acquired a percussion pistol that allegedly once belonged to Jedediah Smith! Jim contacted the museum and they responded with this: "Yes, we do have a percussion pistol that is al-legedly one of the guns that belonged to Jedediah Strong

Smith and that he may have had in his possession when he was killed." Further on in their response they said: "The brass butt cap of the gun is inscribed "Jedediah Strong Smith" and both the butt cap and inscription are original to the gun." They go on to say that the origin and condition of the gun had been confirmed by a prominent firearms authority, whose report/appraisal is not available to the general public because it's the exclusive property of its owner. Jim wants to view this gun, which is on display at the museum, but would also like to see the report/appraisal at the same time, which the museum is currently trying to get approval. With winter snows starting to fly, getting to the museum will be difficult, so stand-by till spring for an update on this interesting bit of information pertaining to Jed's pistol!



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Dues will expire Jan 1<sup>st</sup>

