



CASTOR CANADENSIS

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

FALL 2012

Jedediah Smith's Contributions to Early Western Botanical Science, Confirmed!

By Joe J. Molter

In reading the existing journals and letters of Jedediah Strong Smith, one gets a sense of Jed's close and accurate observations in his descriptions of geographic features of those newly explored western lands he was passing through, but it also becomes apparent he utilized the same careful observations in his documentation of ethnological, zoological and botanical discoveries. Within today's available literature, it's his geographic explorations that are emphasized, with little to no mention of his contributions to those previously mentioned sciences. Jed wasn't trained as a scientist and would be termed basically as an amateur, but his observations were done with care and attention, and with a degree of passion and enthusiasm. The word "amateur" is clearly derived from the Latin source, *amator* and its Latin derived French source, *amateur*, both meaning "lover, devotee, enthusiastic pursuer of an objective,"¹ something Jed exhibited in all areas of his explorations. I was vaguely aware of some of these contributions until I read Dale Morgan and Carl Wheat's book: **Jedediah Smith and his Maps of the American West.**² Not only does this book do an excellent job describing Jed's routes, based on the discovery of the "Fremont-Gibbs-Smith" map in 1953, but also includes a full chapter on "Smith's Scientific Contributions." Within that chapter, a letter written by Jedediah was introduced for the first time, written not long after his arrival in St. Louis after spending over eight years in the wilds of the Rocky Mountains and the West. This was a transmittal letter of plant seeds and specimens that Jed had collected during his previous travels, which up until this time has been regarded with some skepticism due to its poor provenance and lack of certain pertinent facts dealing with to whom it was sent! I will show in the following documentation that this letter was truly written by Jedediah Strong Smith and reveal the actual person it was written to. Its story of where it was found and those associated with it are an interesting tale which reveals some truths and creates additional mysteries.



St. Louis, Missouri, 27th December, 1830.

Dear Sir - During my travels of nine years in the country of the sources of the Missouri River and in the Territory of Mexico and the United States, west of the Rocky Mountains, and on the coast of the Pacific, I have at different times gathered the seeds of such shrubs and plants as appears peculiar to that country. Some of these may claim consideration from their inherent qualities, and others may find a place in the gardens of the curious from the fact that they are natives of the most distant and wild territory of our Republic. It may perhaps be a pleasure to a lady of the Atlantic to gather Cherries or Currants from a shrub whose parent stock is now growing by the bank of a stream that flows unmarked by the eye of civilized man to the calm Pacific. A few samples I inclose to you, in the hope that you will make such a disposition of them that I may in some future time see them blooming in the gardens of the Atlantic. The different parcels are numbered and of each I give a short description.

No. 1. Large black gooseberry, found on the head of the Platte, in wet ground, in the vicinity of springs that burst from the sides of the mountains; where the soil is rich they grow well in the shade. Ripen there about the first of September. Entirely smooth.

No. 2. The Seria Berry, gathered on an eastern spur of the Rocky Mountains, northern declivity and clay soil, ripe about the last of August. A fine fruit, the shrub about 5 or 6 feet high. Size of the Fox Grape.

No. 3. Choke Cherries of a superior kind; they are found in all parts of the mountains, in the rich soil of the valleys of creeks and rivers. The shrub is from 4 to 7 feet high; in the middle of August when ripe, the berry is a most beautiful purple, and about the size of the Fox grape. Yield abundantly.

No. 4. The Yellow Currant found on the sources of the Missouri and Platte, on the eastern declivity of the mountains found in the vicinity of springs and

The letter is as follows:

Rivers where the soil is good. The shrub larger than the common currant; ripe about the 15th of August; they are larger than any current cultivated in the United States. An acquisition to the housewife.

No. 5. The Black Currant, the fruit and shrub much like the Yellow, with the exception of the color; found in the Black hills.

No. 6. The Buffalo Berry, found in the Black hills in gravelly soil along the water courses. The berry when ripe, about the middle of August is a beautiful red. The shrub, about 5 or 6 feet high, is of the kind which is supposed would make a good hedge.

No. 7. The Scented Grass-seed. This grass is found on the west side of the Rocky Mountains, on the Columbia river. Grows in damp ground; should be cut before ripe, when it is peculiarly fragrant.

No. 8. Leaves of the Scented Wood. Grow on the western coast, south of the mouth of the Columbia. The tree has a resemblance to the apple tree, the largest about eighteen inches in diameter. They may perhaps be restored to their original fragrance. I am not certain that the wood is fragrant, but know bark and leaves to be so. The tree is an evergreen. I procured seeds, but lost them.

I must request that you would do me the favor to acknowledge the receipt of the package, directing to this place.

If in my future journeys to the west, I could make any collections that would be interesting I shall do it with great pleasure.

I am, Sir, your most obedient,

J.S. SMITH.³

This letter, though not the original hand written one from Jed, was a transcription discovered by Dr. Dorsett, a collector in marine history, in 1938 from a San Francisco Bay area book dealer. It had been copied on the back pages of a journal belonging to a Midshipman John Cremer, documenting his cruise aboard United States ship Franklin. Sadly John lost his life along with five other officers and two seamen on either March 19th or 20th, 1822, after leaving the ship for the purpose of visiting a small town 20 miles from Valparaiso, Chile.⁴ The dealer selling this document stated that it had been found “in the attic of the first house built in Oakland,”⁵ which lies across the Bay from San Francisco.

At the time of Dorsett’s acquisition of this document, the first frame house to be built in Oakland was still standing and was considered to be built by Moses Chase, a sea fairing man from Boston who came to mine gold in 1849. Becoming ill in the gold fields, he moved down to the Oakland area to set up his tent. Buying the lands which he had previously leased from the Spanish family of Don Luis Maria Peralta, he built a

small home which later was assimilated into a larger structure. Others came to live here also and not long after in 1852 that settlement was incorporated as a town and in 1854 it was chartered as a city. The name of that city was suggested by the grove of oaks in which these first houses were built.⁶ This original house was continually occupied by Moses Chase’s dependents up until the late 1920’s and appears to have been torn down in 1946, concluding over 95 years of service as a dwelling.

Why this letter was written in the back of this journal and why this journal was in the hands of the Chase family are quite puzzling. You would think on the death of Midshipman John Cremer, that his effects would have been given to his next of kin, that being his mother Mary (Cremer) Burdeen or Bodine of Baltimore, Maryland. The connection between the Chase family and John Cremer and how his journal came to be out west, has not been determined and why after eight years or more, someone would copy Jedediah’s letter of 1830, along with another item pertaining to “the culture of peach trees”, onto the back pages of that journal!

When I first read about this transcription, I thought to myself: “wouldn’t be nice if it could confirm that Jedediah Strong Smith actually wrote this letter” and show that this gifted amateur was making a conscious effort to add to the young and still rapidly evolving science of botany. Morgan and Wheat gave me my first clues where to start looking when they mentioned that the adjoining transcription with Jed’s letter appeared to have been “copied from a published source” and “that might imply that the Jedediah Smith letter was itself also copied from a published source, but whether a botanical periodical, an agricultural paper, or a general newspaper is an open question.”⁷ Through the marvels of the internet and some persistence, I was able to find that source!

I found Jed’s letter published in **THE NEW ENGLAND FARMER AND HORTICULTURAL JOURNAL, VOL. IX, 1831, BOSTON** on pages 282 and 283, under the title of: *An Account of the Proceedings of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, at a meeting held at the Hall of Institution, on the 19th of March, 1831.*⁸ This society describes itself as the oldest, formally-organized horticultural institution in the United States and was established in 1829; surprisingly it is still in existence today! Within the context of these minutes, it is mentioned that “*among the numerous letters which have been received are following, which merit the special attention of the Society.*” It was the third letter that caught my eye!

3. A letter from John S. Skinner, Esq. of Baltimore, accompanied by a package of seeds, from Western America, with a letter from the adventurous J.S. Smith, Esq. of St Louis, containing a description of the plants from which the seeds were obtained.

Continued on page 3

Baltimore Post Office, 21st Feb. 1831.

Sir - If I have been slow to acknowledge it permit me to assure you that I am not the less proud of the honors you announced to me of my having been elected an Honorary Member of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society. But the pleasure of being thus associated, even by name, with gentlemen of science and efficient patriotism is accompanied by an unfeigned consciousness of my inability to make any adequate return to the Society.

The only contribution I have now to offer consists of seeds of hitherto uncultivated plants, recently received from regions far West which may afford valuable additions to the horticultural products of Massachusetts, if by careful efforts they can be gradually accommodated to your so much more northern climate. I leave to the better judgment of the Society to say how far the prospect of success may warrant the trouble of experiment; and only beg leave to add that whatever may be the value of the result, it is to Mr. Smith, who made the collection, and whose description accompanies this, that will be due the thanks of the Society; while a high appreciation of its objects, and a readiness to co-operate most cordially for their attainment in my humble way, are the only claims that can be offered for its consideration.

*Your most obedient servant,
J.S. Skinner.*

John Stuart Skinner, the one who Jedediah sent his letter to, was an interesting man. He was an American lawyer who began practicing law as an attorney, at the age of twenty-one in 1809. He served in the War of 1812 as a Colonel and was given a special assignment by President Madison, along with Francis Scott Key, to negotiate the release of Dr. William Beanes aboard the British flagship *Tonnant*, anchored in the Chesapeake Bay. Before they were allowed to leave, they witnessed the British bombardment of Fort Mchenry and Skinner was with Key when he penned the words to the poem that became our American national anthem, "The Star Spangled Banner." Skinner was postmaster of Baltimore from 1816 until 1849 and at one time chief of the Agricultural Bureau of the U.S. Patent and Trademark office. He was also a publisher and editor, establishing several publications, one being the "American Farmer," the first agricultural journal in the United States to attain prominence.⁹ It is unknown if Jed was an acquaintance of Skinner or if he became aware of Skinners' agricultural and botanical expertise through one of the available publications in St. Louis at that time.

Following the above cover letter of J.S Skinner was the copy of Jed's transmittal letter which has been reproduced earlier in this text. Beneath this transmittal letter was the title block stating: *The following resolutions were adopted.* Three resolutions were stated, in which the second and third pertained to Jedediah. These resolutions are as stated:

2. Resolved, that the thanks of the Society be presented to John S. Skinner, Esq. of Baltimore, for the very acceptable present of seeds, obtained in the regions near the sources of the Missouri, and west of the Rocky Mountains.

3. Resolved, that the Secretary be directed to transmit copies of the foregoing resolutions to the gentlemen therein named.

As it is desirable that the rare varieties of foreign and native fruits should be speedily and extensively cultivated, it is suggested, that collections of scions should be made, and placed in charge of the Executive Committee, for distribution, at some future meeting; and that notice be given, in the new England Farmer, of the kinds, and the time when they will be offered to the members of the Society.

It is deemed expedient that the Committees on fruits, vegetables and flowers, announce, in the New England Farmer, when the exhibitions of those products will commence, at the hall of the Society.

There is one more post within these minutes of this Horticultural Society pertaining to when the seeds that Jed sent were to be distributed. It states:

The seeds presented by Mr. Skinner were ordered to be distributed by lot to subscribers, (along with others that may arrive) on Saturday next, the 26th inst., at 12 o'clock.

We now know for sure, that Jedediah was making a conscience effort in collecting plant specimens to further the limited knowledge of western botany and to benefit and enjoyment of the public. We have evidence through his confirmed transmittal letter and the documentation found in the above Horticultural Journal that these specimens were actually sent and received with the same intentions by a person and a society that was well qualified for this purpose. It appears from Jedediah's own words that there were probably other collections that were lost, most likely occurring due to the successive disasters his party incurred and one ponders what other specimens might have been sent by him if his life hadn't been shortened at such a young age. Further research is needed to determine if his seeds were actually viable and eventually grew and if "descendants of these plants may still grow today in some botanical garden, distinguished in their relation to the first botanical collections ever made in the Rocky Mountains south of the track of Lewis and Clark."¹⁰

Footnotes:

1. The Free Dictionary by Farlex, www.thefreedictionary.com
2. Morgan, Dale L. and Wheat, Carl I., *Jedediah Smith and his Maps of the American West* (California Historical Society, San Francisco, CA, 1954). It's sad this excellent source is scarce, only 530 copies, thus greatly reducing its accessibility for research and creating ridiculous resale prices!

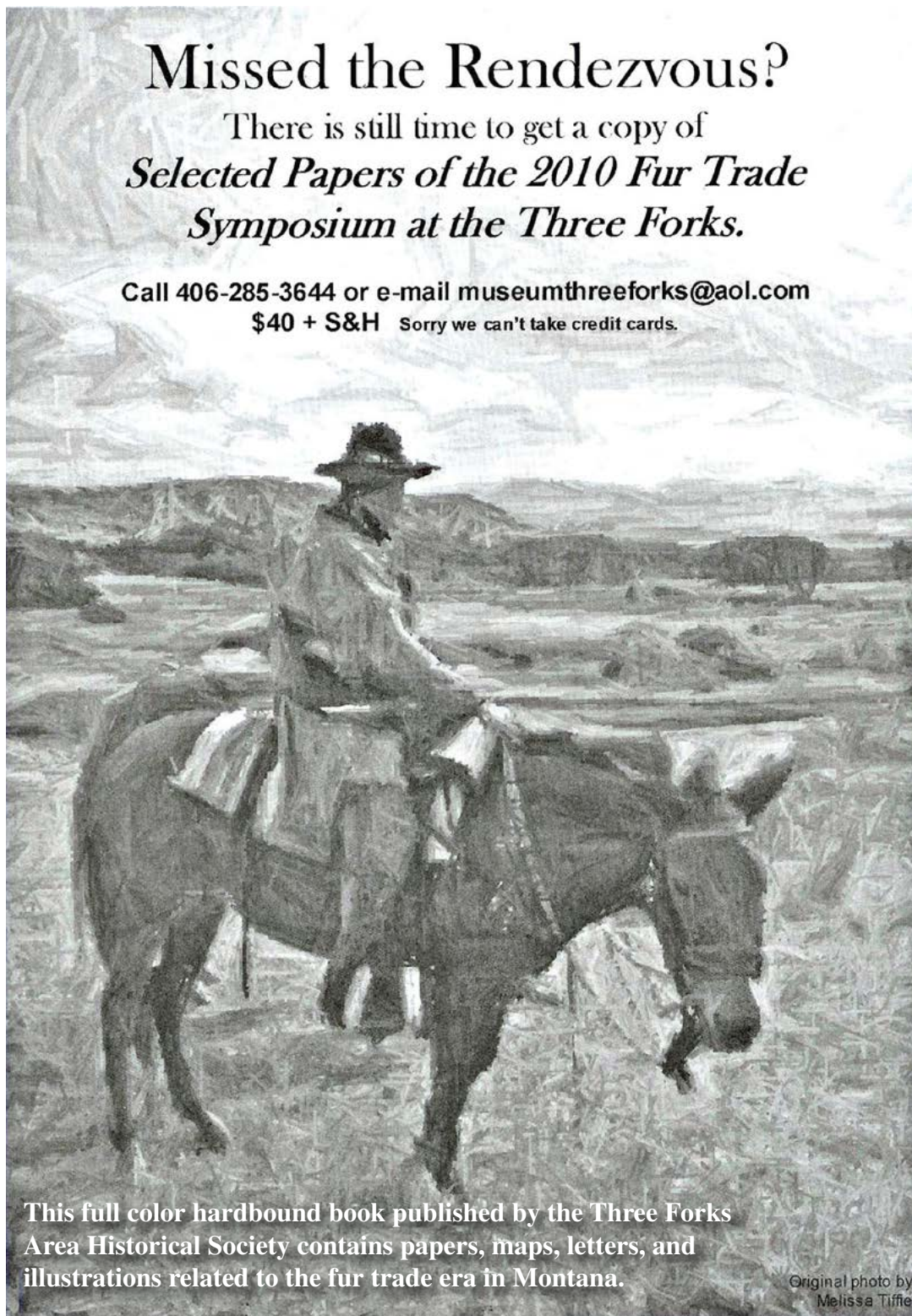
3. This version of Jedediah transmittal letter is not the exact copy produced in the book referenced in footnote # 2 that was found in the back of the Cremer journal, but a close facsimile which came from another source to be explained further in the text. This reproduced version reads easier due to less grammatical errors which the original introduced copy has, possibly by the hand of the person transcribing it.

4. *Melancholy* (Palmyra, N.Y. Western Farmer 1821-1822) <http://fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html>.
5. Morgan and Wheat, *Jedediah*, p. 84. footnote 3.
6. Note from the Chase Chronicles. *Old California City* (Boston Sunday Post, January 31, 1932).
7. Morgan and Wheat, *Jedediah*, p. 84. footnote 3.
8. Jedediah's letter can also be found in the following: *American Farmer*, Vol. 12, 1830-31 and Vol. 13, 1831-32.
9. Wikipedia, *John Stuart Skinner*.
10. Morgan and Wheat, *Jedediah*, p. 86.

Missed the Rendezvous?

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Melissa Tiffie

NOTICE FROM THE INTERIM EDITOR

Since the passing of our Director, Al Clover, almost two years ago, I've been trying to keep our newsletter continuing on a regular schedule. This task has become more problematic for me and I'm seeking someone to fill this much needed position. Please contact the Society if you have an interest and also if you have a paper or a related announcement you would like to see published.

Thank you.
Joe J. Molter

FALL RENDEZVOUS 2012



JSS Members at the Water Temple



The beautiful Water Temple in Sunol Valley



Presenting John Talbot the "Old Griz Service Award" with daughter & JSS Board



Mission San Jose where Jed was detained in 1827



Lunch in the barn at the Koopman Ranch



The Alviso Adobe, built in 1854



Our speaker and host, Tom Koopman



The Sunol Valley, which Jed passed through in 1827

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.

Student	\$10.00	Individual	\$20.00
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Details to follow



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Dues will expire Jan 1st

