



CASTOR CANADENSIS

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

FALL 2015

The Fur Trade

(Continued from Summer 2015)

BY HOWARD C. LEWIS

Now that we have looked at the fur industry, let's zero in on the political activities during the period of 1800 to 1850.

Just prior to 1800, the political situation was undergoing serious changes.

- A. Prior to 1802, when the Americans stepped across the Mississippi River, they were on foreign ground, in hostile territory.
- B. The Spanish territory—of the Louisiana Purchase—was virtually without government and what little government there was—was dispensed from local alcaldes or equivalents. Enforcement of the Spanish laws was non-existent.
- C. It was not until 1819 that an agreement was reached with Spain as to the 42nd parallel that confirmed the absence of Spanish rule north of that line. The 42nd is the southern line of Oregon and Idaho.
- D. It was not until June 15, 1846, that the Oregon Territory boundary treaty was signed by President Polk setting the U.S./Canadian line at the 49th parallel. This had the effect of kicking the British, French and Hudson Bay Company out of Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, and Minnesota.
- E. The background of the Louisiana Purchase, though interesting, need not be repeated here. Let it suffice to say that Carlos IV of Spain had not considered the seriousness of the separate threats of the English and Americans. Carlos was attempting to govern and defend vast territories over immense distances with no money and few troops. History also tells us that the mechanics of Spanish government were missing.
- F. Spain had declared war on England in 1796. Carlos IV had stretched his government beyond its limits. In fear of an immediate invasion of the Louisiana Territory by the British, Spain secretly returned the area to France in 1800.

G. When the transfer to France was discovered by Thomas Jefferson, he convinced the Congress it was time to act. Napoleon needed the money, and the Louisiana Purchase was completed in 1802.

H. Eventually, in 1846, the U.S. wrested the balance of the territories west of the Rockies and south of the 42nd parallel from Mexico. The area included the entire southwest portion of the U.S. except for the Gadsen Purchase which came much later.

Through the period 1800 to 1850, there were many changes in the western part of North America, involving very substantial transactions in lands that were comparatively devoid of population. There were no surveys. The government was without factual data of any kind. There were few people in the Louisiana, Oregon, and California territories who were not trappers or former trappers. For instance, in this central area of California, we had only a few non-trappers, such as:

Thomas Oliver Larkin, Robert Livermore, John Sutter, John Marsh, John Bidwell, Charles Weber and a few others. Most of the men just named became established during the later portion of that 50-year period—actually after 1835. Such men, who had been dealing with trappers and their kind, had an important part of structuring the first governments of each of the territories. Most of the first politicians, mayors, and local representatives were former trappers—except in California, where ex-gold miners were in plentiful supply.

In 1803, President Jefferson sent Lewis & Clark to the Pacific slopes to discover what the United States had purchased from France, and what was beyond the Continental Divide.

After the Louisiana Purchase, Americans could and did move into the west, being careful to identify the boundary with Mexico. Or, if beyond the line, they also had to avoid Spanish or Mexican authorities. They trapped and settled, as their bravery and ideals dictated.

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Not until after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1846, due to the Mexican rule, could American settlers safely establish themselves in the west unless they stayed close to established forts, trappers, and mountain men who had learned to live around and with Mexican rule and the Indian tribes.

Before 1846, some persons, such as the Bents, Kit Carson, and our own Charles Weber, John Sutter, and others, played (nominally) with the Mexican rules. Those men became Mexican citizens (on paper) and conformed to the Mexican customs. They acquired land, traded, and served the needs of others like them.

Finally, after the Treaty with Mexico in 1846, Americans could go freely into California and the West without fear of Mexican reprisals. Until then, only the Catholic padres and certain other individuals who became Mexican citizens could legally own land or reside in California.

It appears that many of the local settlers were former fur trappers and their camp followers. They provided the people and the demands for government and services, which dictated the extent of political representation and therefore, the structure of government.

Back to the Rocky Mountain Trappers Rendezvous

During the years 1825 to 1840, the American trappers provided some of the best known names of the Rocky Mountain fur trade. Those individuals, and the annual fur trade rendezvous have been written about and romanticized until the stories have overshadowed and obscured the economic purpose and logistical problems.

Let's take a quick look at the romanticized rendezvous during the years 1825 to 1840.

The Rocky Mountain Rendezvous was started by William Ashley, to fulfill a definite economic need. Ashley hired men to trap for furs, instead of relying on local Indians to bring the furs in. This concept of independent, non-Indian trappers was a sharp contrast to the methods of Hudson Bay, the Montreal group, and Astor's American Fur Company.

Independent trappers had no way of purchasing needed supplies, or marketing their annual catch of furs. They lived in the mountains. A "trip to town" required a minimum of 70 days each way. With a little additional time for drinking, the turn-around time was about 180 days, or half of a year. Plus, if he went alone, he was extremely vulnerable to Indian attack and the loss of his hair. The rendezvous brought the necessary supplies to the trapper and provided a market for his furs. Especially—it relieved

him (the trapper) of the work and risk of taking the furs to St. Louis or Santa Fe, which were the closest markets.

The first Rocky Mountain Rendezvous was held on Henry's Fork of the Green River in 1825. The last rendezvous was in 1840. For 15 years, pack trains and later, wagons, made the trip to the rendezvous sites to provide the trade goods, which were the "center piece" of those 2 weeks of drinking, carousing, sporting events, and visiting. The rendezvous was an annual reunion or vacation of the people of the fur gathering industry.

Let's refer again to the rendezvous logistics—1,250 miles from St. Louis to the Green River. Recall, if you will, that this has already been discussed under the subject of transportation. There was a minimum of 70 days lead time. This meant leaving St. Louis not later than April 15th. There were no roads. They had to average 20 miles per day—7 days per week for 70 days. Think again about packing and unpacking, saddling and unsaddling over 125 animals every day for 70 days.

It is recorded that in 1834, a milk cow walks from St. Louis to the rendezvous and then walked back to St. Louis. Rationally, we can only assume that the exercise had made her so "tough" that no one would have eaten her, if converted to table use.

Very little has been written about the economics of the rendezvous era. Authors have primarily written about the people. The available archival records such as diaries, logs, correspondence, directives, and governmental records do not reflect the financial aspects with any degree of continuity or accuracy.

Let's just mention some additional business aspects of the 1825-1840 rendezvous period.

- A. William Ashley was eminently successful. When he sold out in 1826, it was "at the right time." When he withdrew from most of the fur trade, he was that day's equivalent of a multi-millionaire.
- B. John Jacob Astor organized and developed the American Fur Company into one of the largest companies in the western hemisphere. His operation was efficient, yet simple. His administration was, for the most part, his writing of letters, directives and working politically. Astor amassed a fortune from the fur trade. The activities of the Astor fortunes need not be discussed here, but they are a direct result of the fur trade.
- C. Pierre Chouteau and the various Chouteau organizations of St. Louis, and elsewhere, were the principal

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suppliers to the Rocky Mountain and western fur trade. The Chouteaus were the largest entrepreneurs in St. Louis for many years. Pierre was known as the French fur man. The St. Louis docks were active receiving trade goods destined for the fur trade areas. The Chouteaus controlled the largest banking houses in St. Louis. All goods were shipped to the mountains on credit to be repaid with the furs acquired. The extension of credit was their way of insuring that the furs would be traded back to them, which in turn made Chouteau the largest fur wholesaler on the Mississippi, which in turn insured to them a preference by the British where the furs were shipped in exchange for English manufactured trade goods. Virtually, all goods which moved over the Santa Fe Trail were provided and financed by the Chouteau organizations. The economic fall out of such operations is obvious. The initial development of the St. Louis port, business area and transportation system was a direct result of the initial stimulus due to the fur trade. St. Louis was the first recognized financial center in the Midwest.

- D. Missouri is famous for its mules. The mule trade developed in that area. Mules were needed to power the freighting and packing of goods to Santa Fe, Green River, and all points west. Incidentally, after mules had provided power toward the west, they also provided a portable fresh meat supply. In those days, keeping mule meat refrigerated on the hoof at 100 plus minus degrees Fahrenheit was an important step toward feeding the men. Note: It was the Missouri mule industry that, in later years, provided much of the motive power for the Civil War.
- E. Many of the cities and towns of the Midwest and West developed on the camp sites of the fur trappers. The railroads, roads, and later highways were first built on or along the trails established by the trappers—especially, those trails over the mountain passes where the roadways had been cleared and developed by the trappers and traders.
- F. The trappers gave their names to hundreds of towns, lakes, rivers, mountain passes, mountain ranges, and individual mountain peaks. Those who have read the history of the fur trade recognize many names as they look over maps of the central and western United States.

- G. It seems appropriate to mention the traders' method of doing business. There was no such thing as money in the mountains. Money was worthless. Beaver pelts entitled you to an amount of value determined by weight and quality. Trade goods were quoted in terms of so many "Made-Beaver."

Any excess credit or charge was entered into the trader's account book and the trapper's personal diary, if he maintained one. It was not uncommon for a trapper to build a credit at the rendezvous, which was then owed to him by the trader who disappeared toward St. Louis. Eventually, the trapper would get to St. Louis and collect the money, "if he kept his hair on." Otherwise, the person who settled the trapper's estate, using the diary or log book, would put in a sight draft against the trader to obtain the funds.

The traders developed reputations for honesty. It was one of the trader's most honored possessions. Some of the established traders paid small unjust drafts rather than risk the bad publicity, had he reneged.

An overview of the trapper's business methods demonstrates why the "clerk" was such an important person in the trader's establishment. The neatness, accuracy and overall quality of the bookkeeping was an important element of assuring collectibility of the trader's charge accounts, and holding the trader free from unnecessary questions or challenges.

The mountain trader's system was unique to its time, but some of today's banking procedures have their roots in the fur trader's methods.

While talking of economic influences, with tongue in cheek, it is only fair to consider the librarians, archivists, researchers, authors, and bookstore proprietors who would now be deprived of jobs were it not for the fur trade,

In conclusion: this brief overview of the fur trade and a few of the related economics has been too brief and too hurried. Any discussion of the fur trade covers so many facets of the total period and industry that it is impossible to have a meaningful conversation, until the parties establish some specifics as to when, where and who. Yet, most people in our society think of the fur trade as a very romantic time with fairly well-defined specifics as to where and when, i.e. the Rocky Mountains 1800-1850.

THE END

Castor Announcements

From the *Castor* Editor - Ed Sieckert

The *Castor* is evolving and as we move forward you will see some new changes. This is the last section of the Howard C. Lewis article. We are reviewing some of the new manuscripts submitted and they will be printed in 2016. Please note: The *Castor Canadensis* is not responsible for either the research or opinions of our writers.

Editorial review committee, Joe Molter, Wayne Knauf, Darrell Thomas, and Irene Steiner



Members' Section

New Members We welcome these members!

Steve Beck, Sutters Fort State Historic Park
Sacramento, CA

Nathan Crum, Lodi, CA

Sarah Lucy, La Jolla, CA

Interests: Jedediah Smith and the Fur Trade

Donor List & New Member

Sponsor Level

Timothy Hickson, Sacramento, CA

Interests: Jed Smith, Fur Trade & the Mountain Man

Web Site

The Jedediah Smith Web site is coming along well and the Board of Directors will see the final draft in late September. We expect to roll this new version out in late October. Irene Steiner, *Soler Graphics*, and Joe Molter have been working on this diligently since our spring meeting. I know you will enjoy it when released.

Publications - CD Web project



Most of the JSS publications on the web site are out of print. It was decided to place each item on a CD in an Adobe format, with a nice CD photo and title cover. In this manner we can offer historians, JSS members and the public a

copy. These will be offered for sale from the business office. This will not be available until the Web site is up and running. Irene Steiner has done a great job on putting this together and we thank her for the valuable expertise.

Here is an example of one of the CDs offered on our new website.

Future Events

Keep these dates on your calendar for 2016:

1. **May 2016** - Jed's Route over the Sierras, from Oakdale to Bear Valley. This trip we will travel by bus from Stockton will have a number of stops from along the route with stops to discuss his journal entries. Lunch and presentation at Bear Valley.
2. **October 8, 2016** - The 60th Anniversary Rendezvous celebration to be held at Micky Grove, San Joaquin Historical Society and Museum in Lodi, CA. Jim Hardee will be our key note speaker. More details in the next newsletter.
3. **Oct 15-17, 2015** - California Conference of Historical Societies Fall Symposium in Redding
See web site for schedule and papers.

Events of Other Societies

San Bernardino County Museum

Joe Molter shared this information on Mountain Men who came to Southern California. "Turn left at the Rockies" exhibit will introduce visitors to the "Mountain Men" who came to Southern California between 1828 and 1850. The exhibit runs from Feb. 7 to the end of 2015. This museum is located at 2014 Orange Tree Lane, Redlands, CA. For more detailed information contact www.sbcountymuseum.org.

Museum of the Mountain Man, Pinedale, WY

The movie "Revenant" is about a fur trapper played by Leo Di Caprio and is based on a true story about Hugh Glass. It is set in the 1820's and the plot revolves around how he was attacked by a bear and they had to choose whether to leave him behind, (almost dead) or bring him with them. Two men stayed behind to look after him, but then they buried him alive basically. Mr. Glass crawled across this huge portion of the country to a get a revenge on them. Also starring Will Poulter, Lukas Haas and Tom Hardy. The movie is set to release 12/25/2015. Filmed in Libby, Montana and Canada. The museum contributed information on the fur trappers and the period of activity and exploration.

(Source: *Francisco Salazar, journalist, Latin Post.com*)



The Fall 2015 Rendezvous

November 7, 2015

The 2015 Fall Rendezvous is around the corner November 7, 2017 at Sutter's Fort. If you know someone who is interested in History invite them to join us. Rich Cimino, Wayne Knauf and I met with Sutter's Fort Staff to review, the presentation, meal, and fort tour and it will be something to look forward too.

Location	Sutter's Fort, Sacramento, CA, 2701 "L" Street	
Time	2:00 - 4:00 pm	Board Meeting - Distillery Room
	4:00 - 4:15 pm	General Membership Meeting <i>(At the sound of the bell)</i> - Distillery Room
	4:20- 5:00 pm	Speaker - Mr. Steve Beck* Title: "Fur Trappers and the Sutter's Fort
	5:00 - 6:00pm	Members will enjoy walking around the Fort to see exhibits and see live demonstrations by Sutter's Fort docents
	6:00pm	Dinner Buffet Style - Outside <i>(In cases of rain, it will be held in the Distillery Rm)</i>
Parking	Parking on the weekend on the surface street is good.	



* Steve Beck is Sutter's Fort Director of History and Educational Programming. He currently is involved in a Living History Program where students attend a Trappers Camp at Red Bluff and Chico. He has written several monographs on the history and anthropology of the Sacramento Region including the Donner Party, Bear Flag Revolt, and John Sutter and his relationship with the Indigenous People of Sacramento Valley. He has also appeared on the Discovery Channel and History Channel. He has received cable television WAVE award for "The Donner Party" amongst many other awards.

Please welcome him at the Jedediah Smith Society Fall 2015 Rendezvous.

Steve Beck in Fur Trapper attire at the Trappers Camp

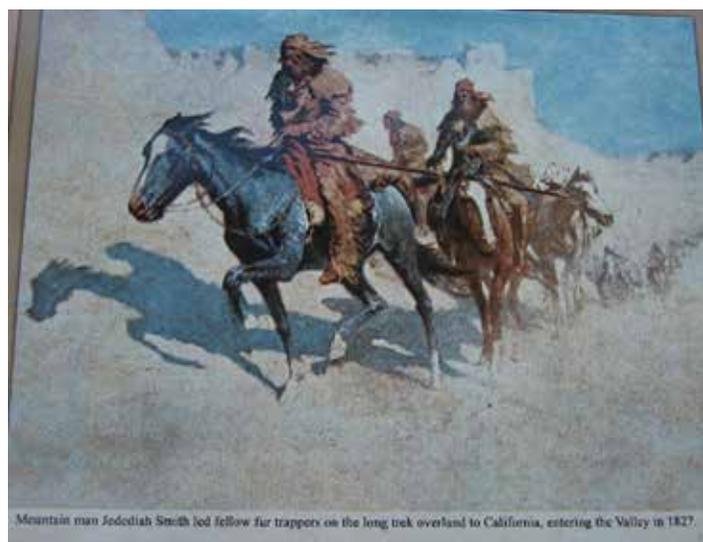
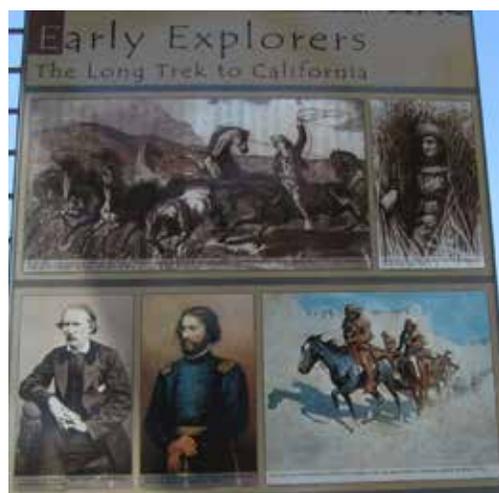
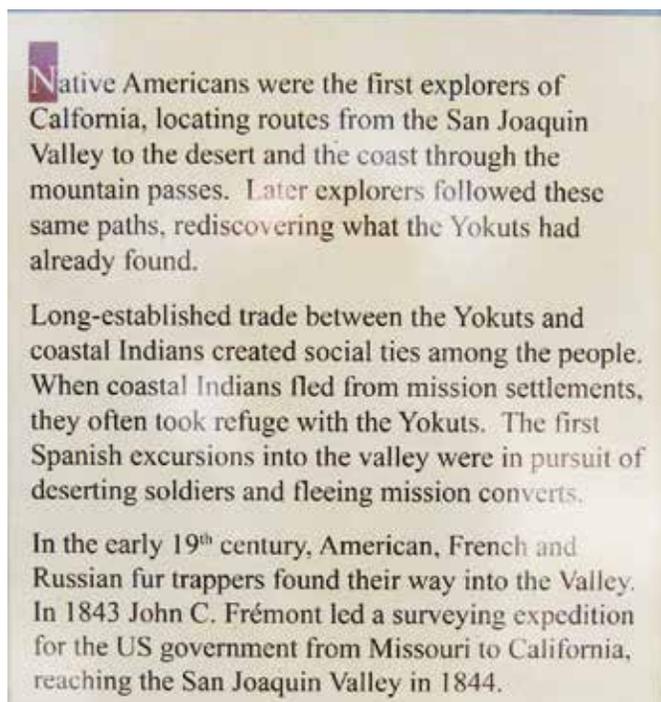
Monuments and Sites

Each edition we will feature a site where Jedediah Smith traveled by or camped nearby. If you have a photo and a small write up you would like entered please submit to the editor.

The Summer edition featured the Flat Head House Marker on the Clark River in Montana. Submitted by Jim Smith of Helena.

Phillip S. Raines Rest Stop on CA 99

This edition we feature an interpretative display at Off Ramp 80 at the Cal Trans Phillip Raines Rest Area. It is located ½ way between Bakersfield and Fresno. The displays are 5 feet by 8 and feature early agricultural activities, explorers, and commercial development in the Southern San Joaquin Valley of California. This display of 20 separate units is well done and one of them features the early travels of Jedediah Strong Smith (See Photo).



If you are going north from Los Angeles through Bakersfield this is a must stop to see this well done display of history.

Archives Corner

If you are researching Jedediah Smith the following list will help you.

- 1926 A. S. Nasatir, Historical Society of Southern California
- 1976 Don Chase, Jedediah Smith Society
- 1990 Virginia Struhsaker, Jedediah Smith Society

These are available at University of the Pacific, Holt-Atherton Library, Special Collections.

Word of the Day Foofarrah

What does this word have in relation to Jedediah Smith?

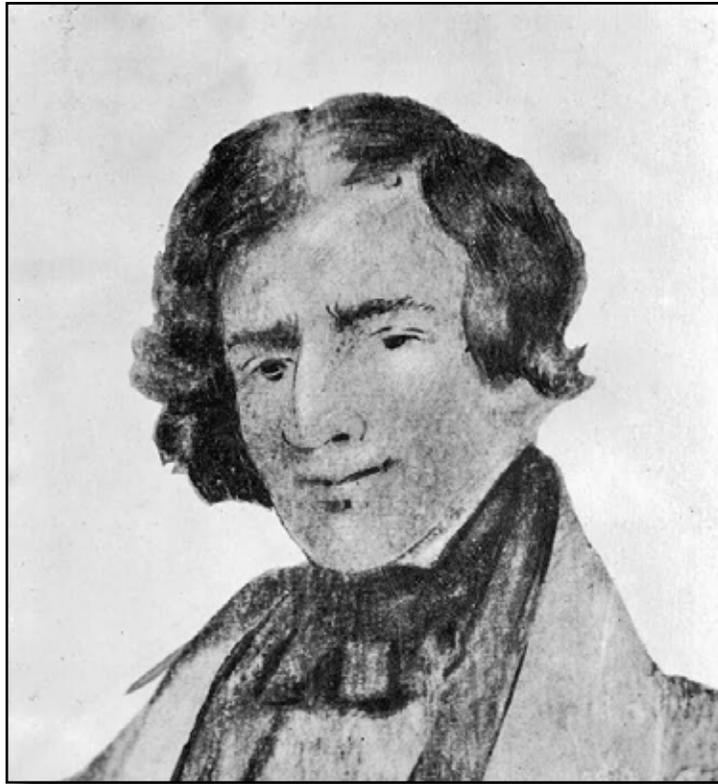
INVITE A FRIEND TO JOIN

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
Sponsor \$50.00	Patron \$100.00

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Please make check payable to: JEDEDIAH SMITH SOCIETY
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Your dues will expire Jan 1, 2016