CASTOR CANADENSIS

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

SUMMER/FALL 2026

Join the Jedediah Smith Society Celebration of the 200th Anniversary of Jedediah's entry into California!

October 13-16 2026, location, **AVI Resort, Fort Mojave, near Needles, CA**

- Call for papers, presentations, and your attendance.
- Presentations will be in person and via Zoom.
- **Tuesday October 13, 5 PM** Meet-and-greet social, no-host bar in the **AVI Resort.**
- **Wednesday, October 14, 8 AM:** Van tour of Fort Mojave, the Colorado River crossing, Paiute Pass, and Indian Springs, led by **Lance Holter.**
- **Wednesday, October 14:** Dinner, Keynote Speaker is **Clint Gilchrist,** Executive Director, Museum of the Mountain Man, Pinedale, WY. Featured Speaker, **Lance Holter.**
- **Thursday, October 15, 8AM.** Van tour to Indian Springs and Rock Springs, led by **Lance Holter.**
- **Thursday, October 15,** Dinner, featuring speaker **Milton Von Damm** presenting on Ewing Young's Taos 1826 Gila expedition and his encounter with the Mojave people.
- Contact **Rich Cimino** for directions to the location, lodging, the presentation schedule, and field trip coodination at: president@jededediahsmithsociety.com

Like us on Facebook!
Visit our website:
www.jededediahsmithsociety.org

Rendezvous Registration

The registration form for the October Rendezvous is on page 8. A day-by-day itinerary can be found at jededediahsmithsociety.org/rendezvous

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Jedediah Strong Smith and the Mojave Desert Crossings 1826-1827
by Lance Holter

Some years ago, I read Jed Smith's *The Southwest Expedition of Jedediah S. Smith , His Personal Account of the Journey to California , 1826-1827, edited by George R. Brooks*. I was especially struck by Smith's description of his southwest expedition of fur trappers across the Mojave Desert in 1826—the first crossing of Anglo-Americans overland into Alta California from the east—an incredible story of survival and exploration into an unknown country, over and through a desert devoid of water. A brutal landscape, scattered with unforgiving volcanic rock, white sand, thorned barrel cactus, Cholla, Mesquite, beds of prickly pear covering the ground waiting to penetrate feet and hooves at every step and a peculiar and strange spiny tree that the early Mormon pioneers had named the Joshua Tree after the biblical Joshua, believing its outstretched limbs resembled the prophet guiding the faithful westward to the promised land of California and the Pacific.

Lance Holter exploring petroglyphs viewed during the April 2026 rendezvous scouting trip. Photo: Rich Cimino

They were following the ancient Pah-Ute trail, a trade route thousands of years old. Along this corridor, abalone shells moved from the Chumash people of the Santa Barbara Channel Islands eastward to the Mohave villages along the Colorado River, then onward to the Pueblos and Plains Indians. The Mohave served as middlemen, crossing one of the harshest deserts in North America to trade and exchange for these shells which were prized for rituals, ceremony, and personal adornment and were considered the same as money. A "vara" of shells, approximately a 33" long string of shells, was at one time equivalent in trade for a good horse.

No one could travel this desert without knowledge of water and the location of ephemeral springs approximately 20 miles apart along this trail. These springs were only known to the Indigenous people of the desert: the Serrano, Paiute, Chemehuevi, and Mohave. Without Native guides, Europeans attempting this crossing would certainly die.

The first known European to complete the journey was the Franciscan friar Francisco Garces. In March 1776, at 38 years old and accompanied by his Native interpreter and two Mohave guides, he traveled west on foot from the Mohave villages near present-day Needles, California across nearly 300 miles of desert to Mission San Gabriel.

Fifty years later, in 1826, Jedediah Strong Smith set out from Bear Lake, Utah with 17 trappers and 80 horses representing the newly formed Jackson-Sublette and Smith Fur Company to explore and

JSS President Rich Cimino exploring Mojave Springs.

assess the unknown country to the south and west. Some experts say he was searching for the San Buenaventura River, a mythical river flowing from the Great Salt Lake to the Pacific Ocean.

Old Mojave Trail looking east toward Colorado River.

By October of 1826, Smith's expedition had reached the Colorado River exhausted and short on supplies. At the Mohave villages they were welcomed by the friendly inhabitants who told them that paradise lay ten days westward: the Spanish missions and settlements of Alta California where they could recoup and resupply.

Day 1-Colorado River to Rock Springs

On May 1st, 2026, I intended to follow this route, now known as The Old Mojave Trail, across the desert linking the scattered springs as Garces and Smith did and try to imagine what they saw and endured. Joining me was Austin, a Mojave resident who had recently earned his doctorate in history on the Mojave Desert, and Jake, an experienced overlander, electrician and mechanic. We were well suited for this journey. We had our trusty Tacoma pickups, camping gear, food, drinking water, walkie-talkies and maps. A modern-day windfall and luxury.

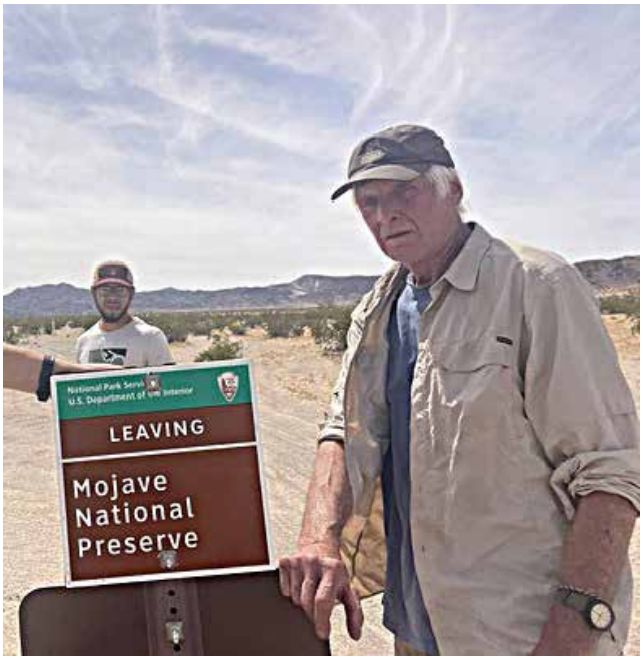
By 1:30 in the afternoon, temperatures had climbed into the 90s as we headed West toward Paiute Springs, the first and most important water source after leaving the Colorado River and the last dependable water for many miles. Our goal and camp was Rock Springs, roughly 50 miles ahead.

Our trail climbed through rough, boulder strewn terrain covered with creosote bush and spiny cholla cactus. Ahead we could see Jedediah Smith Butte rise against the horizon. Passing the Butte on our left we entered a canyon with walls blanketed with black volcanic boulders, barrel cactus, and thorned brush "cats' claw" named for grabbing/ripping your skin and clothes. Carved into many of the rocks at the spring were ancient petroglyphs—something we repeatedly encountered wherever water and springs existed in this country.

After exploring Paiute Springs and discussing the nearby ruins of Ft. Paiute—established by the U.S. Army in the 1860s to protect the Mojave Wagon Road from Indian depredations, a road that linked Fort Mojave at the Colorado River, through the desert, over the Cajon Pass and into Los Angeles, we began climbing toward Paiute Pass at 3,412 feet. A road and pass considered the most difficult and roughest wagon road of its time.

The road quickly became brutal. Several times my Tacoma slid dangerously close to the edge of a steep ravine. At one particularly narrow rutted part of the road crossing I found myself teetering above a deep ravine several hundred feet deep. Genuinely terrified, I managed somehow to make it through and reached the summit of Paiute Pass. Looking

Crossing over the Old Mojave trail to Rock Springs through the Joshua Tree Forest.



Jake and Lance after crossing the "salt plans" (Dry Soda Lake) of the Old Mojave Trail.

eastward, back from where we had come, we could see the trail leading from the Dead Mountains and the distant Colorado River beyond.

It was here that Smith and his trappers found themselves abandoned that night at the Springs by their Mohave Indian guides who had stolen their best horse and returned to the Mohave villages. Smith wrote in his journal: "The idea came forcibly to mind that it was the policy of the Indians to send me into the desert to perish." The party wandered around this desert for several days in all directions looking for water. Finding none they returned to the river, regained their horses and secured two dependable Serrano Paiute Indians as guides for their 2nd attempt across the desert. With their guides in hand and showing the way, the explorers reached Rock Springs November 12, 1826.

For us, Rock Springs and our first camp lay 22 miles ahead. We could see a huge vast landscape before us. Vontrigger Hills to the left, southwest; the Providence Mountains and Table Mesa ahead, west on into the horizon; and Landfair Buttes to the right, north. No wonder the Smith party found themselves lost in this unknown territory. The trail we followed led west through a broad Joshua Tree forest with white sand washes, creosote and salt brush—no water anywhere in sight.

We arrived at Rock Springs that night and explored the spring itself and the surrounding rocks. Once again petroglyphs marked the sight as an important Indigenous stopping place. That evening we watched a full moon rise over the desert and illuminate the surrounding hills in a silver light.

Day 2- Rock Springs to the Mojave River

The morning came cold at the camp's 5,000 foot elevation. We broke camp and headed west towards Marl Springs, roughly 20 miles ahead—the next dependable water source on the trail. Descending Cedar Canyon, magnificent views opened before us. To the south rose the Kelso Sand Dunes, 500 feet high, and the desolate region known as the Devil's Playground. To the north stood the broad volcanic rise of Cima Dome. In the distance we saw the San Bernardino Mountains and the snow-capped peak of Mount San Gorgonio, 133 miles away as the crow flies. Eventually we reached Marl Springs—the final reliable water source before the long crossing toward Soda Dry Lake.

After passing through an exhausting dry, hard, panned desert of scattered black and brown rocks, salt brush and mesquite with scattered sand dunes and washes we reached Soda Lake. Nearly two centuries later, we found the scene remarkably unchanged. The white salt plain lakebed stretched flat and blinding beneath the heat, shimmering with mirages that resembled distant water. Indeed, tasting the white crystals on the dry lakebed's surface we discovered that it was salt.

Jedediah Smith Butte just before Paiute Springs.

After crossing the Soda Lake plain, we reached the western edge of the Mojave National Preserve. Beyond lay the Mojave River sink. We departed the Old Mojave Trail here, fully aware of the accomplishments Smith's southwest expedition had endured and completed.

Jedediah Smith's expedition followed the Mojave River westward, climbing toward the San Bernardino Mountains before finally reaching Mission San Gabriel on November 28, 1826. The journey had nearly destroyed them. By the time they staggered into Mission San Gabriel, their clothing hung in tatters. Many were nearly naked. Of the original eighty horses only eighteen survived. Of the eighteen men who left the Bear Lake Rendezvous that July in 1826, fourteen had managed to complete the almost 1,500 mile journey. To the exhausted trappers, Alta California must have appeared like paradise.

Jedediah Strong Smith helped open the American West to trappers, emigrants, soldiers and settlers who would follow in the decades ahead. Indigenous trails became wagon roads. The springs became survival points. Their knowledge guided every crossing. And in may places across the Mojave, if you leave the pavement and follow the broken tracks far enough, the country still looks much as Garces and Smith first saw it—immense, silent, dangerous, and beautiful beyond description. That night, as the moon rose over the desert once again, I thought about the long chain of travelers who had crossed this land before us. The Mojave remembers all of them.

The President 's Stump

Greetings. This issue of the *Castor* covers more about the foundation we're laying to continue keeping you, the members of the society, involved for years to come. The society is entering a new phase of activity, based on the historical records of Jedediah's time in California, and later in Oregon and Washington.

In October, we'll have our **200th Anniversary Rendezvous** at the AVI Resort / Fort Mojave, Laughlin, NV. Members are signing up for the rendezvous as we add activities to the venue. Speakers have volunteered, so we've added dinner with an historical presentation! We've changed the start date to take advantage of a great room rate at the AVI Resort. You'll need to make your room reservation for Tuesday, October 13th through Friday, October 16th to attend the entire rendezvous. Plan to arrive for the membership meet-and-greet on Tuesday, a no-host mixer at the AVI Resort at 5pm. The registration form is on page 7 of the *Castor*, and on the website along with the day-by-day itinerary. (jedediahsmithsociety.org/rendezvous)

Van(s) will be available to shuttle you to the desert field trip locations. Let me know if you are flying into Las Vegas; if your schedule is in sync with picking up a rental van(s) you might be able to ride with us to the AVI Resort.

Please let me know as soon as possible if you're attending so that I can get the correct headcount for the dinners and lunch boxes; these meals are covered in your registration fee. You're on your own for breakfast.

For added historical value, you may wish to **visit the Mojave Desert Culture and Heritage Museum in Essex**, CA, which is about 20 miles from the AVI Resort. The museum is holding its annual membership meeting on site. I visited the site in April with society member Lance Holter. Lance is a long-term member of this wonderful, fabulous museum, all 178 acres; there is so much to see. Depending on your personal preference, you may want to tour the museum on Friday the 16th or Saturday the 17th. mojaveculturheritage.org

It is somewhat hard to believe that I'm already entering my third year as the society's president.

The presidency has plenty of responsibilities, but it is a satisfying undertaking which includes the fun of meeting new members; participating in rewarding board meetings and planning rendezvous. With so many responsibilities, I could use **volunteer support** with some of the considerable tasks involved with publishing the *Castor*. Contact me directly if you have questions about the amount of involvement this would require.

The society is entering a new phase based on the historical record of Jedediah's time in California. **Beginning this year, 2026, with Jed's entry into California, and later into Oregon and Washington, there are three years**

of history for you as a member to walk in Jedediah's footprints on several historical sites. We read so much about Jedediah's West Coast movements; now is the time to visit many of these trails, camps, missions, presidios and seaports, in order to learn firsthand and place them into context. The board is planning more membership meetings and rendezvous all the way into 2028.

Please remain an up-to-date, dues-paying member, and if you can, become a member at the $150 level—you'll be keeping American history alive and active.

Thank you for your unwavering support. I'm available to discuss your ideas concerning the society at president@jedediahsmithsociety.org

With appreciation,
Rich Cimino,
President of the Jedediah Smith Society

Membership Meeting

Membership Meeting Tuesday September 15 in-person or on zoom. The meeting will be held in the University of the Pacific Holt -Atherton Specials Collections and Archives Library. Our speaker will be Michael Wurtz, Associate Professor, UOP Library. The Zoom link: tinyurl.com/jssmembermeeting

Castor Canadensis Newsletter Guidelines

The Castor is your publication and your contributions are welcome. Please write to president@jedediahsmithsociety.org with your proposed ideas and to learn about specific guidelines for articles. We are seeking a volunteer to assist Rich Cimino and co-editor Lisa Thompson in this tri-annual process.

- Submit articles in Microsoft Word, photos welcome.
- After receipt, the article will be reviewed by a technical editor. Once this is completed the author will be notified.
- Please note the *Castor Canadensis* is not responsible for either the research or the opinions of the writer.

Donations

Your generous donations fund our education and outreach efforts regarding Jed's work and life, and will make membership events and rendezvous possible.

Mail contributions to Arthur Hurley, 1230 Olive Hill Lane, Napa, CA 94558.

Donate online jedediahsmithsociety.org/donations or use the Donation button.

We are a 501c3 nonprofit; all gifts are fully tax deductible.

Special Thanks

When members donate dues above the minimum amount, those additional donations help us provide activities, communication to you the membership, and our Rendezvous program.

This year, we've received additional support from members Hearst, Hurley, Pappas, Sorrels and Cimino. Thank You!

Archivist Report

The purpose of an archive is to collect, preserve, and provide access to a range of sources, whether it be letters, government documents, photographs, or an array of other records. As an international relations major, I know the difficulties of accessing records, government documents, and materials to better understand various historical figures and events. This has become a driving motivation as Jedediah Smith Society Student Archivist in the Holt-Atherton Special Collections and Archives (home of the Jed Smith Society collection) to make important resources more accessible to everyone. As the archivist for the society, I have made numerous new resources available in our online database, including the entire collection of *Castor Canadensis*. I also scanned two books dedicated to Jed Smith and assisted many outside researchers with providing resources on him for their own research. Through these projects, I have had the opportunity to read about his story and the history of Smith and the society that bears his name.

JSS President Rich Cimino with 2026 intern Annie Sawyer.

Archivist Mike Wurtz in the Jedediah Smith Archives at the University of the Pacific Holt-Atherton Speical Collections and Archives.

I have focused on the interactive maps on the JSS website and have taken a particular interest in the Idaho and Washington routes. The location Jed Smith visited in Idaho and Washington is an area I am very familiar with since I grew up and lived on both sides of Washington, in Seattle and Spokane. The land that is now near the modern city of Colville was the land that Jed Smith and the Hudson Bay Company traversed. That land which spanned 39 million acres belonged to the Indigenous Colville Tribe at the time of Jed Smith's arrival. The stories and information about Jed Smith and the Hudson's Bay Company in the area can be found at the Stevens County Historical Museum in Colville. However, there are no landmarks indicating the exact spot where Jed Smith was, aside from the markings at Fort Colville and the Hudson Bay Fort. The Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation mentions the Hudson's Bay Company on its website, which provides a history of the tribe and historical events. What is important to me about all these groups that can share their perspectives and retelling of history, including Jed Smith's, is their ability to access records and information on him. Our archives, like all archives, strive for accessibility so researchers can draw their own conclusions and form opinions about the material. Our resources and the work I do can give someone the opportunity to advocate for the recognition of that history, including in Colville.

—Annie Sawyer

Annie Sawyer is the current University of the Pacific Holt-Atherton Special Collections and Archives' Jedediah Smith Society Student Archivist.

Browse, search and read all back issues of the *Castor Canadensis* at the University of the Pacific Holt-Atherton Special Collections and Archives, Jedediah Strong Smith Collections. (scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/jedediah-strong-smith/)

Jedediah Smith Society October 13 - 15, 2026 Celebrating the 200th Anniversary of Jedediah Smith entry into Alta California Rendezvous
Fort Mojave, San Bernardino County, CA

Registration form

Name_____

Address_____

City, State Zip code _____

Best phone # to reach you: _____

Email address_____

Emergency contact_____

Emergency Cell # _____

Do you have physical handicaps that may affect your short walks?

I understand that the walk to the historical sites contains loose soil.

Yes. _____ please initial

The Jedediah Smith Society (JSS) has no insurance policy to cover attendees.

Yes, I have my own insurance policy. _____

I accept responsibility for my participation knowing that the Jedediah Smith Society 2026 Rendezvous is not responsible for my participation. This rendezvous is supported by volunteer JSS members and are not liable for my actions.

A registration fee of $75.00 to assist in covering a small portion of JSS cost is requested. Included is the cost of the van rental, insurance, fuel, meeting room, dinner, box lunches. Not included is your hotel room, breakfasts, dinner Thursday, and alcoholic beverages.

JSS accepts personal checks sent to:
JSS C/O Rich Cimino, 60 Elizabeth Circle, Greenbrae, CA, 94904

Contact by email to: President@jedediahsmithsociety.org for questions.

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