



EMIGRANT TRAILS HALL OF FAME

OREGON-CALIFORNIA TRAILS ASSOCIATION



Jedediah Strong Smith

In the preface to *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West*, historian Dale Morgan wrote:

In the exploration of the American West, Jedediah Strong Smith is overshadowed only by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. During his eight years in the West Jedediah Smith made the effective discovery of South Pass; he was the first man to reach California overland from the American frontier, the first to cross the Sierra Nevada, the first to travel the length and width of the Great Basin, the first to reach Oregon by a journey up the California coast. He saw more of the West than any man of his time and was familiar with it from the Missouri River to the Pacific from Mexico to Canada. He survived the three worst disasters of the American fur trade, the Arikara defeat of 1823, the Mojave massacre of 1827, and the Umpqua massacre of 1828, in which no less than forty men fell around him, only to die a lonely death on the Santa Fe Trail under the lances of the Comanches. Jedediah Smith is an authentic American hero, a man who packed a staggering amount of achievement into the time between his twenty-third and thirty-third years.

While active in the fur trade, Smith was responsible for the effective discovery of South Pass in March 1824. An eastbound overland party led by Robert Stuart in 1812 had discovered a wagon-friendly crossing of the Continental Divide at South Pass, but the location of the pass was not disclosed to others at that time.

It ultimately became the single most important factor in the transcontinental migration and settlement of the West. Its broad, near level gap served as the passage through the Rockies for the Oregon, California, and Mormon Trails, and later the Pony Express.

Biography

- Born: 1799, Jericho (now Bainbridge), New York
- Died: 1831, On the Cimarron River, Southwest Kansas
- Trail pioneer, trapper, frontiersman, explorer

Achievements

- Outlined the geography of the West from St. Louis and the Missouri River to the Pacific Coast, from San Diego to Fort Vancouver and points in between.
- Shared information and maps with others involved in the fur trade and exploration of the West, including the Hudson Bay Company and indirectly with John C. Frémont.
- With David Jackson and William Sublette, led the first wagon train to traverse the northeast Kansas-Platte River route from the Missouri River to the Rendezvous site on the Wind River.