



## **JEDEDIAH SMITH 1799-1831**

As the single line of trail worn trappers trudged slowly leading their pack horses down the valley in search of water and a place to camp, a grizzly bear crashed through the brush and struck the center of their line. Their horses scattered before the men could draw their rifles and the massive beast sprung upon Captain Jedediah Strong Smith, clamping his huge mouth upon his head and tearing at his middle with both paws. The grizzly's enormous weight snapped the captain's knife and several ribs all at the same time. It took several moments to retrieve his gun but Jim Clyman put a bullet in the bear's stomach, but it didn't stop the bear's rage. Ed Rose and a few more men shot it again, knowing that it might take four or five hits to bring down a grizzly, but even then, you better not turn your back too soon.

But the Captain just lay there looking up as calm as can be. No moaning, no cursing, no rage, like the rest of these rough mountain men would have done. He caught his breath and said, "Boys, you gotta fix me up!" No one wanted to move him, he was hurt so badly. "Go for water," Smith instructed, "and if you've got a needle and thread, get it out and sew up my wounds." Finally, James Clyman of Virginia began the repairs to reattach his Captain's scalp from his left eye to close to the right ear. Clyman stated that Jedediah's ear was too torn up. "Oh, you must try to stitch it up some way or other," Smith said. So that's what Clyman did. This day gave them all a lesson of the character of the grizzly bear that they did not forget. And it taught them even more about the kind of man who was leading them through the wilderness.

Jedediah Strong Smith was born at Jericho, near the Susquehanna Valley of southern New York. By the age of 13, Jed was working on a freight boat on the Great Lakes, where he met fur traders from Canada and the Upper Missouri who fueled his imagination with tales of the wide wilderness. In the spring of 1821, Jed left home with only his rifle, his Bible and the shirt on his back and headed to St. Louis. Jed was no shiftless runaway, just an adventurous young man who had high on his priorities the need to support his aging parents. May 22, 1822, he headed out on an organized expedition of "enterprising young men" to ascend the Missouri River at its source in search of beaver, a fur in great demand then.

His group, known as "The Reckless Breed," quickly recognized Jed's leadership and he emerged as the head of their company. They saw him as a Christian man with unblemished character. His companions say that he made religion, "an active principle from the duties of which nothing could seduce him." He was a devout Methodist who did not smoke or drink or use profanity. In his mere eight years in the West, Smith made history. He discovered the South Pass, was the first white man to cross the Sierra Nevada, the first to taste the bitter waters of the Great Salt Lake, the first to officiate a public

Christian worship in South Dakota at a sad wilderness funeral for thirteen massacred trappers. His legacy is memorialized in the South Dakota State Capitol in a mural depicting this sad funeral.

Why would he endure frigid winters, scorching summers, timber wolves, bears, and two horrific massacres with Indians? To his elder brother Ralph he wrote, "It is that I may be able to help those who stand in need that I face danger." With this letter, he included a gift of \$2,200, no small amount in that day! He died alone on the Santa Fe Trail, ambushed by Comanche Indians. A man of Christian conscience as tall and unmoving as the mountains he climbed, Jedediah Smith is truly one of America's great western heroes and Christian models. With such character our frontier was charted.