

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Jedediah Smith

The story of Jedediah Smith was forgotten for a full century because of many factors. Smith was first overland visitor to California.

The Pacific Historian, the quarterly bulletin of the California History Foundation, tells us that research students have begun to uncover piecemeal the story of the life of this remarkable man: a copy of part of his journals was found with a relative; letters were found in Beaver House, the Hudson Bay treasure chest in London; Mexican archives were searched for other items; rare, early books recounted his exploits; some of his deeds were recited in the memoirs of his associates; a map was discovered in New York which was undoubtedly copied from an original by Smith.

He was the blazer of the southern and central routes to the Pacific, the Oregon-California trail, and the crossing of the Sierra Nevadas. Single-handed and without government assistance, he carried on his explorations, met and matched the wits and business acumen of the Hudson Bay Company, and for his time, knew the geography, the economy, and the military strength and weakness of California more accurately and intimately than any other American.

To honor Jedediah Strong Smith, a society of that name has been organized through the California History Foundation at the College of the Pacific in Stockton. The first annual rendezvous of the group was held October 12. Why a "rendezvous"? It was the mountain man's name for a meeting place, the Pacific Historian tells us. It was here that the trapper secured his supplies for the coming year and disposed of his accumulated pelts. It was democratic: the humblest beginner was on a par with the company's factor. It was the meeting for the exchange of both goods and information. Finally, it was for pleasure, as well as profit.

Bancroftiana, the publication of the Friends of the Bancroft Library at the University of California in Berkeley, reports that members of the Jedediah Smith family has given much material to the library and recently added all the known Bibles in which the family genealogy has been recorded.

From the Calhoun family of Los Angeles has come a Bible published in 1834 which for many years before his

death in 1849 was the property of the senior Jedediah, father of the great explorer and fur trader. Jedediah S. Smith, whose name is an imperishable part of the historical heritage of California and the West. This Bible later passed into the possession of Smith's sister Eunice and was faithfully preserved in her family until given to Bancroft.

Another gift came to the library in the form of a similar Bible which had belonged to another sister, Betty Smith Davis, given by a granddaughter, Miss May Davis, of Mt. Pleasant, Iowa; it is valued not only for its record of the birth dates of Jedediah S. Smith and his immediate family, but also for its Davis family entries. Betsy's oldest son, George Washington Davis, a California pioneer of 1854, settled at Santa Rosa. His second son, William Rude Davis, became a prominent Oakland attorney, educator and public official whose papers, were added to the Bancroft Library's Smith family collection some years ago through the gift of his son.

The third Bible had belonged to Ralph Smith, Jedediah's eldest brother, before Miss Lura Smith of Meade, Kansas, gave its family record pages to Bancroft.

All these Bibles provide documentary evidence valuable in compiling the history of the Smith family.