

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Jedediah Smith Redwoods

As the motorist travels up the Redwood Highway many memorial groves are passed through, marked with either familiar state markers or bronze tablets naming the grove in honor of a distinguished person or organization. One of the most interesting markers is that dedicated to Jedediah Smith by Mr. and Mrs. C. M. Goethe of Sacramento and by the State of California.

The Jedediah Smith Memorial Grove, established in honor of the first American who crossed the Sierra Nevada, directs timely attention to the pioneer who in 1826 started a train of events which, a quarter-century later, 1850, terminated in the placing of the 31st star in our flag, representing California.

The redwood grove named in his memory recalls vividly his significance, for it holds a scenic and strategic location on the southern side of the Hiouchi Bridge across the Smith River, on the Redwood Highway - near U.S. Route 199. The grove is about four miles northeast of Crescent City, Del Norte County, on the way between that coast port and Grants Pass, Oregon.

The Smith River is named for this intrepid explorer who discovered it in 1828, as is set forth in the bronze tablet placed on a massive boulder in the grove near the riverside.

As men among men, Jedediah Strong Smith, called "Bible-Toter" by his companions, "his Bible in one hand and his rifle in the other," has been hailed as the first and greatest of those who led in the hazardous overland passage, "Unexcelled among pioneers for both piety and heroism," is the tribute to him of Dr. James A. B. Scherer in his splendid book. "Thirty-first Star," and virtually all other modern historians are in accord.

Manifestly, Bible Toter Smith has "come back" - for one reason, because of the increasing importance of the West in the national scene. Another reason is the careful researching of present-day historians and their just evaluation of events.

The future explorer was born in Bainbridge, New York, Jan. 6, 1799. His parents, Jedediah Smith and Sarah Strong Smith, soon removed their family to Pennsylvania and then to Ohio. At an early age, the young Jed decided to find out about the almost unknown West, beyond the Rocky Mountains. At the

age of 23 he arrived in St. Louis and entered the fur trade - a beaver trapper and path-finding explorer.

Becoming a prominent figure in the early trade, Jedediah Smith was chosen to lead that party which in 1828 explored as far as California for furs. The presence of the Americans proved unwelcome to the Mexican authorities, and they finally departed in 1827. The next year they were again in California, and it was on that expedition that Smith led his party from the upper Sacramento Valley across to the Pacific shore, through the Redwood region.

In the book, "Jedediah Smith and his Maps of the American West," by Dale S. Morgan and Carl I. Wheat, which reproduces the Fremont-Gibbs-Smith Map of the West, reference is made to Smith's scientific contributions, including his interest in botany. He must have been impressed by those titanic botanical specimens, the California Redwoods. "The trappers, led by Smith, made an epic journey down the Trinity and the Klamath," mentions this book, "and at last, through mighty redwoods, reached the coast a little north of Requa . . . It was June 20, 1828, when they reached the little California river that today bears Smith's name."

The expedition continued northward into Oregon. On the Umpqua River all the party except the leader and two others were slain by Indians and the furs were lost.

Finally, Smith was killed by Comanches in 1831, a tragic end involving an irreparable loss to the American people. "Jedediah Smith's importance," summarizes The Pacific Historian, "rests not on a single accomplishment, but on a dozen or more unbelievable achievements. Here are a few of his firsts: He was the blazer of the Southern and the Central routes to the Pacific, the Oregon-California Trail, and the crossing of the Sierra Nevada."