

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

October 7, 1963

### **Jedediah Smith Meeting**

The annual Rendezvous of the Jedediah Smith Society at the Pony Express Museum, 75 Margarita Dr., San Rafael, was held Oct. 5. I have been doing a bit of research on the history of both Jedediah Smith and the Pony Express which I hope will be of interest to our readers.

Any method of bringing Western history to the attention of the public is good and for that reason the picture of the stagecoach which is well known, is educational. The vast network of stage lines which covered California a hundred years ago composed a history equaled only by the Pony Express and the first transcontinental railroad.

There were hundreds of stage lines in different parts of California, but 80 percent of the total operation was owned by the great California Stage Co. Also, there was James Birch Jackass Mail into San Diego, the Butterfield Overland Mail into San Francisco, and the California Oregon Stage Line from Sacramento to Oregon. In addition, Russell, Mayors and Waddell, who founded, owned, and operated the Pony Express, also operated a stage-line over the Central Route carrying United States mail from the Missouri River through Salt Lake City to Sacramento.

The host at the meeting of the Jedediah Smith Society is a decedent of William Bradford Waddell, who was interested in the Pony Express, so it is natural that Waddell F. Smith should operate a Pony Express History and Art Gallery in San Rafael and to entertain the Jedediah Smith Society.

There is much historical significance in Jedediah Smith. Specifically, there were seven things which made him one of the great Americans. Four were in the field of exploration, two in business relations and one in cartography.

Smith was the first to comprehend the importance of South Pass. Before his time a trip to the Pacific had meant two seasons with the perils of the winter in the mountains. It had been limited, too, by the goods which could be carried by pack train. Smith saw that South Pass provided an open roadway for wagon trains from the Mississippi Valley to the Great Basin of Utah. One could leave Missouri in the early spring and reach his destination in Oregon or California that same fall. Thus

Smith wrote a time schedule which made possible the Overland Route for hundreds of thousands of emigrants.

The Pacific Historian, quarterly bulletin of the California History Foundation, in the May 1958 edition writes of Smith:

“Better than any man of his day—native or foreign—Smith understood California, its attractions and its drawbacks. He had visited not fewer than seven, and perhaps nine, of the early missions, three of the four presidios, and the two principal pueblos. He had met many of the officials, including the governors, alcaldes, and generals. He had come in close contact with both mission Indians and the Tulareños. He had traveled the entire length of the great Central Valley, along three important segments of the coastline, and the first white man to cross the Sierra Nevadas. He had traded with rancheros both in Southern California and about San Francisco Bay. Unwittingly, his enforced detention had provided him with invaluable information. His reports exploded the myth of an aggressive Spanish government and pointed the way for an easy American conquest.”

One of the few California landmarks that perpetuate the memory of this trail blazer is the Smith River, located largely in Del Norte County. He and his company came upon this river first on June 20, 1828. There is also the Jedediah Smith Memorial Grove on the Smith River in the same county.

On a bronze plate placed on a huge native rock in the grove is the following tribute to Jedediah Smith, referred to as “Bible Toter, first white man to cross from Mississippi to the Pacific, thus starting the train of events which made California the 31st star in our Flag. This grove on the Smith River (which he discovered in 1828) dedicated to his memory by Mrs. and Mrs. C.M. Goethe of Sacramento and by the State of California.”

Smith was killed by Comanches in 1831, a tragic and irreparable loss to the American people. What more might he have achieved?