
Jed Smith

TRAILBLAZER OF THE WEST

by Frank Latham



—Revised and Edited by Michael J. McHugh—

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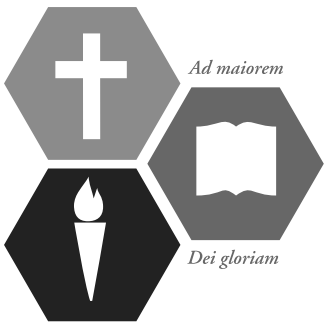
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—Preface—

When students of American history study about the opening and settlement of the vast western wilderness territory, they often think of names such as Kit Carson, Lewis and Clark, and Zebulon Pike. Seldom will students be given the opportunity to learn about other individuals who contributed greatly to the process of westward expansion.

The book that follows tells the story of one man who deserves to be recognized for his outstanding contributions to the opening of the West in the nineteenth century—Jedediah Smith. The trailblazer known as Jed Smith (1799–1831) was a daring explorer, a skilled trapper, and a dedicated Christian frontiersman. As a young man, he dared to live his God-given dreams, and, as a result blazed a trail of achievement and honor throughout much of the West. His work literally opened up major portions of the wilderness territory to settlers traveling west of the Rocky Mountains.

Few men in American history experienced more intense challenges and outright danger than Jed Smith, the “knight in buckskin,” and lived to tell about it. He was a truly courageous adventurer. Best of all, his story and Christian testimony are as amazing as they are true.

May the book that follows inspire readers to live out their own dreams, and ultimately, to adopt the Christian faith as their own.

Michael J. McHugh
2003

CHAPTER 1

Jed Wins a Fight

“**H**ere, sonny, take a drink o’ this. It’ll tighten your scalp so Indians can’t take it so easy when we go up the Missouri with Ashley.”

Hank Johnson, mountain man, slapped a huge fist on the table as he spoke. Then he held a cup in front of young Jed Smith.

“No thank you. I don’t drink,” Jed said, shaking his head. “I promised my mother...”

“He promised his maw! Did you hear that, men?”

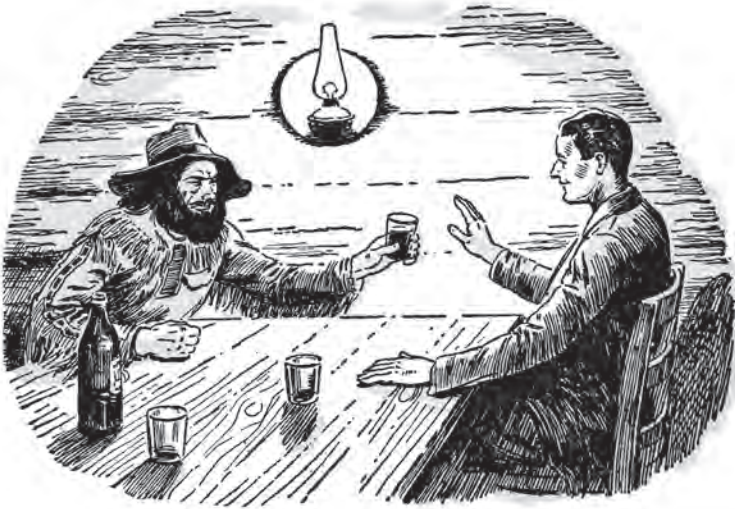
Johnson gave a short laugh as he looked around the room at the dozen mountain men sitting at tables. Like himself, all were dressed in buckskins. Like himself, all had heavy beards and long, tangled hair. Jed, with his face smooth-shaven and his brown hair neatly cut, looked very young among them.

Hank Johnson winked at the others. He thought he saw a chance for fun. “What are you doin’ so far from your maw?” he asked, turning back to Jed. “Why in thunder did Ashley hire a youngin’ who’s still wet behind the ears?”

“Maybe Ashley wants you to nurse him,” red-bearded Joe Holt spoke up.

“You know what I think,” Johnson said. “I think a feller who won’t take a drink is too yellow to go up the Missouri with us. He’d turn an’ run the first time he heard a wolf howl.” Again Hank held the cup out to Jed.

Jed could feel his heart pounding. He tried to smile, as he repeated, “No thank you. I don’t care to drink. But I won’t try to



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force you to not drink. So that should make us even. There is no reason why we should quarrel about it.”

“He don’t care if I drink! Now, ain’t that nice. I think,” said Johnson, “I’d better take this yellow-belly in my arms and feed him outa my cup.” With this, Johnson reached across the table and put a hairy hand on Jed’s shoulder. “What you got to say to that?” he asked.

“Nothing,” said Jed quietly, “except you better take your hand off my shoulder.”

“I’m keeping my hand right where it is, yellow-belly,” said Johnson. “Now what you got to say?”

“Nothing else,” said Jed. Suddenly, he straightened up to his full six feet in height. His fist moved up from his side and hit Hank Johnson’s jaw with a sound like an axe hitting a spruce log. Johnson’s head snapped back and his feet went up in the air. The table turned violently on its side. Johnson fell full length on the floor and lay still.



“That’ll be enough outa you!” yelled red-headed Joe Holt, leaping to his feet. Rushing at Jed, he tried to wrap his heavy arms around the lad, but Jed stepped back quickly. Holt missed a punch

at Jed and stumbled. Then Jed's fist lashed out. It caught Holt between the eyes. The mountain man wobbled from side to side and fell flat on his face.

In an instant, Jed was surrounded by eight or ten mountain men. But now another man dressed in a dark business suit and tall hat was pushing through the crowd. "What is going on here?" he demanded.

A mountain man with a yellow beard and smiling eyes stepped forward. "Hello, General Ashley," he said pleasantly. "This lad just knocked out Johnson and Holt. It seems like Jed Smith didn't want to take a drink. But they wouldn't let him alone; so he cooled them off."

"All right, Black. Take a look at Johnson and Holt and see what the damage is," the general ordered. Then he turned to look at Jed, who was shifting his feet nervously, looking down at his skinned hand.

"Johnson's got a busted jaw," Art Black reported. "Holt has a busted nose. Otherwise, the boys are in fine shape."

"Two men laid up for repairs," said Ashley. "Is that a usual day's work for you, young man? Or do we have to expect more? It's still early in the evening."

"I'm sorry about this, General Ashley," Jed said. "I shouldn't have lost my temper. But I don't like to have any man say I'm a coward because I won't take a drink."

General Ashley didn't speak. He just stood looking at his new man, till finally Jed asked rather sharply, "Is drinking required on this trip, General Ashley?"

Ashley smiled. "If you can do your work on this trip, I don't care what you drink, Jed," he said. "You can even drink water. But take it easy if some of the boys make remarks. We'll be too busy trapping beaver and looking out for Indians to fix up men with broken jaws and noses."

Jed shifted uneasily from one foot to another, then suddenly said good night to General Ashley and followed Art out of the room.

For several minutes the two walked in silence along the rough street. Many times they bumped into men in the darkness. At last Art spoke.

“This town is getting too crowded with people to be comfortable.” As Jed said nothing, Art continued to talk, trying to get his young companion to relax. “The newcomers are mostly trappers,” he said. “French boatmen and merchants are big in the fur trade. Right now, St. Louis is the leading fur-trading town in the whole West. It’s going to be an important city some day.”

Jed still refused to talk, so Art finally touched his shoulder and asked, “What’s eating at you, Jed? Don’t keep on worrying about that fight. It’s over and done with. You’ll have no more trouble. When this news gets around, the boys are going to let you alone.”

“I can’t help having regrets about the fight,” Jed answered. “It’s the first time I ever really hurt a man with my fists, and I don’t like it. What’s more, I don’t think the Almighty does either.”

“Jed, a man sometimes has to let other men know that they can’t push him too hard. It wasn’t your fault that Hank and Joe tried to get rough with you.”

“But I’m ashamed of myself,” Jed said. “God didn’t put men on the earth to snap at one another like wild dogs. There is much good work to be done on this earth before we leave it. And we can’t do this work if we fight each other over minor offenses and name calling.”

“Well,” said Art, “all I’ve got to say is a young fellow with all these ideas in his head is likely to be mighty sad and lonesome. You’re going to be in a wild country and live among rough men for the next two or three years. Are you sure that’s what you want to do? You really want to go up the Missouri with us?”

“Yes, I do. I want to go,” replied Jed firmly. “And I won’t be lonesome when I get out there.” He waved his hand toward the northwest. “There are a lot of white spaces on the maps of that unknown country. Someday, the United States is going to own the country beyond the Rocky Mountains. I want to see what’s really out there—I’ve dreamed of seeing that country for so long.”

CHAPTER 2

Jed Hears of Faraway Lands

YOUNG Jedediah Strong Smith was born in Bainbridge, New York, January 6, 1799. His parents, Jedediah Smith and Sarah Strong Smith, were running a little store at Bainbridge the year Jed was born. But they did not stay long in New York State. Jed's father had the urge to keep moving farther west. First he moved to Pennsylvania, and then to Ohio.

By this time, there were eleven children in the Smith home. Sarah Strong Smith urged her husband to try to settle down in one place. She wanted her children to get the opportunity to attend a solid Christian church and to grow up in the company of God-fearing people.

There was no school near the Smiths in Ohio, but they found their children could get schooling just the same. Dr. Simons, who lived near them, didn't just take care of the sick. He also taught many of the children round about. Dr. Simons became especially fond of young Jed Smith, whom he tutored for quite some time.

The doctor would come home at night worn out from a long trip to visit a patient, and there would be Jed waiting eagerly for him. Jed's wanting to learn arithmetic, English, biblical theology, and history made Dr. Simons forget how tired he was.

One evening, Jed seemed to be particularly excited when he met Dr. Simons.

"This book you gave me, Dr. Simons, about the Lewis and Clark expedition. I want to talk more about it, please," Jed said. "How did we get that big country west of the Mississippi, the Loui-

siana Territory they went through? I'm ashamed to admit it, but I don't know much about the history of our country."

"Don't be ashamed because you don't know something, Jed. You need be ashamed only if you ever stop trying to learn more," said Dr. Simons.



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"All right, let's talk about the Louisiana Territory. It stretches west from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains. It runs from the Gulf of Mexico on the south to Canada on the north, and takes in the important port of New Orleans at the mouth of the Mississippi.

"Spain had held the Louisiana Territory for a long time," continued Dr. Simons. "But in 1800, Napoleon of France forced Spain to give Louisiana to France.

"This news worried Americans who lived along the Mississippi and Ohio rivers. They sold their farm crops in New Orleans, and they were afraid that France would not let Americans do business freely in that city. People who lived in Tennessee, Kentucky, and Ohio wanted to go to war and take New Orleans from France."

Dr. Simons paused while Jed took notes.

“Then,” added Dr. Simons, “President Thomas Jefferson got busy. He did not want any war. But he did want to get control of New Orleans. So he sent his friend James Monroe to France to see if he could buy New Orleans from Napoleon. Monroe talked things over with Robert Livingston, the American minister to France. Monroe and the minister then went to see Napoleon, who really surprised them. Napoleon swept his hand over the map and offered to sell the whole Louisiana Territory to the United States.”

“But why, why did he do that?” exclaimed Jed. “How could Napoleon do that? Didn’t the people of France have anything to say about this?”

Dr. Simons laughed. “One question at a time, Jed. First, we must remember that what Napoleon said was law in France. The people could do nothing about it.”

“But, why did Napoleon suddenly decide to sell the whole Louisiana Territory after he had just gotten it from Spain?” asked Jed.

“Napoleon was getting ready to fight England again,” replied Dr. Simons. “He knew that England’s navy could keep France from sending soldiers to New Orleans. This meant that France would lose the territory to England. So why not make some money by selling Louisiana before he lost it?” Dr. Simons added.

“Well, anyway, Napoleon sold the Louisiana Territory to us for around \$15,000,000. The purchase of this land pushed our frontier 1,500 miles farther west. It made the Mississippi an American river and a safe water highway for our farmers and merchants.

“I say that the Louisiana Purchase was the greatest land bargain in the world. People back East think this territory is mostly rocks and forests. They say it is fit only for wild animals and a few hunters. But I believe it will one day be a rich land of farms and cities.”

Jed was to learn that Dr. Simons was right about the value of the Louisiana Territory. The Louisiana Purchase more than doubled the area of the United States. It probably did more than anything else to make the United States a great and important nation.

The Louisiana Territory contained the areas, which were to become the states of Louisiana, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, Iowa, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Montana. In time, Minnesota and parts of Colorado and Wyoming would also be made from this land.

Jed's eyes shone as he listened to the doctor. A longing awoke in him. It was as if that wonderful frontier beyond the Mississippi was calling to him. What really lay beyond the river, beyond the mountains? Some day he must find out for himself.

"Well, what is it, Jed?" Dr. Simons asked. "You act like you are full of questions again."

"Yes," said Jed. "There's so much I want to know. Tell me more about Lewis and Clark."

"First," said Dr. Simons, "you tell me what you know about them. Let me see how well you remember what you read."

"Well," said Jed, "President Jefferson was anxious to open the Louisiana Territory to settlers, so he ordered Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to explore it. He asked them to map a route up the Missouri River and across the Rocky Mountains and to describe the country they saw. Lewis and Clark started in the spring of 1804 and came back in the fall of 1806. They crossed the Rocky Mountains and then followed the Columbia River down to the Pacific Ocean."

"Correct," said Dr. Simons.

"But what about the country south of the Columbia River?" asked Jed. "Is there another way to cross the Rocky Mountains farther south?" Jed began to pace the room excitedly. "I have been looking at maps of that country. There are a lot of white spaces on

them. I want to know what is in those white spaces. I want to go out there some day and find out!”

“Calm down, Jed,” Dr. Simons laughed. “I’m sure you will find out what you want to know. Of course, you will have to wait until you are older. But you can prepare for your future calling by studying hard right now. Who knows, perhaps, in the providence of God, your life’s work will be to explore unknown lands for the good of Christ and His Kingdom.”

Dr. Simons paused, then in quite a new tone of voice he said, “We will take up our study of the Bible. Remember, Jed, no man will go far without the help of God and His Word. The Scriptures, my dear boy, will be as a lamp unto your feet and a light unto your path, if you will but apply God’s wisdom to your heart.”

Jed kept busy with his studies, but he was required to help his father clothe and feed a large family. He knew arithmetic and English, and that helped him to get a job as clerk on a Lake Erie freight boat. He was only fifteen, but he did a man’s work.

Working on the freight boat, Jed heard the British fur traders talk about the fur business. They said a man could make a lot of money trapping beaver, if he did not get killed by Indians. The beaver’s silky fur was needed to make men’s tall hats. There was a big demand for it back East.



Jed also heard the traders and trappers talk about faraway rivers. They spoke of the Snake, the Yellowstone, the Musselshell, the Madison, the Jefferson, and the Gallatin rivers, where the mighty Missouri River begins. The names kept running through Jed’s mind when he tried to go to sleep at night. Would he ever get to see those rivers?

For the next seven years, Jed continued working on Lake Erie freight boats. He spent much of his free time reading every book

he could find about the Far West. He also visited Dr. Simons and had long talks with him about everything from theology to buffalo hunting.

The older Jed got, the more convinced he became that it was God's will for him to explore the white spaces on the maps of the Far West. But the folks at home still needed him, and Jed was determined to honor his mother and father. There were five younger brothers who had to be given a start in life, and Jed prayed for the grace to wait patiently for the opportunity to begin his life's work.

A year later, the time at last came for this young man to say farewell to this home and family. Jed made up his mind to leave for the West. He had heard the trappers say money was to be made in the fur trade if a man only had but little brains and a lot of courage. Jed hoped that he could make enough money in a year or two to help out his youngest brothers and his parents.

But Jed did not like to think too much about making money. Dr. Simons had said a lot of things about people who thought too much about money. "God seldom blesses such people," said the wise doctor. So Jed liked to think about the good he could accomplish by exploring the uncivilized areas of the West.

Those faraway lands were waiting for someone with courage enough to explore them, Jed thought. Maybe he would be the first man to see the southern country beyond the Rocky Mountains. Even the brave Lewis and Clark had never seen it. Jed talked with Dr. Simons about going, and the doctor said, "If it is God's will, you will be the man who explores that land."

On the day Jed left for the West, his father put both hands on his shoulders, and cleared his throat but couldn't say anything for some time. Finally, he told his son to lean upon the Lord for daily strength.

Sarah Strong Smith kissed her son and said, "I am not going

to send you away with tears in my eyes, Jed. And I am not going to give you a lot of advice on what to do. You have always been a boy that could be trusted to do the right thing. Keep your faith in God, Jed, and think of us back home.”

Jed’s eyes were misty as he said good-bye to his parents and walked down the road to Dr. Simons’s house.

Upon arriving, the good doctor put a book of hymns in Jed’s hand. “These songs will be a comfort to you in the wilderness,” said Dr. Simons. “You are going to live in a wild land, Jed. You will meet many men who know little of God and are full of destructive habits. Don’t give up your faith. Don’t put your trust in men. Remember, you will go far if you always live by the grace of God.”

“I understand, Dr. Simons. You will never be ashamed of what I do out there.”

Jed put the book away in his pack and strapped the pack on his shoulders. He then picked up his rifle, shook hands with his old friend, and started on his way west.

It was the spring of 1822 when twenty-three year old Jed Smith arrived in St. Louis, a town of 5,000 on the edge of the wilderness. Jed was dressed in homespun clothes and carried a bag containing all he owned. His greatest treasures were his books: a Bible, the Methodist hymnbook, a history book, and his old book about the Lewis and Clark expedition.

Jed looked eagerly around him as he walked down the dusty streets. St. Louis seemed a great and wonderful city to him. It was exciting and filled with color. The streets by the water were crowded with bearded trappers dressed in buckskins, and with French boatmen wearing red woolen caps and shirts. They had bright-colored bands around their waists and wore rough leggings and moccasins. Among these rough-and-ready men were fashionably dressed American businessmen and French and Spanish visitors from New Orleans.

Everywhere Jed heard people talking about the fur trade. The “fur fever” was in the air. Men talked excitedly about one trapping party that had just returned with \$24,000 worth of beaver pelts. Just one year’s work in the wilderness, they said.

The trappers discussed supplies and boats, and waterways. They talked about fierce beasts and Indians. Men who had been up the Missouri River pointed out that \$2,000 worth of good trapping supplies could keep 20 trappers for a year. And each of these trappers might get at least \$1,000 worth of furs.

Of course, Indians might wipe out your trapping party and you would not make a cent. You might even lose your life. But that was a chance you had to take if you wanted to make money in the fur trade. Trapping was a business for the strong, for men with grit and courage.

As Jed shouldered his way through one crowd, he heard a man saying, “Major Henry has taken a hundred men up the Missouri to trap beaver. Now his partner, General William Ashley, is going to send more men up the river in a few days. Wish I wasn’t so old. I’d go along.”

“Who are those fellows you’re talking about—Henry and Ashley?” asked another man. “Do they know this fur business?”

“Who are Henry and Ashley?” echoed the first speaker. “You must be new around here or you wouldn’t ask. Why, Major Andrew Henry was one of the men who started the Missouri Fur Company back in 1808. He led men up the Missouri to the three forks of the Madison, Jefferson, and Gallatin rivers. He was the first man to trap beaver west of the Rocky Mountains in the Snake River country.”

As he spoke, the man waved his arms. He was clearly enjoying himself. “Major Henry,” he continued, “has been in the lead mining business for the past ten years. But I guess he couldn’t forget the mountains. He had to go back. Now, Ashley hasn’t been up the

Missouri, but he is pretty important hereabouts. He is next to the governor in the State of Missouri, and a general in the militia.”

Jed hurried away to find the office of General William H. Ashley. Perhaps the general would let him be one of the hundred to go up the Missouri!

A few minutes later, the young man from Ohio was standing before the man named Ashley. The general shook his head doubt-



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fully as he looked at the slim, smooth-shaven youth with the eager eyes. “Jed,” he said, “you certainly don’t look twenty-three. Maybe it would help if you grew a beard and let your hair get longer.”

“I can work as well as any man, General, hair or no hair. If you try me out for size, I will not let you down.”

“Well, young man, I will sign you up with our company at \$400 a year in spite of my doubts.”

“Art Black! Come over here!” the general called out when Jed had signed up.

A husky man with yellow hair and beard walked over to Ashley’s desk.

“Art, this is Jed Smith,” said Ashley. “He’s just signed up. Take charge of him and see that he has what he needs for the trip.”

“Howdy, Jed,” said Art. “Come along and meet some of the wild men who are going up the Missouri with you.”

As Jed walked silently along the street, Art stole glances at him. “He looks awfully young to me,” thought Art. “Wonder how he’ll get along with those rough-and-ready wild men Ashley has? Well, he’s tall and pretty husky and he might be tough if he got mad. The soft-spoken ones often are.”

It was two days later that Hank Johnson and Joe Holt found out they couldn’t push young Jed Smith around very long.