

MOUNTAIN MEN

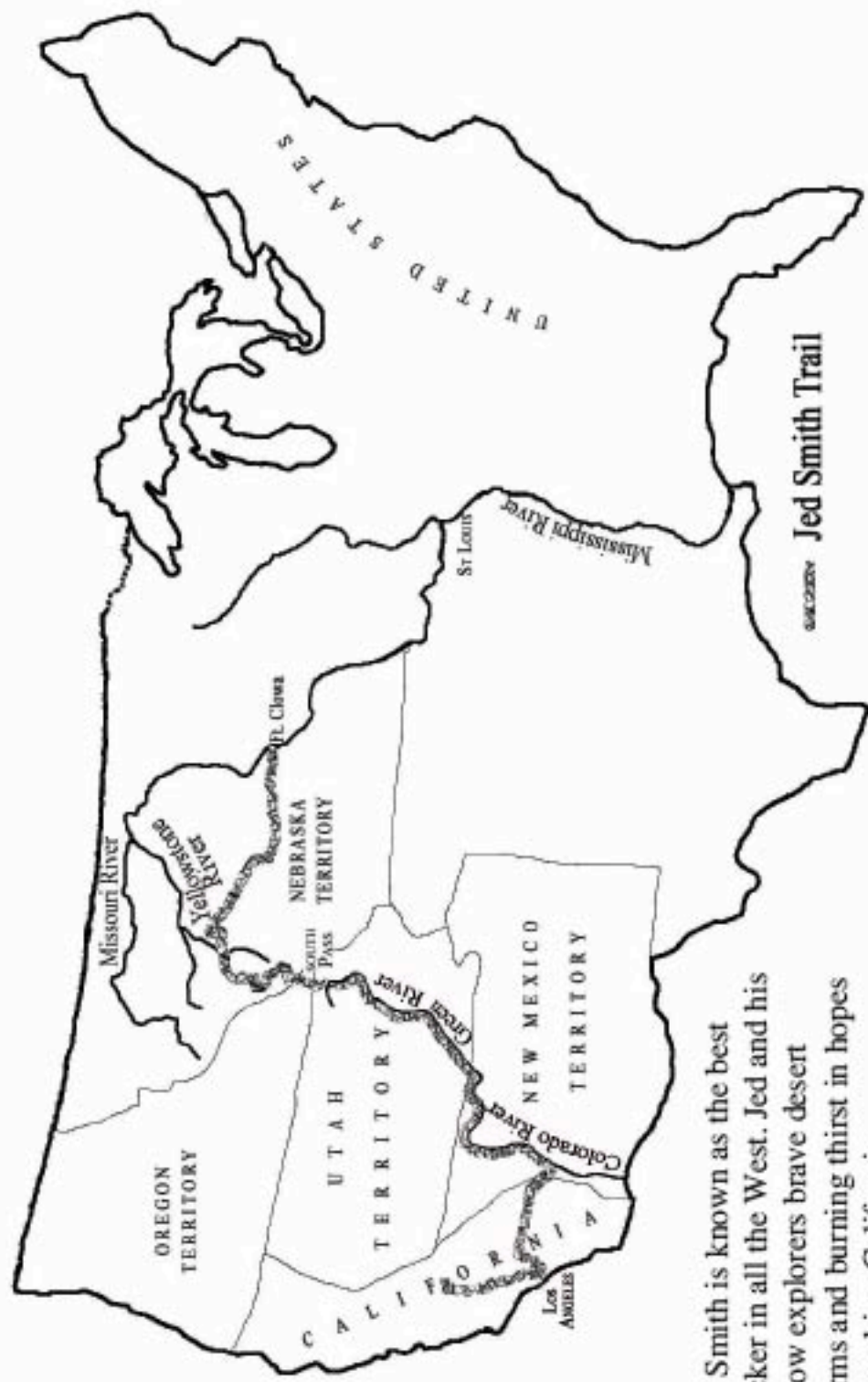
Jed Smith
California the Hard Way

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Jed Smith is known as the best tracker in all the West. Jed and his fellow explorers brave desert storms and burning thirst in hopes of reaching California.

Jed Smith Trail

CHAPTER 1

A Young Man's Dreams

When Jedediah (Jed) Smith was fifteen, he read stories about the American explorers, Lewis and Clark. After those stories, he wanted to live in the wilderness.

“I want to see places no white man has ever seen,” he said.

His friends didn't understand why Smith would choose such a hard life.

They said, “Life is already hard. Stay home, make money, and live in a nice house.”

Jed often read the Bible. He said, “When we die, we can have a nice house in heaven. For now, I want to see all I can see.”

Jed’s mother said, “That young girl Ann likes you. Stay and marry her.”

Jed liked Ann, too. But he could not stay. He left for the mountains. He would not see Ann again for four years.

Jed Smith had great outdoor skills, but he was not a typical mountain man. He didn’t drink or use tobacco. He didn’t brag or make jokes. When in trouble, he often prayed.

Jed would explore more than any other mountain man. In 1826, he led twenty men into the Rocky Mountains. Helped by Crow and

Cheyenne Indians, Smith discovered the South Pass. It was a treeless valley, and would allow wagons to cross the Rockies.

Jed Smith led his men over the Rocky Mountains through the South Pass. They camped next to the Green River. In the middle of the night, it began to rain. The men lay awake in wet blankets, unable to sleep.

“I hear California is the place,” Jed said.

“The place for what?” asked Will.

“The place for us,” Jed said. “I hear the sun always shines in California. You can pick oranges right off the trees. And California beavers are as big as bobcats.”

One of the trappers, a tall man named Rob,

said, “Where is California?” He had been with Jed for years. He would follow Jed anywhere.

“California is right next to the Pacific Ocean,” Jed said.

“I’ve never even seen an ocean,” Rob said.

“Me neither,” said another trapper named Will.

“Well, I’ve seen the Atlantic Ocean. And I plan to see the Pacific before I die,” said Jed.

The men talked all night. In the morning, Rob and Will said they would go to California with Jed. The rest of the party went back to the Rocky Mountains. They would trap for beaver furs there.

CHAPTER 2

The Desert

Jed, Will, and Rob made boats and paddled down the Colorado River. At times the river was as rough as a bucking horse.

Rob said, “The river looks like boiling mud.”

When they started walking again, the land was hot and dry. The rocks and dirt were red.

“Red dirt. You ever see anything like that?” Rob asked.

“Never did. But I know this. California is

on the other side of that desert,” Jed said as he pointed west.

It was hot, dry, and flat everywhere they looked. There was not a tree in sight.

The men started into the desert with only eight quarts of water. They would find water on the way. If not, they would die.

The men walked for three hours. The sun was very hot on their bodies. Soon they drank all their water.

Jed stopped and pointed. “We’ll find water at the foot of those hills. Only three more miles,” he said.

Rob and Will were so thirsty, it was hard to talk. But Smith’s words made them feel better.

“Maybe we’ll make it,” they thought.

After two hours, they found a stream.

“It’s right where Jed said it would be,” Rob said. He turned to Will. “You ever see anything like that? Jed sure knows the wilderness.”

They sat for hours in the stream and dumped hatfuls of water on their heads. They



splashed each other and laughed.

They saw several deer, but could not kill

any. Robert did shoot two hares that evening. They skinned the rabbits and cooked them in a pot.

“Better than horse meat,” Jed said. The other men nodded.

The desert night was cold. The men wrapped themselves in blankets and tried to sleep.

Suddenly, the wind picked up. It began to rain hard. Then the rain turned to icy hail.

“You ever see anything like this?” Rob said.

“I thought it never rained here,” Will said.

“And I didn’t know it would get cold enough to hail,” said Rob.

“Here!” Jed yelled. “Sit back to back.”

The men sat with their backs touching. They faced outward. Then they pulled their blankets up over them for shelter, like a tent.

“Sure as shootin’, California’s the place,” Jed said.

Then the hail stopped. But it rained hard for another hour. It quit just as the sun came up.

The men looked around in wonder. Last night the red canyon walls had been bone dry. Now there were waterfalls everywhere.

“It looks like someone poured tomato soup over those cliffs,” Rob said.

The clear rain water turned bright red as it washed over the rocks. The river beside them

turned red, too.

Suddenly they heard a new sound.

“What’s that noise?” Will asked.

“Sounds like water,” Jed said.

“Look!” Will shouted. All heads turned to look upstream. A great wall of red water was heading toward them.

“It’s a flash flood!” Jed yelled.

They were strong mountain men, but they felt helpless.

The wave of water hit them like a punch in the face. It swept over them and pulled them under water. They tumbled and rolled down the raging river. When their heads popped up above the water, they tried to breathe.

Finally, Jed was thrown onto land. He lay there for a while, breathing hard.

“I’m alive,” he thought. “But where are Will and Rob?”

He raised his head and saw them lying nearby. “You fellows all right?” Jed croaked.

“I’m not sure,” Rob said.

“I think I’m dead,” said Will.

Dripping wet, the men slowly got to their feet. Jed thanked God they were still alive.

An hour later, the river was a tiny stream again. The sun was hot and the air was dry.

Rob scratched his head and said, “It looks like it never rained.”

The men took off their clothes and laid

them on the ground to dry. Then they went looking for their gear. They found two rifles, three blankets, and their deer meat.

For the next hour, they stood around naked. The sun felt warm.

Their clothes dried quickly. The men dressed and moved on.

They followed the stream for a few miles. Soon it became a trickle. Then it disappeared into the sand.

“Jed, you ever see anything like that?” Rob asked.

“One minute there’s a stream. Then it’s gone,” Will said.

They walked up stream and splashed in the

water one last time. Then they drank, filled their water horns, and walked on.

The day grew hotter. The dirt turned to sand. With each step, their boots sank into the sand. Their feet were hot.

They were on a flat land that seemed to go on forever. There were no clouds. It felt as hot as a frying pan.

An hour later, they came to a spring. Water bubbled out of the ground.

“The water looks clean,” said Will.

Jed bent down and cupped his hands. He dipped them into the water and brought them to his lips. “This water is bad. It tastes rusty,” he said.

The men couldn't drink dirty water. It would ease their thirst. But it might make them sick.

The men said nothing. They felt Jed knew best.

CHAPTER 3

The Mountain

Jed awoke before sunrise. He decided to look for water. The other men slept.

He climbed a nearby hill. From the top he could see for miles in every direction. He saw only dry flatlands and rocky hills. But far to the southwest, he could see a mountain. It had snow on top. Jed guessed it was about fifty or sixty miles away.

Jed said to himself, “I won’t tell the men what I’ve seen. That mountain is too far away.

I can't have them lose hope."

In camp, Will was sewing a shirt. Rob sat on the ground drinking a cup of coffee. Both men looked sick. Their eyes drooped and their faces sagged.

Will said, "This desert is as hot as the devil's kitchen. There's not enough shade for even a grasshopper."

"Did you find water?" Rob asked.

Jed smiled. "I saw something. I think it was trees. I'm sure we'll find water there," he said.

"How far?" both men asked.

"Hard to tell. Not far," Jed lied.

Jed was packing his supplies. He looked at the two men. They were still sitting.

Jed said, “The sooner we start, the sooner we’ll get there.”

The three men walked on, thinking only of water. Every hour or so, Jed said gently, “Don’t worry, men. We’ll soon find water.”

But Jed was worried. Will looked very weak. He might not make it to the mountains.

They walked through miles of hot, flat sand. A few bushes grew here and there. Lizards ran from bush to bush to hide in the shade.

“Snow!” Will yelled. He had seen the snowy mountain.

Rob took off his hat and wiped his brow. “Look there,” he said. “The mountain comes up right out of the desert. You ever see anything

like that, Jed?”

“Do we have to get to that mountain?”
asked Will. “It looks far away.”

“Only to the foot of it,” Jed said. “We will
find a creek there.”

Will said, “I don’t think I can walk that far.
It looks as far away as the moon.”

Will was now walking ten steps behind the
others. Jed and Rob stopped and waited for him.

“You’ll make it, Will. We’ve been in worse
spots,” Jed said.

Will sat down on the sand to rest. But the
sand was too hot. Soon he had to stand again.

Will said, “I feel at home in the mountains.
But not here. I don’t understand this desert. I

don't understand a place with no trees. One minute there's no water. Then there's too much. Now there's none again. This is a scary place."

The men kept walking. In the afternoon, they stopped near a Joshua tree. It was at least thirty feet high. It looked like a man standing with his arms held upward.



They dug holes in the dirt. Then they lay in the holes to rest and cool down.

After their rest, they walked for five more hours until it was dark. The moonlight and stars lit their way. And it was cooler at night.

Sometime after midnight, they stopped. Will began to shake. Then he fell to the ground. Jed and Rob rolled him up in a blanket and let him sleep.

That night, Jed began writing a letter to Ann, the girl back home. He didn't know if he would ever mail it. But he felt he had to write to someone.

He began writing, "Dear Ann: It now seems likely that we might die in this desert."