

## THE OLD TRAPPER

Some of my favorite people in American history are frontiersmen -those daring and hardy individuals who risked their lives in uncharted and often hostile territories for no greater reason in many instances than to see what lay over the next hilt. My affection for these people has resulted in a certain sameness of subject matter in some of my Club papers, for which I apologize while feeling no genuine remorse. With that, let me proceed.

Last year we celebrated the 200th anniversary of the Louisiana Purchase, the greatest real estate steal in history. It literally doubled the land area of the fledgling United States and vaulted it into the uppermost tier of the world's richest nations - and all of this for a ridiculously low price of just \$15,000,000!

Inconceivable as it seems today, the difficulties encountered in negotiating with the French and raising the \$15,000,000 purchase price were outweighed by the uncertainties of trying to figure out just what we had bought. Trans-Mississippi lands were terra incognita and opinions as to the value of the Louisiana territory ranged from "we've been diddled" to "at last, we have a Northwest Passage to the Pacific". President Jefferson acted quickly to address the widespread speculation and dispatched a military party under Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to explore the new lands.

Departing from St. Louis in May, 1804, this contingent of approximately 30 men accomplished one of the most celebrated journeys in American history. In the space of 2 1/2 years, they blazed a tortuous path to the Pacific Ocean through lands which few, if any, white men had ever visited, and then returned to St. Louis with the loss of only one man. Jefferson characterized their efforts as "undaunted courage", the title used by the late Stephen Ambrose in his saga of the Lewis and Clark expedition. If you haven't read it, you should.

Many American history books reflect this historic expedition by assigning Lewis and Clark principal credit for opening the West to future settlement by emigrants and gold seekers. The fact remains, however, that Lewis and Clark concluded their expedition in 1806 - with most of the vast territory west of the Mississippi still unexplored. It remained for another group of hardy adventurers to complete the job.

These were fur trappers - primarily in search of beaver fur -who were to become known as "mountain men". These men have been shamefully neglected by historians and my story tonight is about one of them - a legendary character named Jim Bridger who has been one of my heroes since I was nine years old and reading stories about him in Open Road for Boys. As some of you may remember, this was a magazine for prepubescent males. A maiden aunt had endowed me with a subscription --probably because of her concern that I might be corrupted by reading

the [Police Gazette](#) in our local [barbershop](#).

But I digress. For 45 years Jim Bridger made his home in the Rocky Mountains and saw the West change from wilderness to settlement in his capacities as a fur trapper, entrepreneur, guide, military scout and elder statesman. It was a remarkable life of a remarkable man and I'll try to do it justice in the time available.

Jim Bridger was born, it is believed, in Richmond, Virginia, on March 17, 1804, just two months before Lewis and Clark departed. His parents were reasonably well-off and owned both a tavern and a farm, but they got caught up in the westward emigration fever of 1812 and moved to a farm near St. Louis, which was at that time a glorified trading post of some 1500 souls. The life was hard and, in four years, Jim was orphaned and placed in the care of a maiden aunt.

Although he was 14 at the time, Jim had had no formal schooling. He never learned to read or write although, as we'll see, that didn't seem to matter a lot in his later life. It was decided that he should be apprenticed to a blacksmith and, for the next five years, he labored at the forge, acquiring such learning as he could from those around him.

St. Louis was the center of the fur trade, and it was becoming clear in the early 1820's that the demands of the fur industry could no longer be met by individual trappers who were always vulnerable to hostile Indians. Instead, it was decided to organize large bands of trappers for both protection and efficiency in exploiting the western resources.

So it was, in the Missouri REPUBLICAN of March 20, 1822, that one of the most celebrated "want ads" in history appeared. It read:

"To enterprising young men: The subscriber wishes to engage one hundred young men to ascend the Missouri River to its source, there to be employed for one, two, or three years. For particulars enquire of Major Andrew Henry, near the lead mines in the county of Washington, who will ascend with and command the party; or of the subscriber near St. Louis. Signed: William H. Ashley.

To [Bridger](#), the notice appeared to have been addressed especially to him. Henry and Ashley were well-known in St. Louis. Major Henry had trapped the northern Rocky Mountain streams in 1809-10, but had been driven out by the [Blackfoot](#) Indians. General Ashley was a man of political and business prominence in St. Louis, with interests in mining and banking. He could command almost unlimited capital for the new enterprise, later called the "Rocky Mountain Fur Company", which would replace individual trappers with a systematized organization.

The call for 100 men was answered in no time. Among the recruits, in addition to [Bridger](#), were such men as [Etienne Provot](#) (after whom [Provo](#), Utah is named), Thomas

Fitzpatrick and Milton and William Sublette, all of whom were to figure prominently in the fur trade and western history in later years. The plan was for the party to go up the Missouri by boat, accompanied by a land party with horses, to the Three Forks in Montana. (This is between Bozeman and Butte in West Central Montana.) They would trap the streams on both sides of the Rockies and probably penetrate as far west as the mouth of the Columbia River. It was the intention to return to St. Louis before the expiration of the 3-year enlistment period.

The expedition departed St. Louis on April 15, 1822, in two large keel boats accompanied by a large herd of horses. The keel boats were about 75 feet in length and 15 feet in width. They drew only 2 or 3 feet of water and were propelled by poling. The crewmen would place long poles on the river bottom and drive the boat ahead by walking toward the stern. Where the water was too deep for poling, ropes would be attached to the horses on shore who would draw the boat upstream. It was hard work, particularly on a river that was uncharted, sand-choked and bristling with log snags, and disaster was never far away. Such a disaster befell the expedition about two weeks out when one of the boats ran into a snag and sank instantly with all its cargo. All the crewmen were able to make it to shore, however, and the expedition pushed ahead with its remaining supplies. Food, fortunately, was not a problem because there was ample game along the river, as well as berries, wild currants and other fruits.

A second disaster occurred in North Dakota in August when a band of Indians, professing friendship, stole all 50 of the expedition's horses. This development forced a change in plans and the expedition was compelled to make its winter camp at the mouth of the Yellowstone River. (This is at the border of present-day Montana and North Dakota - nearly 450 river miles short of their original goal of Three Forks.) Most of the men set to work constructing a substantial fort, called Fort Union, but General Ashley and a few men returned to St. Louis to recruit more men and purchase more supplies. The winter was not wasted for those who remained behind; the men used it to develop skills for survival on the frontier.

Their preparations were prudent. The Indian tribes were becoming alarmed by the increasing number of invading whites. The Ankara's, a very war-like tribe in the Dakota's, had long harbored resentment against whites and rose up in 1823 when General Ashley came back up the river from St. Louis. They succeeded in routing Ashley and his men, who lost 14 dead, and it was only the intervention of a U.S. Army expeditionary force from Ft. Leavenworth that saved the whites.

One of Ashley's most experienced men was Hugh Glass, who has attained legendary status by virtue of an incredible incident early on the trip West. I must note that there are quite a few variations on this story -most of them emanating from Glass himself. One historian has indicated that he "would not eliminate the story entirely from books, but maybe just from those

books that pretend to be historical." I have selected a version that has attained some measure of credibility. Glass was an expert marksman and often was detailed to procure game for the other trappers. One day, while scouting ahead of the main party for fresh meat, he stumbled across a female grizzly bear lying in a thicket. Before he could even cock his rifle, the bear seized him and mauled him severely. Finally, others came up and killed the bear, but Glass was left unable to stand and in terrible pain; it seemed unlikely he would live. Major Henry could not bring himself to leave Glass to die alone so he offered a reward to any two men who would stay with him until he either died or recovered sufficiently to be conveyed to a trading post. The two men who volunteered were Thomas Fitzgerald and 19 year-old Jim Bridger.

For two days, the young attendants did what they could to minister to Glass. And then their imaginations began to take hold. They thought about the hostile Indians in the area and the possibility that another bear might appear on the scene. They considered that death was but a matter of time for Glass and decided to desert him while he was unconscious and report to the main party that he had died. Not only did they desert him but, in addition, they took his rifle, his knife and all his other possessions except for a razor and a small kettle.

When Glass regained consciousness and saw his situation, it would have been easy to give up and die. As he said later, however, the desertion by his comrades inspired feelings of revenge to see them brought to justice. He dragged himself to the edge of a nearby creek and reclined there for several days gathering strength. When he discovered he could crawl, he decided to seek help and began crawling towards the Missouri River at the rate of about two miles per day. Along the way, he ate the remains of a buffalo calf which wolves had earlier killed and partially eaten. He crawled for 40 days before reaching a deserted Ankara village. Here he enticed a stray dog close enough to kill it with his razor and lived for several days on the carcass. Continuing to crawl down the Missouri on his hands and knees, he was discovered by a small party of Sioux Indians who - like good Samaritans - treated his wounds and took him to a trading post.

There, Glass recovered from his wounds and headed back up the Missouri to the trappers' annual rendezvous. His appearance was to them a miraculous resurrection. But, to young Jim Bridger, the shock of Glass's reappearance had a numbing effect. A contemporary account says: "He stood without power of any emotion; his eyes rolled wildly in their sockets; his teeth chattered; and a clammy sweat rose upon his ashy features"^^ Glass had intended to kill Bridger, but, seeing his reaction, took pity on the young man and spared his life. This incident formed the basis of a Hollywood movie called "Man in the Wilderness" which perhaps some of you have seen. It illustrates most vividly the incredible life force of these men and the code by which they lived. Incidentally, Hugh Glass was to live for another 10 years in the mountains before being killed in an Indian raid in 1853 near Billings, Montana.

Within a year or two of Ashley's arrival in the Rockies, the place was crawling with bands of trappers working the streams on both sides of the mountains. Beaver pelts, used in making men's hats of the time, were valued at \$6-8 in St. Louis; of this, the individual trapper received about a dollar, and there was no shortage of men willing to endure the hard life to make that kind of money.

And it WAS a hard life. The beaver is a timid animal, working mostly at night, and is highly suspicious of foreign scents, such as those of the trapper himself. Often it was necessary for the trapper to wade in water for many miles in order to conceal his scent. Mountain-fed streams, even in the summer, are ice-cold and the trappers often worked for hours in cold and sodden buckskins, carrying a half-dozen traps, a rifle, tomahawk, knife and whetstone.

And, always, there was the concern about hostile Indians. There were many skirmishes with them - with many dead on both sides. To live in that environment required a certain disregard for one's own life, and I have always admired the bravery - or perhaps the fatalism - of these men.

But, Bridger did more than trap and fight Indians, He was a natural-born traveler and geographer, with an incredible memory for every valley, stream and physical feature he encountered. He is given credit for two important discoveries. The first came in 1823, when he and a few other trappers, came upon South Pass, the defile through the Rockies and over the Continental Divide which emigrants were to use in succeeding years. Obviously, the Indians were aware of and had used South Pass extensively, but Bridger and his companions were the first white men known to have been there.

The second discovery was of even more moment, and was credited to Bridger alone. While in winter quarters in 1824, an argument arose among the trappers as to the location of the mouth of the Bear River on which they were camped. More or less to settle a wager, Bridger took a "bull boat" - hides stretched over a wooden frame - down the Bear until he reached a large lake whose water had a salty flavor - the Great Salt Lake. Bridger did not explore its perimeter, as later trappers did, and, in fact, mistakenly believed he had found an arm of the Pacific Ocean. Nevertheless, neither his contemporaries nor any subsequent historians have denied him credit as the lake's discoverer.

Bridger's relationship with the Indians must be characterized as "inconsistent", at best. Like many of his comrades, he had Indian wives; in fact, he had three of them. Unlike most of the others, however, he took them in succession rather than simultaneously. First, he married a Flathead woman, then a Ute, and, finally, a Snake woman. He had 6 children (4 girls and 2 boys) by these wives and 4 of them - both the boys and two of the girls - lived to adulthood. Best

known of them was his daughter, Virginia, who married an army officer and took care of Bridger in his final days. Bridger reputedly was kind and thoughtful to his wives and children. Two of the girls were sent back East to the Catholic School at St. Charles, Missouri, for their schooling. One other daughter was sent to the school run by Dr. Marcus Whitman in Walla Walla, Washington. Dr. Whitman, a medical missionary, was a good doctor who had removed two arrowheads embedded in Bridger's back on one occasion. But, he was also an intolerant prig who had neither sympathy nor regard for the religion or customs of the Cayuse Indians to whom he was ministering. They finally lost patience with the man and, after blaming him for an epidemic among the tribe, killed him, his wife and all the whites in his mission school in 1847. One of the victims was 11 year-old Mary Ann Bridger.

Bridger was respected by the Indians as a formidable protagonist and one whose neutrality - if not friendship - was desirable. From his earliest days in the West, Bridger understood that Indians saw nothing wrong in using treachery to gain an advantage over a foe. He adopted the same approach and one notable incident will perhaps illustrate how effective it could be.

A man named Joseph Meek, one of Bridger's trappers, had been captured by the Crow Indians. He was promised that his life would be spared if he would disclose where the rest of the Bridger party could be found. Unable to refuse an offer like that, he supplied the information, but lied about the number of armed men at Bridger's disposal. When the Indians saw the size of the white force, they were more than a little irritated with Meek but decided to attack Bridger's camp anyway and decide on poor Meek's fate later. While they were preparing for battle, Bridger appeared about 300 yards from them and made signs that the Crow chief should send one of his sub-chiefs out to "smoke with him", that is, to negotiate; the second-in-command of the Crow war party, named Little Gun, was designated to go. He approached to within about 100 yards of Bridger, where, according to Crow laws of war, each man was forced to strip and proceed the remaining distance in the nude. When they met, they were supposed to embrace and kiss and then proceed to parley. Bridger had been thoughtful enough, however, to have five of his armed men crawl up a nearby ravine and capture Little Gun as the two negotiators were embracing. With Little Gun in his possession, Bridger made signs to the Indians for a prisoner exchange and, with some gnashing of teeth, I'm sure, the Indians released Meek and broke off their preparations for battle.

By 1839, the trapping industry was virtually finished, but Bridger's keen vision of the future saw a new direction for the West - servicing the wagon trains of emigrants who were beginning to cross the overland trail to Oregon and California. He decided, therefore, to build a fort, which would provide a sanctuary and trading post for emigrants, as well as a place where

repairs could be made to their wagons and equipment. Also, it was to be a place where an experienced man like Bridger could provide a guide service to the emigrants as they went through hostile country. The fort was constructed by the first week of August, 1843, on the Green River in Southwestern Wyoming and was the first trading post beyond the Mississippi ever built for this purpose. Named "Fort Bridger", it marked the beginning of the era of emigration for the far West.

As it turned out, Bridger got the fort built just in time. Only one or two parties had been going west for the 6 years prior to 1843. But, in that year, nearly 1500 people made the long trek to Oregon and in 1844 that number increased to 3000. It was the beginning of a great migration and led the Indians to declare that the whites in the East "must be as numerous as the leaves on the trees." And what did these pilgrims see when they arrived at Fort Bridger, this oasis in the wilderness? One early account described it as a "shabby concern, built of poles and daubed with mud." The writer went on to observe: "I cannot imagine how the term fort came to be applied to these trading stations, for they have no one point of resemblance to such a structure, Fort Bridger being even more destitute than the others of any such feature". The fort was surrounded by the lodges of 25 or so trappers and their Indian wives. The latter had a good supply of animal robes, rough clothing, moccasins and blankets which they traded to the emigrants. Horses were available for purchase or trade and cost between \$25 and \$50.

One of the wagon trains which stopped at Fort Bridger was the famous (or infamous) Donner Party which arrived at the fort in July, 1846. The leaders of this party were much influenced by reports of a new and shorter route to California which passed along the south shore of the Great Salt Lake. This route had supposedly been explored by a man named Lansford Hastings and he publicized it extensively, even though it had not yet been established that a wagon train - as opposed to riders on horses - could negotiate the difficult terrain. Some have claimed that Bridger was eager to see the new trail, called the "Hastings Cut-off", utilized by the emigrants, rather than the northerly route which most of the wagon trains used. His eagerness, it is said, stemmed from the fact that he would profit greatly from the provisioning of the wagon trains since his trading post was squarely on the route. One account contends that the Donner Party would not have tried the new route, but for Bridger's urgings, but there is nothing in the accounts of the survivors of the Donner train to indicate that they ever talked with Bridger. At any rate, 87 persons in the Donner party embarked on the Hastings Cut-off, only to be trapped by deep snow in the mountains. The story of their hunger and their descent into cannibalism is part of the lore of the old West.

Bridger's reputation has also been somewhat sullied by his encounter with Brigham Young when the latter was leading the Mormon migration to the Salt Lake Valley in 1847. The

encounter was what you might call an "interpersonal disaster", which had long-lasting consequences for Bridger. Young desired to get information from Bridger about the climate and soil conditions in the valley to see if farming would be possible. Bridger was anything but encouraging in his assessment of the Mormons' chances of survival in the Salt Lake Valley, saying that no one to his knowledge had successfully raised corn there because of the short growing season. He said he would give \$100 (re-telling over the years has increased the amount to \$1000) for the first ear of corn anyone could produce. This dire assessment was, of course, at odds with Brigham Young's prophecies - of which Bridger was completely unaware - and prompted an almost paranoid fixation on his part against our hero.

Obviously, the Mormons DID ultimately raise corn in the Salt Lake Valley (probably because they made use of a species which ripened over a shorter period of time.) They claimed their ability to grow corn was a special mark of God's protection over them and they demonized Bridger as a non-believer who had tried to talk them out of settling in their "promised land". The anti-Bridger frenzy reached a point where word was sent by the Mormons to Bridger that he would not be welcome in Utah should he ever decide to leave the mountains.

A climax of sorts came in 1853 when Young sent a large posse to take Fort Bridger and bring its owner to Salt Lake City for Mormon justice. There was no difficulty in taking the so-called fort; Bridger, however, was not at home when the Mormon force came calling - and he didn't reappear until they had gone. Before leaving, however, the Mormons destroyed all of Bridger's trade goods and supplies - including, to the regret of its habitués - the entire stock of whiskey at the fort.

Whether it was the loss of the whiskey or the fact that the emigrants selected a route away from the fort, Fort Bridger was finished as a trading post. The U.S. Army moved into it during our government's ill-advised "war" against the Mormons in 1857 and improved it considerably. In 1858, the Army leased the Fort from Bridger for a period of ten years, with an option to buy it for \$10,000 at the end of that time. They stayed, off and on, until 1890.

No longer an entrepreneur, Bridger fell back upon his knowledge of the West and became a guide. He worked for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in exploring the Yellowstone River and all its subsidiaries in 1859. It was on this expedition that Bridger discovered gold in a small stream in the Black Hills. He showed samples to General Reynolds, in charge of the expedition, but Reynolds told him to throw the samples away and say nothing, fearing that his soldiers would desert and go prospecting if they found out. General George Custer made a survey of the same region in 1874 and confirmed the presence of gold. He was not as circumspect as General Reynolds, however, and word of the find inspired the Black Hills gold rush that same year.

Bridger's performance for the Army impressed the commander of the plains, General

**Grenville** Dodge, who appointed him as principal guide and chief of scouts for the western plains in 1865. He served in this capacity for three years and participated in the final few years of significant **Indian** wars in the West.

He had become a **legend** in the West - truly larger than life - and he was not hesitant about contributing to that legend in his declining years. With few of his contemporaries still around to contradict him, he spun tales that perhaps contained a grain of truth, but the truth was so twisted that it could barely be separated from fiction. For example, he supposedly once asserted that he didn't eat bread for a period of 17 years.

In creating his legend, he was aided and abetted by the famous Ned **Buntline**, the pen name for Col. Edward **Zane Carroll Judson**. Col. **Judson** was an interesting historical character in his own right. He had been chief of scouts among the Indians prior to the Civil War and had held the rank of colonel. But a strong interest in literary matters - begun when he was a teenager - caused him to **leave** the dusty life of the prairie. From about 1850 on, he devoted himself to writing sensational stories for certain weekly newspapers under the byline of "Ned Buntline". He was very successful at this, making as much as \$20,000 per year.

Buntline met **Bridger** in about 1860 and the two men hit it off immediately. The old trapper gave Buntline enough stories to last him a **lifetime** and Buntline responded by writing "Bridger stories" which were **published** once a week for over a year. One writer has noted that: "**Buntline** made **Bridger** famous and carried him through more hairbreadth escapes than any man ever had." I would guess that it was some of Bunt-line's stories that I was reading as a nine-year old.

In May, 1868, Bridger was discharged from the Army at his request and he decided to leave the West. His eyesight was failing and it was increasingly difficult for him to cope with the rigors of western **life**. His daughter, Virginia, had been urging him to come live with her in Missouri and he apparently felt it was time to do so.

His trip back to Missouri from the mountains was very much in the nature of a **triumphal** procession, and at each stop the old mountain man was welcomed into retirement by the awe and respect of a whole new generation of western settlers. I should note that those welcoming ceremonies were facilitated by large quantities of whiskey and other spirits.

For his first **five** years in retirement, he was occupied in trying to get the government to compensate him for taking over Fort Bridger. He was finally successful - but only after his death - in getting \$6000 from them. In 1873, he lost most of his failing eyesight. His daughter got him a gentle horse which he rode around his farm, accompanied by an old dog named Sultan. He was **lonely** in his final years, yearning for the mountains and his old comrades. He died in 1881, at the age of 77, and is buried near the small town of Dallas, Missouri, next to his two sons.

The only monument of any significance erected to his memory is in Kansas City, Missouri, and was placed there by General Dodge, under whom Bridger had served as a guide and scout. It reads:

JAMES BRIDGER

Celebrated as a hunter, trapper, fur trader and guide. Discovered Great Salt Lake 1824, the South Pass 1823. Visited Yellowstone Lake and Geysers 1830. Founded Fort Bridger 1843. Was a guide for U. S. exploring expeditions.

In addition to the small town of Fort Bridger in Wyoming, there is a Bridger, Montana (pop. 692) and various creeks, meadows, lakes, passes, peaks and trails in Wyoming, Montana and Utah which bear the old trapper's name. In recent years, the Teton National Forest in Wyoming has been renamed the "Bridger Teton National Forest" - a most beautiful and appropriate recognition of the contribution he made to the American West.

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December 6, 2004