

# Mountain Man Jedediah Smith Meets His Match in the Great Basin • 1827 •

Read the  
story.

Write a  
12-15 sentence  
summary.



**J**edediah Smith thought his troubles were over. He and his fur trader companions were about to embark on the last leg of their exploration of the Southwest. In a few days, they would reach the annual fur trading Rendezvous in the Rocky Mountains.

It seemed like a long time had passed since Smith and his partners, David E. Jackson and William L. Sublette, had bought General William Ashley's fur trading company. Then, just a year before—in the summer of 1826—Smith decided to take a party of men and explore the area between what has since become Utah

and California. His excitement about seeing this new territory and the hope of finding many new sources of beaver made him optimistic.

Now, at the end of the expedition, he reconsidered the merits of his actions. The large group of men, horses, and mules he started with had dwindled to two men besides himself, seven horses, and two mules. Now, however, he had only to cross the Great Basin to reach home.

The land between Utah and California is made up of a series of valleys and mountain ranges. A basin or valley separates each mountain range from the next. Around the Great Salt Lake, streams that would normally run off into the sea end up in the lake or the surrounding mud flats. Having collected salt-bearing runoff for hundreds of thousands of years, the many water sources in the Great Basin are brackish.

On June 22, Smith and his remaining companions, Robert Evans and Silas Gobel, spent the night on the briny edge of a small salty lake. Here the Great Basin played its first prank. One of Smith's horses, trotting across some crusty mud, sank suddenly into the ooze up to its stomach. Try as they could, the men could not free the animal. A frustrated Smith killed the horse and salvaged what meat he could.

Smith and his friends decided to travel in the valleys and rocky foothills. Each mountain range they passed looked the same—snowcapped peaks with intermittent streams along their flanks. On June 23, the men shot at an antelope and missed. Luckily, they bagged two rabbits for dinner. They were getting tired of horse meat.

The next day, the men stopped twice for water. After that, the only water they found was too salty to drink. The party camped that night without water.

Smith got up early the next morning. He rode to the top of a nearby hill to scout what lay ahead. The desert seemed to stretch on forever. Then, on the way back, Smith's horse gave out on him. When he finally got back to camp, he evasively told Gobel and

Evans that he had seen a dark spot on the horizon that must be water. He knew the truth would demoralize them.

Under a scorching sun, the men plodded on through the soft sand. Each step was an effort; each breath of dry air brought pangs of thirst. By late afternoon, the men could go no farther. Smith, who knew from his previous treks what had to be done, made Evans and Gobel join him in digging holes in the shade of a juniper tree. They buried themselves in the sand to cool off and rest. When the sun went down, they dug out and traveled on. Soon the men saw turtledoves; according to Smith, this meant water was somewhere nearby. They searched for it in vain.

At ten that night, the men tried to sleep. Cruelly, their thirst brought on dreams of water. In the state he was in, Smith later wrote, gold and honors meant nothing to him. All he wanted was the clear, refreshing streams of the mountains.

At midmorning on June 25, Evans fell motionless under a juniper tree. He refused to get up. Smith and Gobel, promising to return for him, continued in search of water. Some time later, they saw Indians headed for the place where they had left Evans. They heard gunshots and saw smoke. They didn't turn around. Doggedly, they trudged on.

Three miles later, they came upon a spring. Gobel jumped right into the water. Smith poured water over his head and down his throat as fast as he could. The two men filled their water horns and hurried back to the juniper tree.

Evans was still there. He hadn't even seen the Indians; he had fired shots and lit a fire to make sure his companions could find him again. Smith poured a mixture of water and horse meat from a large kettle into Evans's mouth. When Evans felt strong enough, the trio returned to the spring to drink their fill and recuperate.

How curious it was, Smith reflected in his journal, that a hungry man takes several days to recover, but a thirsty man seems to revive much sooner. "Hunger can be endured twice as long as thirst." During the day they spent at the freshwater spring, the three saw several Indians on the hilltops looking down at them.

The white men sat still and looked back, no doubt wondering (among other things) how these people could survive in such a harsh environment. The Paiute and Goshute who lived in the Great Basin seemed primitive to men like Smith. He claimed they survived on insects, lizards, small game, and plants, thus he saw them as inferior to other tribes he encountered. Ironically, the Paiutes and Goshutes knew much more about the Great Basin than Smith, most importantly where to find fresh water. But the Indians on the hilltop did not come any closer to protest.

On the morning of June 26, Smith, Evans, and Gobel trudged on to the north, passing several more brackish springs. They encountered a group of Shoshone Indians. Smith recognized the nomads and was able to communicate with them. A few days' ride to the northeast, they told him, he and his men would find plenty of buffalo. Smith pressed them for information about the Great Salt Lake, the landmark that would show him the way home to the Cache Valley and the Rendezvous. The Shoshone seemed to know nothing about it.

But on June 27, the three men found cause to celebrate. They saw the Great Salt Lake ahead, large and blue and ringed to the east by the prodigious Wasatch Mountains. Safe at last! To Smith, the Great Salt Lake offered a homecoming. He loved the place. The walk around the southern end of the lake seemed easy. Even crossing the Jordan River at flood stage felt like a happy adventure.

A few days later, the three fur trappers made it to the mountain man rendezvous at Bear Lake. They were down to one horse and one mule. Their friends had feared them lost. In jubilation, the men at the rendezvous fired a cannon. Smith, a man who was known for his disdain of alcohol, tobacco, and loose women, made no record in his journal of how he celebrated.