

# Jim Bridger

*America's Famous Mountain Man*

*Louis Accola*

*Margaret Gee*

*The Grayling Post Office*

*George Poetter's Canyon Store*

*Spieth and Krug Building*

*Tribute to Wilbur Spring*



# JIM BRIDGER – MOUNTAIN MAN

By John C. Russell

**T**here are numerous places in the American West that bear the name Bridger - geographic listings in Wyoming, Utah, and of course here in Montana. Bozeman lies within the shadow of the Bridger Mountain Range. There's also Bridger Creek, and numerous businesses that bear the moniker. Chances are you or someone you know has had a pet named Bridger, and undoubtedly you know the name comes from America's foremost mountain man, Jim Bridger.

If anyone experienced the true life of a frontiersman, it was Jim Bridger. He began by trapping beaver, but unlike most others, refused to leave the Rockies after the fur trade collapsed in the late 1830's. He operated a trading post, guided hunting parties, scouted for the US Army, and led pioneers to the Gallatin Valley or to Virginia City. Through the years Bridger became so familiar with the terrain it was said "...he could smell his way where he could not see it."<sup>1</sup> In all, he spent some forty-plus years in the wilderness, and made only occasional trips back to "civilization" until poor health and failing eye sight forced him to spend his final years with family in Missouri.

James Felix "Jim" Bridger was born March 17, 1804, in Richmond, Virginia, the son of tavern keeper James Bridger and his wife Chloe Tyler Bridger. Bridger's ancestors first migrated to the new world from England during the colonial period, and in 1812, the Bridgers moved to a farm in Missouri, about six miles from St. Louis. Chloe died in 1816, and James, Sr. passed away in 1817. Bridger supported his sister and a maiden aunt, but still found time to learn how to trade with the Indians who lived along the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. He also apprenticed as a blacksmith, a trade that would come in handy later on. By the time he was eighteen, Bridger stood just over six feet tall, was muscular, and according to a friend was "...spare, straight as an arrow, agile, rawboned and of powerful frame."<sup>2</sup> He had brown hair and beard and gray eyes.

In 1822, entrepreneurs William Ashley and Andrew Henry placed ads in St Louis newspapers, seeking one hundred "enterprising young men . . . to ascend the river Missouri to its source, there to be employed for one, two, or three years." Hungry for adventure, Bridger signed on. He became one of what was to be known as "Ashley's Hundred." Other enlistees were Jim Beckwourth, Tom Fitzpatrick, Hugh Glass, Jedediah Smith, and William Sublette, men destined to leave their mark, but not to the same extent as Jim Bridger.

Ashley and Henry's ambitious undertaking marked the beginning of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. Other American companies had been thwarted in the fur trade, due largely to the British Hudson's Bay Company domination and the intransigence of their allies, the Blackfeet. Manuel Lisa led some successful forays into the Missouri River area, and in 1809, he teamed up with investors that included Pierre Chouteau, Jr., William Clark, and Andrew Henry to form the St. Louis Missouri Fur Trading Company. They sent trappers up the Missouri to build trading posts, and Henry, accompanied



Jim Bridger Statue in front of the Bozeman Area Chamber of Commerce Building.

*Ott Jones Sculpture.*

by lead scout John Colter, a veteran of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, led some of these trappers to the Three Forks, arriving on April 3, 1810. They built a three-hundred square foot stockade on a piece of land between the Jefferson and Madison Rivers. But the post was under constant siege by the Blackfeet. Several men were killed, and the threat of grizzly bears was also a never ending problem. John Colter was among the first to quit the enterprise. The others soon followed. John Jacob Astor's Pacific Fur Company, founded the same year as the Three Forks debacle, built Fort Astoria near the mouth of the Columbia River, but the threat of British invasion during the War of 1812 forced Astor to sell out to the Montreal-based North West Company.<sup>3</sup>

Thanks to an economic downturn following the War of 1812, the American fur trade was basically non-existent until "Ashley's Hundred" left St. Louis in the spring of 1822. By October 1<sup>st</sup> they established a crude fort at the mouth of the Yellowstone. The men would battle not only the Blackfeet as they pushed deeper into fur-trapping country, but also grizzly bears. Jedediah Smith was mauled by a grizzly near the Powder River in September, 1823. He survived the attack, but would carry massive scars for the rest of his life. That same month Hugh Glass, while en route with Henry and a contingent of traders from Fort Kiowa to Fort Henry at the Yellowstone, was also mauled. His wounds were bandaged, but Henry, believing Glass would soon die, enticed Jim Bridger and John Fitzgerald to care for the trapper until the end came. Henry, worried about the Arikara, was anxious to get back to the Yellowstone.<sup>4</sup>

Like Henry, Bridger and Fitzgerald were also worried about the Arikara. They abandoned Glass, later telling Henry the trapper had died. But that was not the case. Glass was alive, and incredibly crawled his way over the next six weeks back to Fort Kiowa, living off berries, rattlesnake, bone marrow in a buffalo carcass, and meat from another buffalo killed by wolves. Following further recuperation, Glass made his way to Henry's new fort at the mouth of the Bighorn. He wanted revenge, but spared Bridger, due to his youth and inexperience. As for Fitzgerald, he was gone, headed down the Missouri. By the time Glass finally caught up with him, Fitzgerald had joined the army and was stationed at Fort Atkinson. Since Fitzgerald was protected by his uniform and his commanding officer, Glass had to back off.

In 1823, Henry dispatched a party of traders, Bridger among them, to trap in the Big Horn region, where they also wintered. In the spring these men, led by John Weber,<sup>5</sup> headed to South Pass, on to the Green River, and eventually to the Bear River in the Uinta Mountains. Plenty of beaver were found in the nearby streams, and the Cache Valley offered an ideal location for shelter against storms. Here the men made their winter camp of 1824-1825. Curious as to the course of the Bear River, Bridger was chosen to explore the stream. Upon his return, he told the others the river emptied into a large lake that tasted of salt. The men thought Bridger may have found an inlet of the Pacific Ocean. In reality, he found the Great Salt Lake.<sup>6</sup>

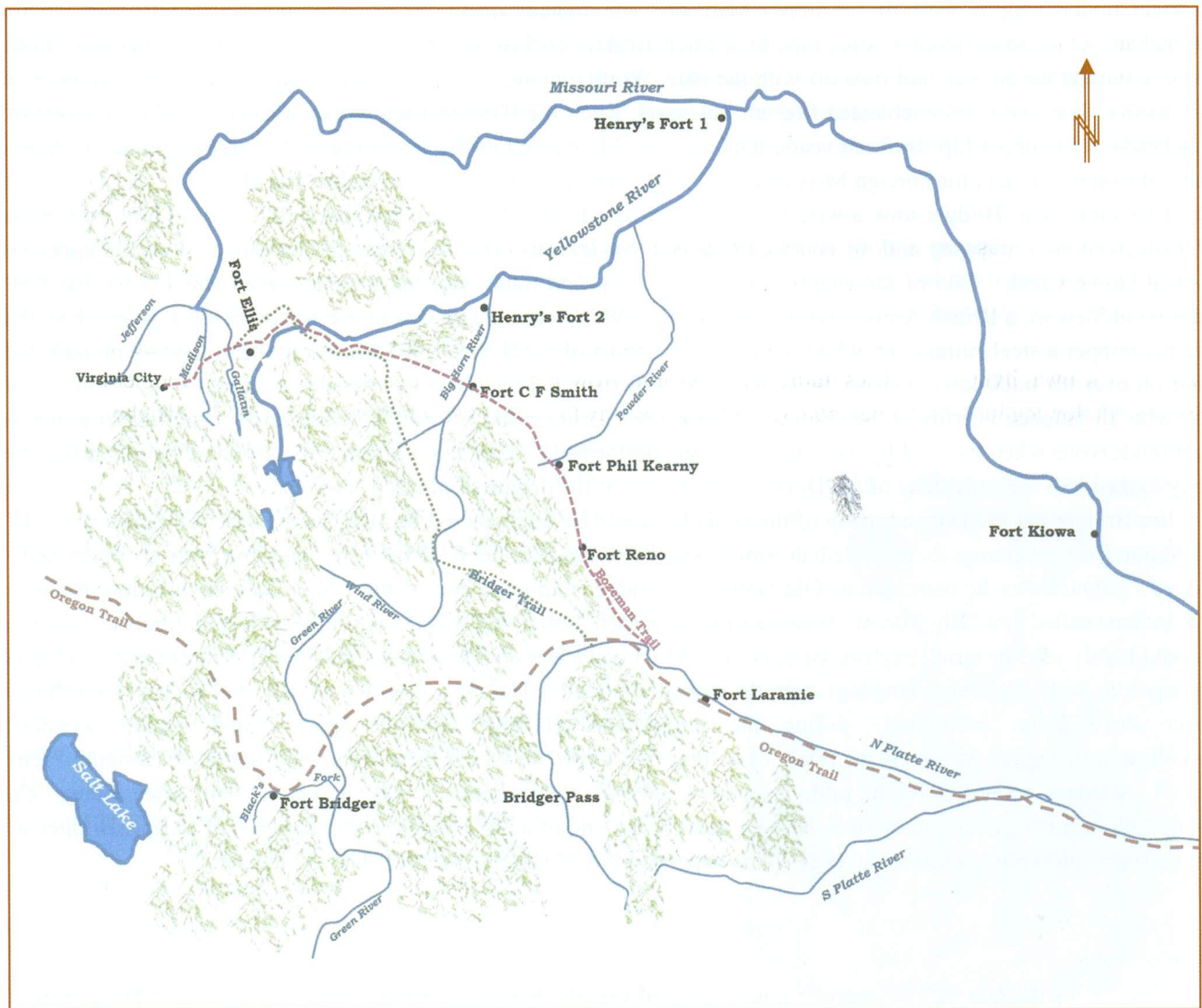
Bridger and most of Ashley's men spent the winter of 1825-1826 in the Salt Lake Valley in two camps: one at the mouth of the Weber River, and one on the Bear River. In 1825, an important aspect of the Rocky Mountain Fur Trade Company's business system came into play – the mountain man rendezvous. Whereas trappers on the upper Missouri relied on Indians to bring in furs and skins to various trading posts, those in the Rockies assembled once a year to sell their pelts to buyers who traveled overland to a designated site. These buyers would then haul the pelts back east, allowing the mountain men to remain in the Rockies all year long. The 1826 rendezvous, which Bridger attended, was held in the Cache Valley along the Bear River. A year earlier, Andrew Henry had retired from the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, turning over his interest to Jedediah Smith. Now it was Ashley's turn – he sold his interest to Smith, David E. Jackson, and William Sublette during the rendezvous. Ashley's interest included the contracts of 42 hunters, one of them being Jim Bridger.<sup>7</sup> Bridger continued to trap the regions of the Wasatch Front over the next few years, spending some of his winters in the Salt Lake Valley. He attended the rendezvous of 1827 and 1828, both held on the

TO  
**Enterprising Young Men.**  
THE subscriber wishes to engage ONE HUNDRED MEN, to ascend the river Missouri 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 to the subscriber at St. Louis.  
**Wm. H. Ashley.**  
February 13 —98 tf

St. Louis Newspaper ad that attracted Bridger's attention.

south shore of Bear Lake.

In the autumn of 1829, Jedediah Smith formed a brigade that included David Jackson and Jim Bridger. They made winter camp on the Powder River, and before being driven out by the Blackfeet, the men garnered some eighty-four thousand dollars in pelts that they took to the 1830 rendezvous on the Wind River. During this encampment, Smith, Jackson, and Sublette, pleased overall with their profits, sold out their interests in the Rocky Mountain Fur Company to Bridger, Tom Fitzpatrick, Milton Sublette, Henry Fraeb, and Jean Baptiste Gervais.



The West of Jim Bridger

The biggest competitors of Bridger and his partners were the Hudson Bay Company and John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company. This competition, coupled with dwindling beaver numbers, forced Bridger and his trappers to venture north into hostile Blackfoot territory. In the spring of 1832, two American Fur Company's trappers, Andrew Drips and William Vanderburgh, closely followed Bridger and Sublette during their trapping forays, learning not only the terrain but also trapping techniques. This shadowing by the American Fur Company became such an issue that Tom Fitzpatrick proposed the two companies divide the fur country in two, each having its own district. But Drips and Vanderburgh refused, and a few months later they and a contingent of other trappers followed Bridger and Tom Fitzpatrick to the Three Forks area.

Hoping to dodge their unwelcome guests, Bridger and Fitzpatrick travelled to the Clark's Fork, then up the Big Blackfoot and across the divide to the Great Falls of the Missouri, and then south, back to the Three Forks. By now, Drips was concentrating his trapping efforts on the Jefferson River, so Bridger and Fitzpatrick headed up the Gallatin, then crossed over to the Madison River, only to bump into Vanderburgh.

Vanderburgh, perhaps weary of the cat and mouse game, travelled down the Madison and then west to join Drips on the Jefferson. On October 14, after making camp along the headwaters of the Ruby River, Vanderburgh and seven men went on a scout to investigate fresh Indian signs. This turned out to be a fatal move, as the group was ambushed by Blackfeet while entering a gully. Vanderburgh and another trapper were killed. The other six, two of them wounded, retreated.

Eleven days later, Bridger, Fitzpatrick, and other Rocky Mountain trappers came upon a group of one hundred Blackfeet in the heights west of the upper Madison. The Indians displayed a white flag, and so Bridger cautiously approached. As he was offered a peace pipe by a chief, Bridger cocked his rifle. The startled chief pulled Bridger from the saddle, mounted the animal, and rode off with the rifle. While running back to his men, Bridger was shot twice in the back with arrows. The two sides exchanged fire until evening, when the Blackfeet withdrew. Bridger would carry one of the arrowheads in his upper hip for three years, until surgeon Marcus Whitman, travelling with a delegation of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, removed it during the Green River rendezvous of 1835.

That same year, Bridger took a wife when he married a Flathead woman. But that didn't prevent him from pursuing his main passions – trapping and, of course, the annual rendezvous. The 1837 rendezvous was held on the upper Green River at Horse Creek. One of the supply trains sent to sell and trade with the mountain men was led by one William Drummond Stewart, a British Army veteran who served at Waterloo. Stewart was impressed by Bridger, so much so that he gave the trapper a steel cuirass and white-plumed steel helmet of the British Life Guards regiment. Bridger proudly put the armor on over his buckskins, donned the helmet, and then mounted his horse and paraded in front of his fellow mountain men, who all laughed heartily at the display.<sup>8</sup> A year later, Bridger and his men failed to elicit many laughs at the Wind River rendezvous when they boldly rode into camp and performed a scalp dance in front of a group of visiting missionaries. "They looked like the emissaries of the Devil..." wrote one of the disgusted minister's wives.<sup>9</sup>

Jim Bridger had now honed many of the skills he would be remembered for. He had a variety of nicknames, Old Jim and Major Bridger among them. Jedediah Smith, known to read the bible at night by campfire, was so impressed with Bridger's countenance he named him "Old Gabe," as Bridger reminded him of the Angel Gabriel spreading the word of God. Indians called Jim "Big Throat" because of his enlarged goiter. He was always hospitable and generous, and though he could barely read or write English, Bridger now had a conversational knowledge of French, Spanish and several native languages, as well as the sign language used throughout the plains. He had a way with words, and became something of a master story teller, particularly during the rendezvous. Having seen the geysers and natural wonders of the Yellowstone region, he concocted a tale of a "petrified forest" in which there were "petrified birds" singing "petrified songs." Another favorite, often told to newly arrived "greenhorns," was a claim that after being chased by Cheyenne warriors for several miles, Bridger came to the end of a box canyon, with no means of escape. Bridger would then go silent, prompting a listener to ask, "What happened then?" Bridger's reply: "They killed me."<sup>10</sup>

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y the late 1830's, many trappers realized that the hey-days of the Rocky Mountain Fur Trade were over. The American Fur Company and The Rocky Mountain Fur Company had gone out of business, as the demand for beaver pelts waned and silk became more popular. In 1830, beaver pelts were worth \$6 a pound back east, but by now, one was lucky to get \$3. Some mountain men headed further west to farm in Oregon, others returned to their homes back east. During the winter of 1839-1840, Bridger too travelled east, to St. Louis, a town he had not seen in nearly eighteen years. But his journey did not mean he was abandoning the Rocky Mountains. He was a trapper, a frontiersman – he had no intention of picking up the plow. Instead, with the financial backing of Pierre Chouteau, Jr., he formed a partnership with Henry Fraeb, put together a supply wagon, and headed back west to the 1840 Rendezvous. Joining the train were two groups, one a handful of settlers heading to California, the other missionaries: three protestant couples and a Roman Catholic priest, Jesuit Father Pierre Jean De Smet.

This was the first of De Smet's many trips west to minister to the Indians - in this case, the Flatheads. Bridger and De Smet took to each other right away, and became good friends. When Bridger described Dr. Whitman's surgery in 1835 to remove the arrowhead imbedded in his back, De Smet was curious to know if the initial wound had caused any infection. Bridger laughed and told the priest no, adding that "in the mountains meat never spoils."<sup>11</sup> De Smet would call Bridger

“...one of the truest specimens of a real trapper and Rocky Mountain Man.”<sup>12</sup> Following the rendezvous, and a one-year trip to southern California, Bridger and Fraeb began building a log post on the Green River, where they would base their trapping operations and trade with the Indians. In late July, they were able to sell a few goods to a passing wagon train led by Tom Fitzpatrick that included Father De Smet.

Weeks later, Fraeb was killed when he and a group of hunters were attacked by Sioux and Cheyenne along the Little Snake River. Bridger abandoned the post, and, joined by Tom Fitzpatrick, trapped beaver along the Green River in the spring of 1842. Bridger again returned to St. Louis to cash in his furs, and the poor return received for his pelts made him realize he'd better diversify if he was going to remain in the Rockies. While in St. Louis, Bridger formed a partnership with Louis Vasquez, and with the financial backing of Chouteau, the two returned to the Green River in the summer of 1843 and began building a new post on Black's Fork. Bridger had remembered the lesson learned in 1841 when he and Fraeb sold goods to the passing wagon train, and in a letter dictated to a literate trapper and forwarded on to Chouteau, divulged his business plan:

*I have established a small store, with a Black Smith Shop, and a supply of Iron on the road of the Emigrants on Black's fork Green River, which promises fairly, they in coming out are generally well supplied with money, but by the time they get there are in want of all kinds of supplies. Horses, Provisions, Smith work &c brings ready Cash from them and I should receive the goods hereby ordered will do a considerable business in that way with them.*<sup>13</sup>

Bridger would still pursue beaver pelts, but realized that life as a trader at this post, Fort Bridger, was his future. In fact, he made only one other serious effort at fur trapping, this time in the winter of 1844-1845, when he led a party of men through California. Though Indians stole most of his traps, he did manage to return to the Rockies and cash in his furs, mules and horses at Fort Laramie.

Shortly after his return from California, Bridger's Flathead wife died. She and Bridger already had two children, a girl named Mary Ann and a boy named Felix, when she died giving birth to a third, a girl named Mary Josephine. In 1846, Bridger remarried, this time to a Ute woman, who would die three years later after giving birth to a girl named Virginia. In 1850 came his third and final marriage, this time to a Shoshone woman, daughter of Chief Washakie. She and Bridger had two children, a girl named Mary Elizabeth and a boy named William. Bridger's first child, Mary Ann, was killed in 1848 by Indians while attending school in Walla Walla. The fate of Mary Josephine and Mary Elizabeth are unclear, but Felix, William and Virginia were sent to Missouri to be educated.<sup>14</sup>

On June 28, 1847, Bridger and two companions, while riding along the Big Sandy en route to Fort Laramie, came upon an advance wagon train of the Mormon exodus from Illinois and Missouri. Bridger was introduced to Brigham Young and the Council of Twelve Apostles. Later, while dining with Young, Bridger reinforced the leader's desire to reach Salt Lake, claiming the valley was a “paradise.” Bridger pushed on to Fort Laramie, promising to return in time to lead the pioneers. But the Mormons went on without him, and managed to find their way through the Wasatch Mountains and into the Salt Lake Valley.

The infamous Donner party stopped at Fort Bridger in late July of 1847. Two years later another huge exodus from the east created trade for Bridger and Vasquez. Wagon train after wagon train of miners, or “Forty-Niners,” passed Fort Bridger en route to California. So too did a U.S. Army force of mounted riflemen sent to establish forts along the Oregon Trail. The force included a topographical unit led by Captain Howard Stansbury that stopped at Fort Bridger on August 11. Stansbury went on to survey the Great Salt Lake Valley, and visited again with Bridger during his return trip in 1850. Stansbury hoped to find a shorter route home, one that would eliminate the need to swing to the north via the Sweetwater and North Platte



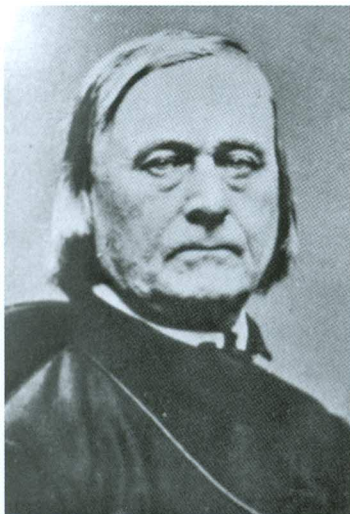
“Old Gabe”

Rivers. Bridger led Stansbury and his men into the Great Divide Basin, then through a pass that led to the Laramie Plain, then on to the head of Lodge pole Creek and the South Platte River. This route shaved some sixty miles off the previous course, and would be followed by the Union Pacific Railroad and today's Interstate 80. The pass that led out of the Great Divide Basin became Bridger Pass.

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he government's desire to protect miners on the Oregon Trail led to the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851, where Jim Bridger served as an interpreter. Also in attendance were Father De Smet and Tom Fitzpatrick. Representatives of the Cheyenne, Sioux, Arapaho, Crow, Shoshone, Assiniboine, Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara nations came to the fort on or about September 1<sup>st</sup> – in all, some 10,000 Indians. There were tensions between some of the rival tribes, particularly the Sioux, Crow, and Shoshone, but no major troubles. A good thing, because the government contingent was accompanied by only some two hundred soldiers, making Bridger remark afterwards “You Dragoons acted nice, but you wouldn't have had no show if a fight had commenced.”<sup>15</sup> Among other things, the treaty negotiated at Laramie guaranteed the tribes ownership of huge tracts of land north of the North Platte River, including much of present-day Wyoming and eastern Montana. The government also promised annuities. In exchange, the Indians agreed to safe passage for Oregon Trail immigrants.

By the early 1850's, Mormon settlements began to attract traders, including Indians. This cut into Bridger's earnings, and in 1853, Utah Territory was expanded enough to encompass Bridger's Fort. Though his first meeting with the Mormons had gone well, things now changed. The Mormons were at war with the Utes, and church leaders thought Bridger was arming the Shoshones and encouraging them to resist the Mormon intrusion. A posse was sent to arrest him, but Bridger, having been tipped off, made his escape. The Mormons took over his fort.



Father Pierre Jean De Smet, S.J.

Cut off now from his primary source of livelihood, Bridger branched out into other endeavors. In 1855, Army Lieutenant Gouverneur Kemble Warren, a West Point graduate, began explorations of the upper Missouri. Accompanied by scientist Ferdinand Hayden, Warren's travels lasted until 1857, when he left after meeting pressure from the Sioux. In his report, Warren noted that he had relied heavily on discussions with old mountain men, including Jim Bridger, who promised to guide Warren should he return. Also in 1855, Sir St. George Gore, an Irish nobleman, came to America for a three year long hunting expedition in the west. Bridger eventually signed on as his primary guide, leading him through most of the 6,000 miles Gore would cover through 1857. Often, during evening camp, Gore liked to read Shakespeare to Bridger,

who soon concluded that the writer was “a little too high-falutin for him.”<sup>16</sup> Shakespeare readings were probably the only benefit of this foray, as Gore would senselessly kill 2,000 buffalo, 1,600 deer and elk, and 105 bears in the upper Missouri region.

Opportunities to work for the U. S. Army started for Bridger in 1857, when he was hired by Colonel Albert Sidney Johnston as his chief guide in his expedition to Salt Lake. Guerilla operations by the Mormons forced Johnston to winter at Fort Bridger – or what was left of it, as much of the post had been torched when the Mormons left. This development led to a controversy over the fort's ownership. Evidently Vasquez, without Bridger's knowledge, negotiated the sale of the fort in 1855 to the Mormons for \$8,000. But now, the U.S. Government was in possession of the property. When Johnston moved on in the spring of 1858, he left two companies behind to establish Fort Bridger as an official army post. A truce avoided any further conflict with the LDS Church, and claims by both the Mormons and Jim Bridger to the fort were rejected. However, years later – after Bridger's death – his family did receive a \$6,000 payment from the government for the damages caused when the Mormons burned the structure.

In 1859 came the Reynolds Expedition, a follow-up to Kemble Warren's exploration a few years earlier. Sensing that the area would soon attract settlers, the government sanctioned this expedition to explore the geography of the upper

Yellowstone. Warren though was left out, as he was re-assigned to a teaching position at West Point. Therefore command of the expedition went to Captain William F. Raynolds. Ferdinand Hayden came along, and Bridger signed on as a guide. Though occasionally confused about the terrain, Bridger proved invaluable to Raynolds, and after a journey to the Yellowstone River and then to the Big Horn Mountains, the expedition turned its attention in the spring of 1860 to the headwaters of the Missouri and Yellowstone. Raynolds led the group toward the Gallatin Valley and the Three Forks, there to meet up with another military detachment. On the way, he decided to explore the headwaters of the Yellowstone.

Initially, Raynolds planned on following the Wind River and then turn north to the headwaters of the Yellowstone. Bridger talked him out of it, noting the mountains, especially the Absaroka Range, were impassable. As he told Raynolds, "A bird can't fly over that without taking a supply of grub along."<sup>17</sup> Instead, Bridger wanted to lead the party to the Snake River, and then turn north to the Yellowstone. Raynolds agreed.

But snow foiled their plans. They slogged their way through Union Pass, then descended the Gros Ventre and Snake River to Jackson Hole. From there Raynolds and Bridger made an advance scout, and were able to reach Two Ocean Pass, from where they gazed on Yellowstone Lake. Again, the snow was too deep, and both realized the men and equipment could not make it over Two Ocean. So, they turned back, and with the expedition, headed for the Three Forks via Teton Pass and what would eventually become known as Raynolds Pass. Bridger would see yet more opportunities to work for the army, but that was a few years down the road.

In the spring of 1864, a train of three hundred people and sixty-two wagons left Denver headed for Montana. Jim Bridger met them at Fort Laramie, where he was employed as post scout. Receiving permission from the army, he agreed to lead them to the Gallatin Valley and Virginia City. The trail he used – the Bridger Trail – followed much of the Bozeman Trail, with one important difference: it ran west and south of the Big Horn Mountains, thus avoiding hostile Indian tribes, and was therefore safer. The Bridger Trail was not as well-watered as the Bozeman, but still sufficed for this particular train. It was during this trip that Bridger used the Yellowstone Ford, three miles east of present-day Springdale. That crossing subsequently would be used by nearly every future wagon train for the next two years. Upon his arrival in Virginia City, Bridger immediately began his return trip to Fort Laramie, this time leading a small group of freight trains and emigrants who had decided to return home. In late July, Bridger's group passed a west-bound wagon train along West Rosebud Creek (six miles south of present-day Absarokee). One of the migrants in the west-bound train wrote that Bridger drove a buggy, pulled by mules. Still, he wrote, Bridger "is a tough looking old chap."<sup>18</sup>

The government soon ordered the temporary closure of the Bozeman Trail and mobilized the army to conduct punitive

raids on the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho. General Grenville Dodge, Commander of the Department of the Missouri, hired Bridger as chief guide for the Powder River Expedition. Commanded by General Patrick E. Connor, the expedition was made up of four columns with a total of 2,400 men. Upon leaving Fort Laramie on July 30, 1865, Bridger led Connor's column to the Powder River via the Dry Fork of the Powder. This was a much easier route for animals and wagons, and would be used by all future travelers on the Bozeman Trail. Though the army did destroy one Arapaho village and established Fort Connor, the expedition did nothing to make the Bozeman Trail safer for emigrant travel.

Dodge befriended Bridger, and consulted with him on the route for the Union Pacific Railroad. This connection with an important officer allowed Bridger to serve as guide for two companies of the 18<sup>th</sup> Infantry, sent from Fort Phil Kearney to construct Fort C.F. Smith in 1866. On Prairie Dog Creek, the army units



Jim Bridger's headstone in the Mount Washington Cemetery.



caught up with the Kirkendall Train, made up of 110 wagons, 171 men, 6 women and 5 children, en route to Virginia City. Bridger was detailed to the train to accompany it to Virginia City, and then report back on the condition of the Bozeman Trail.

After crossing the Bighorn River, Bridger mentioned that they were now in Crow Country, further away from any hostiles. This gave some a false sense of security. One of the wagons, carrying William Thomas, his seven year old son Charley, and their driver, Joseph Schultz moved ahead of the main body, and while camped along Bridger Creek, they were attacked. All three were killed, their bodies found a day later by others in the Kirkendall Train. Though arrows and other artifacts were found at the scene, the responsible tribe could not be identified. Bridger believed they were Blackfeet, but this was never proven conclusively.<sup>19</sup>

One emigrant travelling with the Kirkendall Train recalled another example of how Bridger's leadership altered a small portion of the Bozeman Trail. Prior to 1866, the Bozeman Trail crossed a high bluff on the south side of the Stillwater River, about six miles east of present-day Absarokee, known as Sandborn Hill. "The old mountaineer," wrote Samuel Finley Blythe, led travelers on a safer route when he took them across Rosebud Creek, and then ascended the Stillwater River for a distance of seven miles before making camp. "By coming this route we escaped several large hills which are on the main road."<sup>20</sup> Bridger made many adjustments to the trail as guide and advisor. As pointed out by Historian Susan Badger Doyle, he actually pioneered half the Bozeman Trail – while the trail's namesake, John Bozeman, could make the same claim on roughly a fourth of the route.<sup>21</sup>

Bridger remained of use to the army for a few more years. He was at Fort Phil Kearney in December of 1866 when William Fetterman and some eighty men under his command were wiped out by Sioux and Cheyenne. General Phillip Sheridan consulted with Bridger as late as 1868. But failing health and poor eyesight forced Bridger back to Missouri to live with his daughter Virginia, who, having married army officer Albert Wachsmann, was now living on a farm near present-day Kansas City. Also nearby were Felix, who served in the Missouri Artillery during the Civil War, and William Bridger. "I got father a good old horse, so that he could ride around," wrote Waschmann. "Sometimes father wanted to take a walk in fields with old Sultan (his dog) by his side and cane in hand to guide his way out to the wheat field. He wanted to know how high the wheat was, and then father would go down on his knees and reach his hands to feel for the wheat, and that was the way he passed his time. Father at times wished he could see...so he could go back out and see the mountains."<sup>22</sup>

Jim Bridger never saw his beloved mountains again. He died on July 17, 1881, and was buried in a nearby cemetery. In 1904, Grenville Dodge had the remains moved to the Mount Washington Cemetery in Kansas City, and also saw to it the grave was marked with a seven-foot high monument. During the dedication, Dodge in part explained his reasoning for the new grave and monument, noting that such a remarkable man as Jim Bridger should not be lost to history.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

John C. Russell is a native of Kansas City, Missouri, but has lived in Montana since 1974. He graduated from Montana State University with a degree in history in 1978. Most of his professional career was spent in radio and television journalism. He has served as Executive Director of the Gallatin Historical Society since 1997.

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#### Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> William S. Brackett, “Bonneville and Bridger,” 182.

<sup>2</sup> Grenville M. Dodge, *Biographical Sketch of James Bridger*, 24.

<sup>3</sup> The British did confiscate the fort, but it was later returned to the U.S.

<sup>4</sup> This was the premise for the 1971 motion picture “Man In The Wilderness” that starred Richard Harris.

<sup>5</sup> Namesake of the Weber River, Weber County, and Weber State University in Utah.

<sup>6</sup> Bridger is believed to be the first white man to see the Great Salt Lake, though some historians believe another trapper, Etienne Provost, saw it a few months earlier.

<sup>7</sup> Cecil J. Alter, *Jim Bridger*, 89.

<sup>8</sup> The incident was captured by artist Alfred Jacob Miller, who had accompanied Stewart’s supply train. See Porter, Mae Reed and Odessa Davenport, *Scotsman in Buckskin*, cited in Robert M. Utley’s, *A Life Wild and Perilous*, 167-168.

<sup>9</sup> Eels, Mrs. Myra, “Journal,” cited in Utley, *A Life Wild and Perilous*, 169.

<sup>10</sup> “Stellar Scout Along the Bozeman Trail.”

<sup>11</sup> Hiram Martin Chittenden and Alfred Talbot Richardson. *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet*, Vol. III, 1012.

<sup>12</sup> De Smet to Rev. Fr. Verhaegen, St. Louis University, March 11, 1854, in Chittenden and Richardson, eds., *Life, letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet*, Vol. IV, 1488-89.

<sup>13</sup> James Bridger by Edwin Denig to P. Chouteau & Co., Fort Union, December 10, 1843, cited in Utley, *A Life Wild and Perilous*, 182-183.

<sup>14</sup> The Westport Historical Quarterly, Vol. IV, Number 2, 5.

<sup>15</sup> Bob Fletcher, “Smoke Signals,” 61.

<sup>16</sup> Randolph B. Marcy, *Thirty Years of Army Life on the Border*, 364-66.

<sup>17</sup> W. F. Raynolds, *Report on the Exploration of the Yellowstone River*, 86.

<sup>18</sup> Diary of Abram H. Voorhees, cited in Susan Badger Doyle, *Journeys to the Land of Gold*, 195.

<sup>19</sup> Doyle. *Journeys to the Land of Gold*, 536-537.

<sup>20</sup> Diary of Samuel Finley Blythe, cited in Doyle, *Journeys to the Land of Gold*, 642.

<sup>21</sup> Doyle, *Journeys to the Land of Gold*, 714.

<sup>22</sup> “Stellar Scout Along the Bozeman Trail.”