

Jim Bridger

Frontiersman
1804-1881

by David Conrads

Jim Bridger was the typical mountain man of the early 1800s and one of the most picturesque figures of the American frontier. Though illiterate, his understanding of the land, mastery of wilderness survival skills, and unsurpassed skill as a purveyor of tall tales made "Old Gabe," as his friends called him, a legend.

Bridger was born in Richmond, Virginia, in 1804, but his family settled near St. Louis soon thereafter. When he was 14, both his parents died, and he was apprenticed to a blacksmith. In 1822 he joined the Missouri River expedition of General William Ashley. He worked as a fur trapper, trader, and guide in the mountains from that time until the demise of the fur trade in the 1840s. Afterwards, he found other uses for his many skills, like guiding wagon trains and expeditions through the vast wilderness that he helped to chart. He is generally credited as the first white man to see the Great Salt Lake. In 1843, he and a partner opened Fort Bridger on the Oregon Trail, which became one of the principle trading posts serving the western migration. He achieved great fame in his day due to the many accounts given of him by journalists, explorers, and military men.

Bridger was a familiar figure in the early days of Westport, when it was a frontier outpost south of the Town of Kansas, and he bought a two-story building there in 1866. He is portrayed, along with John McCoy and Alexander Majors, in a statue in Pioneer Park, at the intersection of Broadway and Westport Road, for his contribution to the growth of the town.

Bridger married three Indian women, fathered six children, and was widowed twice. He spent many winters on a farm he owned south of Westport, near the Watts Mill. He later retired to his farm, where he died in 1881. In 1904, Bridger's remains were moved from the farm to Mt. Washington Cemetery in Independence.

Sources

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