

## The Story of Sylvester S. "Three-Fingered" Smith

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Near the historic mining district of Warren lies Smith Canyon. Named for a man who was caught up in the Idaho Gold Rush, it is a tribute to this rugged man who made the wilderness his home. Born in Virginia in 1829, Sylvester S. Smith was a miner and mountain man who picked up the name "Three-Fingered" after an accident. While talking to a friend, with his hands clasped over the end of the barrel of his muzzle-loading shotgun, his foot slipped off a fence rail, and hit the hammers, causing both barrels of the shotgun to fire. The blast took off all but three fingers on each hand (Elsensohn 1965:90).

In 1861, Smith arrived in the newly established mining town of Florence (Idaho) in what was then the territory of Washington (Parker 1968: 11). Smith was one of the first merchants to set up a general store at the camp. He, John Creighton, and Ralph Bledsoe packed in some of the last freight that winter before snow closed the trails into Florence. At the isolated gold camp, prices for all kinds of provisions rose enormously when the supplies ran short of the demands. The History of North Idaho, written in 1903, notes, "The sufferings were enough to drive even good men to acts of desperation and it was stated that the storehouses of merchants were more than once in danger of mob violence...Three-Fingered" Smith, who owned about the richest claim in the camp, kept three rockers at work all winter and each of the rockers averaged a thousand dollars a day."

In 1862, gold was discovered in Warren and Smith's partners in the mercantile at Florence, Judge J.W. Poe and John Haines, were among the first to file claims there. Poe told the following story: "The news reached me early...Among the first who went to Warren was my partner, Joseph Haines...The Party [Haines and a man named White] staked out claims for themselves and one each for Smith and myself and one discovery claim, thus inaugurating the real Warren camp (History of North Idaho:1903 :27-28)."

Smith, who was in Oregon at the time, had apparently found a wife there and started a family. They later moved to Warren. The United States Census for Washington precinct (Warren, Idaho) for 1870 records S.S. Smith's wife, noted as only E. Smith, age 22 years, born in Oregon. The Smiths had two sons; Sam, age four, born in Oregon and Warren, age 2, born in Idaho Territory, and reported to be the first white child born in Warrens.

By 1872, the Smith family had moved from Warren to a ranch at the confluence of Elk Creek and the South Fork of the Salmon River. As settlers moved to isolated ranches away from the security of the gold camps, they invaded areas used for thousands of years by American Indians such as the Nez Perce and later the Shoshones. Conflict over the land and resources was inevitable. In 1874, The Idaho Statesman, in Boise, noted "Three-Fingered" Smith was one of the signers of a petition sent by citizens of Warrens to Territorial Governor T.W. Bennett asking, "for arms and ammunition with which to defend ourselves and our families against the tomahawk and scalping knife." In July of 1877, at the onset of the Nez Perce War, S.S. Smith was among a group taking arms back to the citizens in the area. The Nez Perce were defeated in the fall of 1877, but Idaho's Indian wars were not over.

In mid-August of 1878, "Three-Fingered" Smith, and three companions rode out of Indian Valley searching for missing horses. Tracking the horses, which had been taken by Indians, the men followed the trail east for forty miles to the falls on the Payette River, about 30 miles south of Payette Lake. The Indians ambushed them and three men were killed. Smith was shot through the thigh and then through the arm in the Indian attack but manage to escape. He rode away on his wounded mule, and when it failed, he crawled to the safety of the Calvin R. White mail station on the Little Salmon meadows [Meadows Valley, Idaho]. A doctor was sent for, and a party of men traveled to the site of the attack. They were unable to find those responsible. Legend has it that Smith recognized three of his attackers and hunted them down, killing two, but not finding the third man.

1879 brought Idaho's last Indian war right to Smith's doorstep on the South Fork of the Salmon River. Smith's neighbors, Hugh Johnson and Peter Dorsey had hired some Indians to work for them. The Indians were treated badly and the two men refused to pay them. The Indians became angry and killed Johnson and Dorsey. This happen shortly after some Chinese miners were found murdered on Loon Creek. The Indians were blamed for those murders as well and the Sheepstealer Campaign began. Federal troops were ordered to subdue the Shoshones living in the wilderness. The Indians surrendered as the winter snow began to fall.

Through the years, Smith located a new ranch on the Payette River, and also a claim in Pioneer Gulch near Florence. The family apparently decided to stay on their original ranch. He occasionally did guide work and in an April 15, 1887 article The Idaho Country Free Press reported, "Three-Fingered Smith has bought out Sam Willey's interest in the South Fork bridge (at the mouth of Elk Creek on the Alton Trail) and is now located there with one of his four sons." By July 8<sup>th</sup> of that year, the bridge had washed out and travelers were being conveyed by boat. Then in 1889, Smith was one of the discoverers of a new placer find thirty miles beyond the Alton District in Upper Big Creek drainage. Though times were good for the family tragedy struck in 1890 when they lost a son. In February, Robert "Bobby" Smith, fourteen years old, decided he would deliver the mail from Warren into the Alton district, when the regular mail carrier couldn't. He was trapped in a blizzard and his body was not found until spring.

The last mention of "Three-Fingered" Smith comes from The Idaho County Free Press, October 30, 1891: ... "From Warrens I saw the last of settlements and civilization until my return, with the exception of "Three-Fingered" Smith's ranch and placer claims, fifteen miles distant. I found Smith a whole-souled, typical old miner, who divides his time between mining and raising watermelons, and here I saw sunflowers seventeen and one-half inches in diameter. I have a lively and pleasant remembrance of his home."

"Three-Fingered" Smith died April 28, 1892. Smith knowing he was about to die had ordered his coffin to be made of sluice boxes and was buried in a buffalo robe. Known for his pioneer spirit and generosity, Smith is remembered in his obituary as having, "made more money from the placer mines in Idaho County than any other man, yet ... returned to the South Fork of the Salmon River where he died very poor, not due alone to bad management, but almost wholly to generosity, which he did not practice alone when he made lots of money, but to the last days of his life." His funeral was attended by all of the miners on the river. "Three Fingered" Smith's grave, surrounded by the graves of his family and friends, is in a cemetery located 1.4 miles south of the bridge at South Fork of the Salmon and Elk Creek, on Forest Service Road #340. The road is closed for construction but should be open by June of 2003.