

WILDERNESS PIONEER
The Story of Sylvester S. "Three-Fingered" Smith

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Wilderness pioneer. Magical words that can conjure up a misty image out of the past of a grizzled man, setting beside a campfire in the wilderness; where the smell of coffee and bacon mingled with the howl of a wolf in the mountain moonlight. Its an image that reflects Sylvester S. "Three-Fingered" Smith, one of Idaho's first settlers.

Born in Virginia in 1829, Sylvester S. Smith, was a tall, dark, stringy, 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, 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 pulled into the newly discovered mining town of Florence (Idaho) in what was then the territory of Washington (Parker 1968: 11). Although every newcomer on a fresh strike was a miner looking for the mother lode, 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 number of men needing food exceeded supplies. Flour sold in Florence for \$75 for a fifty pound sack. Beans and bacon were \$3 a pound; gum boots, \$50 a pair. Vegetables could not be bought at any price. Men had to dig through ten feet of snow to wash enough gravel to buy food. "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" (History of North Idaho 1903:25).

As a result, Florence developed a reputation for being a rough camp, but nothing could deter gold seekers after they heard reports of the gold coming out of the Florence claims:

...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. "It was no uncommon thing," [wrote one reporter] "to see, on entering a miner's cabin, a gold washing pan measuring eight quarts, full to the brim or half filled with gold dust washed out in one or two weeks. All manner of vessels, such as oyster cans and yeast powder boxes or pickle bottles, were in demand in which to store the precious dust" (History of North Idaho 1903:26).

Once they were in the mountains, prospecting parties did not confine their operations, during 1862, to the Florence Basin, although that was the principal scene of operations...In July of 1862, James Warren, Matt

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Bledsoe, and a few others set out on an exploring and prospecting tour of the Salmon River country. Warren, the leader, was a college man, generally liked, but like most men of the region, he had drifted into bad habits and bad company. After prospecting all along the Salmon River, the party decided to try the high mountain country to the southward. Crossing the Salmon River at a point nearly due south of Florence they continued their journey to a small stream, which coursed seven or eight miles through a beautiful meadow (ibid:27).

After the party set up camp beside the stream, Warren panned gravels from the creek. Gold was found in rich quantities at the head of the stream and Warren's camp was born. News of the strike soon reached Florence.

"Three-Fingered" Smith's partners at that time in the mercantile business in Florence (under the name of Smith & Company) were Judge J.W. Poe and John Haines. Poe told the following story:

"The news reached me early. Smith was in Oregon. Haines was then in Lewiston and just preparing to start for Florence with a pack train of forty animals. I immediately sent a messenger to him telling him of the new discovery across the Salmon and asking him to come at once as I was unable to leave the store. Meanwhile the rush to the new district began and thousands deserted Florence...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. Others took claims along the creek bed and soon several hundred men were at work. Returning to Florence for his pack train, Haines took it through to the new camp, gaining the distinction of being the first to enter with a mercantile train. The date of his second arrival was September 8, 1862" (History of North Idaho 1903: 27-28).

"Three-Fingered" Smith had apparently married in Oregon and started a family. United States Census for Washington Precinct (Warren, Idaho) for 1870 records S.S. Smith's wife, noted only as E. Smith. Mrs. E. Smith was 22 years of age in 1870, and lists her place of birth as Oregon. The Smiths had two sons when the census was recorded: Sam, age 4, born in Oregon in 1866; and Warren, age 2, born in 1868 in Idaho Territory, and reported to have been the first white child born in Warrens (United States Census, Washington Precinct [Warrens, later shortened to Warren], Idaho Territory, 1870).

By 1872, as reported by N. B. Willey (Idaho's second Governor), the Smith family had moved from Warren to a ranch at the confluence of Elk Creek and the South Fork of the Salmon River:

On the south fork of the Salmon river several ranches have been taken up of late years that promise well for their owners. Near the forks [confluence of the South Fork and the main Salmon River], the Raines Bros. have located and have

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twenty-five or fifty acres.

Next above is S.S. Smith with about the same quantity under plow, and farther up the river and nearest of all to Warrens, Geo. Woodward and Solon Hall have settled and made considerable improvements. Several others have made a beginning. All these raise such vegetables as are marketable in camps or near by... (Idaho Signal July 6, 1872).

As the settlers moved to isolated ranches away from the security of the gold camps, they invaded areas utilized for thousands of years by American Indians. Miners and ranchers built their homes on ancient camp sites. The Nez Perce and later the Shoshoni, known as the Tukudeka or the Sheepeaters, had hunted, gathered plants, and fished from the Bitterroot Mountains west to the Snake River. After the 1860's, grass meadows where Nez Perce horses had grazed were harvested for horse feed by packers and miners. If Indians were seen shots were often fired first and questions asked later. It was no longer safe for Indian women to gather camas, berries or bear grass in the high meadows. Conflict was in the wind.

In 1874, "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" (Idaho Territorial Records, Box 1:file 89).

In July of 1877, at the onset of the Nez Perce War, the Idaho Statesman, Boise, noted S.S. Smith was among a group from Warrens taking arms back to the citizens in the area:

Arms for Warrens...the party who came from Warrens to escort the arms lately shipped to Indian Valley from here for the Warrens people, started on their homeward journey last Tuesday. They have with them 22 needle guns, 15 carbines, 26 revolvers, 1,250 needle gun cartridges, 680 carbine cartridges, and 1,920 revolver cartridges. Before starting they took the needles and screws from the guns so that if they should be captured by the Indians they will be valueless to them.

The Nez Perce were defeated in the Fall of 1877, but Idaho's Indian wars were not over.

On August 17, 1878, "Three-Fingered" Smith, William Munday, Tom Healy, and Jake Groseclose rode out of Indian Valley searching for missing horses. After locating the trail of shod horses being herded by unshod Indian ponies, they headed back to Indian Valley for supplies, planning to begin tracking the Indians the next day. The men followed the trail east forty miles to the falls on the Payette River, about 30 miles south of Payette Lake.

[they] came upon the Indians about noon on Tuesday [Aug. 20]. The Indians were secreted in the rocks, and at the first fire before they were observed by any of the party, shot and killed Munday. At this moment Healy and Groseclose dismounted, when the later was shot in the breast, and turning to Smith said, "they have got me." Mr. Healy then got behind a rock and asked

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Smith to stay with him.

Smith, however, being a man of experience in such matters saw they were completely outnumbered and at the mercy of the Indians, and not having dismounted from his mule, turned to flee, when he was fired upon by the Indians and shot through the thigh. The next shot took his mule from under him and being on foot and running for his life, he was again shot, which broke his arm. Having somewhat the start on the Indians, Smith made his escape by running (Idaho Statesman 8/27, 1878).

Smith's mule was only injured. Aaron Parker continues:

[Smith] escaped to a grove of pine and willows, where he remained under cover until he observed the hostiles rounding up their stock, heading for the divide between the Payette and Salmon river waters. He then made the greatest effort of his life by climbing on his crippled mule and heading for the Calvin R. White mail station on the Little Salmon Meadows [New Meadows, Idaho], finally arriving at his destination after abandoning his mule and making the last lap of his journey on his hands and knees, where he was given every care possible under the primitive conditions existing (Parker 1968:8).

Solon Hall's son Edgar rode for Boise to tell the story, and send a doctor to care for Smith. A party of men, including Parker, traveled to the massacre site, then headed to White's mail station to check on Smith. When they arrived at Meadows,

they found "Three-Fingers" still on his cot, but recovering from his wounds. The doctor had just left for Boise the day before, leaving the assurance that his patient "could not be killed with an axe" (Parker 1968:11).

The search party was unable to find those responsible for Smith's wounds and the deaths of Munday, Healy, and Groseclose. Local legend adds another page to the story.

Smith recognized some of his attackers. After he recovered he traveled to the Lemhi Reservation in eastern Idaho and killed an Indian named Chuck, then rode north to the Blackfoot Reservation on the Canadian border at Brownlee, Montana and killed an Indian named Booyer. He continued his search that winter in Shoshoni country looking for an Indian named War Jack, but he was unable to locate him (Winkler n.d.). Smith's pursuit of his attackers over nearly a thousand miles reflects a determined side of his nature often related to those strong personalities who settled the old west.

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 were killed in the spring of 1879. Henry Smith, "Three-Fingered" Smith's third son, related,

that the two men, Johnson and Dorsey, had hired the Indians to work for them, mistreated them, refused to pay them, with the result that the Indians became so enraged that they shot them in the back and burned them. All that remained of Johnson's

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body was gathered into a candle box and buried on the ranch known as the James Scales place (Elsensohn 1965:90).

The killing of Johnson and Dorsey happened soon after five Chinese miners were found murdered on Loon Creek. Indians were blamed for the Loon Creek killings and the Sheepeater Campaign began; troops were ordered to subdue the Shoshoni living in the Wilderness. The campaign lasted through the summer and fall. Snow was falling as the Indians surrendered at Big Salmon Meadows. This was the last of Idaho's Indian wars.

Parker traveled to Warren in August of 1885, and stopped to visit with Smith. In his newspaper column he wrote:

He has entirely recovered and is as tough and wiry as ever. He was one of the first men in Florence and had a claim on Pioneer Gulch which yielded him a fortune. This summer he has been piloting two English "globe trotters" through the mountains and left yesterday for a ranch he has located on the Payette at the scene of his narrow escape in 1878. A typical mountain man with a heart as big as his body (The Nez Perce News, Aug. 13, 1885).

The Smiths apparently decided to stay on their ranch at the confluence of Elk Creek and the South Fork of the Salmon River. The Idaho Country Free Press reported on April 15, 1887, "Three-Fingered Smith has bought out Sim Willey's interest in the south fork bridge and is now located there with one of his four sons."

On July 8, 1887, the same newspaper reported, "The Sim Willey bridge across the south fork at the mouth of Elk Creek on the Alton trail was carried away by a freshet after the hot weather, and travel is now conveyed across in a boat."

In 1889, "Three-Fingered" Smith was one of the discoverers of a new placer find thirty miles beyond the Alton district. The Lewiston Teller reported:

This Alton district is situated on the east side of the South Fork of the Salmon river and high up in the mountains. They [Smith and partners] use the term that it is beyond the Alton district, but do not say in which direction. We draw the inference from our knowledge of the country that the new discovery is on one of the tributaries of the Middle Fork of the Salmon river and probably in the heart of what we used to term the Sheepeater country, which, in former years, has been too dangerous for prospecting of small parties, in consequence of the treachery of the small bands of Indians that have roamed that country, although several parties have found evidences that it was a rich country...S.S. Smith was one of the first men in Florence and took out a large lot of money there. He went to Warrens and mined in the early days on Warrens creek, near what was then the town of Richmond. He is an old prospector; a good judge of a mining camp (July 18, 1889).

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Life on the South Fork of the Salmon River for the Smith family was touched by tragedy in 1890. In February, Robert "Bobby" Smith, fourteen year old son of "Three-Fingered" Smith decided he would deliver the mail from Warren into the Alton district when the regular mail carrier couldn't make the trip. It was mid-winter and a blizzard closed in. When Bobby didn't return home, searchers combed the mountains, but the young man couldn't be found. On May 30, 1890, the Idaho County Free Press published the following letter from N. B. Willey, Warrens, Idaho. "Young Bobby Smith, who perished in the snow last winter, was lately found. He had succumbed to the cold and laid down in the trail and had not been disturbed by animals." Bobby Smith's remains were buried on the Smith ranch on the South Fork of the Salmon.

On October 24, 1890, the Idaho County Free Press noted:

Three-fingered Smith, and Mr. and Mrs. C.F. [Frank] Smith were in Warrens on election day from their respective places on the south fork, where they catch twenty-seven pound trout, and raise potatoes as big as beer barrels and babies that weigh fifteen pounds a piece. Frank had just come out from the Alton district and is as enthusiastic as ever over the great ledges of rich ore over there.

The last mention of "Three-Fingered" Smith comes from The 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 Smith and his home.

The following spring "Three-Fingered" Smith died. His obituary read as follows:

DEATH OF SYLVESTER S. SMITH

DIED: On South Fork Salmon river, this county, April 28, 1892, Sylvester S. Smith, aged 63 years, 10 months, 28 days, of dropsy. Mr. Smith was one of the pioneers of Idaho county, among the first in the camp at Florence, where he made a great deal of money from the richest claim in camp. He afterward went to Warren and had very rich diggings. He probably made more money from the placer mines in Idaho county than any other one man, yet in spite of all the money made 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. Half of his house and larder contained was always welcome to the needy and prospector. There were about twenty-three miners and prospectors on the river when he died, and all attended the funeral. A more typical and natural scene could not have been arranged. The

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old man seemed to understand the situation and expressed himself ready to die the day before he expired. He ordered some sluice boxes brought down to be used as his coffin, which was done; he was wrapped in a buffalo robe, placed in the coffin, and the grave closed over one of the most noble, true-hearted pioneers of Idaho county, who will be mourned by all who ever knew him. He participated in several Indian wars that have occurred in Idaho and was shot in several places (The Free Press, May 18, 1892).

The grave of Sylvester S. "Three-Fingered" Smith is located 1.4 miles south of the bridge at the South Fork of the Salmon River and Elk Creek, on Forest Service road #340. The Heritage Program on the Payette National Forest surrounded the graves at the Elk Creek cemetery with a buck and pole fence, marking the resting place of the wilderness pioneer, his family and friends.

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