

SILENT VOICES ALONG THE RIVER

The Story of Mollie and Pony Smead

by
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We seldom think of American Indians as pioneers, however, Mollie Smead qualifies as one of Idaho's most unusual pioneer women. Her story is shadowy, filled with mystery and romantically intertwined with that of Pony Smead.

We don't know when or where Mollie was born, or what Indian tribe she was born into; the day or even the year she died. What we do know is that Smead traded for Mollie, exchanging a "pony" and flour for the young girl. In romantic western style, Pony fell in love with Mollie. They married and raised a large family on their ranch on the South Fork of the Salmon River in central Idaho.

Our view of Mollie and Pony's life is filtered through remarks in the "local news" columns, published in Territorial newspapers in the late 1800's. When national news stories didn't come in with the mail on the stage coach, local editors, like Aaron Parker, editor of The Nez Perce News and The Idaho County Free Press, and Milton Kelley, editor of The Idaho Statesman, reported local events and personal news and views, filling up the pages of their newspapers.

Country editors were aware when travelers came to town, making a point to check hotel registers for newcomers. They gathered news while eating at restaurants or having a drink at the saloon. Everyone made a stop at the general store to pick up supplies before heading out of town. The editors could always count on picking up tidbits while warming up next to the store's stove. Although reporters attended political meetings, church suppers, and box socials, news for the most part came from and focused on the men in the community.

It is unlikely Parker would have walked up to Mollie Smead on the street in Grangeville in the late 1800's and ask her why she had traveled to town, or inquired what was happening on the South Fork ranch. She was a married woman and Parker would have spoken to her husband, Pony Smead, asking him these questions, reporting his answers.

As a result, details about Mollie's life were not printed in newspapers. Only by looking through Pony into Mollie's world do we get shadowy glimpses of her life.

CALIFORNIA MINERS

Amasa Daniel "Pony" Smead was born in New York State on January 11, 1827. In 1850, at age twenty-three, Smead left the east and crossed the Plains to mine gold with California's 49's.

California had become the training ground for miners in the 1850's. The process, the tools and machinery, the hydraulics, the tenacity and hard work needed before gold was in the pouch, these and a thousand other hard-learned facts were what miners from California carried to new strikes in the Territories. The veteran

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California miner was experienced and walked into a boom town more self-assured and less frantic than the newcomer.

When gold was found in what would become Idaho Territory in the early 1860's, Smead and other veteran California miners left worked-out claims in California and headed for the Salmon River gold fields. Pony Smead was among the first Californians in Florence in 1863. He mined at the Oro Fino camp and was one of the discoverers of the "Lardo" diggings (Idaho County Free Press, Feb. 3, 17, 1899).

Like California, the boom was soon over in Idaho Territory. Those wanting to stay in the country began looking for opportunities while they prospected. Gold mining, as a single source of income was one of the least dependable occupations a man could have, and one of the most physically demanding.

Pony Smead was in his forties, and no doubt giving some thought to settling down when he joined other California miners living in Warrens. The day Smead rode into Warren's Diggings is unknown, but it must have been shortly after the 1870 census was taken. Although his name is not among those registered as living in Washington Precinct (Warrens) at that time, indications are he was on the South Fork of the Salmon River by 1872.

THE SOUTH FORK OF THE SALMON RIVER

After looking around Warren, Smead apparently rode down the trail into the canyon of the South Fork of the Salmon River. It was a place for staying. On the slopes above the river, open stands of ponderosa pine are scattered over the mountainside. On a summer's day the vanilla scent from the trees blends with the hot air rising from the river. As the trail winds down past the mountain streams, air cooled by hidden springs and last winter's snow layers along the hillside. Thickets follow Pony Creek until it flows into the South Fork of the Salmon River.

Early settlers along the river found the weather almost tropical compared to higher, colder elevations in the Salmon River Mountains. After miners dug ditches along the river to transport water to sluice boxes, they realized the systems could be used for irrigation on the river terraces. Conditions were ideal for growing crops, orchards and gardens. Livestock could be grazed on the slopes and meadows above the river. Winters, while isolating, were generally tolerable and often mild; summers, warm to hot.

Ten years after the discovery of gold at Warrens the Idaho Signal carried an article written by another veteran California miner, Norman B. Willey:

On the south fork of the Salmon river several ranches have been taken up of late that promise well for their owners. Near the forks the Raines [sic] Bros. have located and have twenty or fifty acres under cultivation. Next above [south] is S.S. Smith, with about the same quantity under plow, and further up the river and nearest of all to Warrens, George Woodward and Solon Hall have settled and have made considerable improvements. Several others have made a beginning. All

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these raise such vegetables as are marketable in camps nearby, without venturing on extensive crops of grain. As they all have good facilities for irrigation they have not suffered so much from the drouth as many in other localities (7/6/1872).

Smead must have been one of the "several others" in 1872, for the 1880 census for Warren indicates Pony and Mollie had met by that time. Their story is local legend. Idaho historian and writer, John Carrey told it when he wrote:

The Pony Smead Place first belonged to George Woodward, Dick [James] Raines, George Dyer and Pony Smead, who lived and mined there. Raines was later killed at the mouth of the South fork on the Andy Nelson place where a Sheepeater massacre took place.

While Smead, Woodward, Raines and Dyer were mining on the place, Indians came along and Smead traded a horse and some flour for an Indian girl to stay and cook for them. She was about 10 years old at the time. Smead later bought the other men out and married the Indian woman, Molly. When their first baby was due, Smead went for help, but when he returned the baby had come and his wife was up and around. They had eight children--Ellen, Ida, Maggie, Willy, Mary, Ethel, Earl and George...Smead was a fine looking man and wore whiskers. His wife was a fine looking Indian woman (Carrey 1968:38).

FARMERS ON THE SOUTH FORK

George Woodward, James P. Rains, and J. C. Harris are recorded in the 1870 census for Idaho Territory, Washington (Warrens) Precinct as the first farmers in the Warren area.

The census taker noted that Woodward claimed 160 acres, with 22 acres improved. He had 3 horses, 8 mules, 7 pigs, and \$150 worth of farming machinery. His harvest in 1869 had included 16 bushels of spring wheat, 30 bushels of Indian corn, 45 bushels of oats, and 400 bushels of Irish potatoes. Woodward earned an additional \$1,200 in income from other fresh garden produce he marketed. His expenses included \$1,800 paid in wages.

James Rains, by comparison, claimed 346 acres, 16 improved. His ranch was located near the confluence of the South Fork and the main Salmon River. He had 12 horses, one mule and \$60 worth of machinery. Rains harvested 200 pounds of Irish potatoes, and earned \$600 for the garden produce marketed. He paid \$100 in wages.

J.C. Harris apparently ran a ranch and dairy operation (location unknown). He claimed 480 acres, all improved, and owned 10 horses, 70 milk cows, 2 oxen, and 70 cattle. He produced 400 pounds of cheese, and sold 900 gallons of milk, paying out \$250 in wages (1870 United States Census of Agricultural Production in Washington Precinct [Warrens], Idaho County, Idaho Territory).

The 1880 census supplies the most definitive information about

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Mollie and Pony Smead. It records that Amasa D. Smead, age 50, from New York State was a "farmer," living in Washington (Warrens) Precinct. His wife, Mollie Smead, a 22 year old Indian woman, indicated she had been born in Idaho Territory. Their three children, all born in Idaho Territory, included: Ida, age 7; Maggie, age 3; and Willie, age 1 (1880 United States Census, Washington Precinct [Warrens], Idaho County, Idaho Territory).

Mollie would have been about fifteen years old when Ida was born in 1873. This indicates she may have been older than ten years of age when she first met Pony.

WARS AND RUMORS OF WARS

The most historically eventful years to touch the lives of the Smeads and other families living along the South Fork of the Salmon River, were the 1870's. As miners and settlers took over the homelands of local Indian tribes, conflicts arose. In an 1873 Idaho Statesman article Willey described the situation as he saw it from Warrens:

One might suppose from our position, perched away in a mountain fastness, inaccessible to man or beast for about eight months of the year, that we would look down with sublime equanimity upon wars and rumors of wars that reach us from aboriginal regions. But such is not wholly the case... Acting upon the noble impulses that stir us, we have organized ourselves into a company of Horse Guards, numbering upwards of a hundred and twenty men fit for duty, if all could be found sober at once...Of course we have the news of the Modocs [war], etc., by regular mail once a week...Those who argue most strongly the peaceful side of the question, say that the Nez Perces of this country will not hazard the destruction of their large droves of cattle and horses out of mere sympathy for a more remote tribe, not without good reasons personal to themselves. They are said to possess more of this sort of property in the country than all their pale-faced neighbors. Those along the Salmon river have always been upon good terms with the whites as could reasonably be expected...There formerly existed a band of renegades along the south fork of the salmon river, about the junction of the rivers, composed partly of Snakes [Sheep-eater Band], partly Bannocks and the rest Nez Perces. They were never very formidable in point of numbers, and except in one instance, I do not know that they caused any damage either to miners or settlers, but they were always looked upon with suspicion. They have now mostly disappeared. Some became good Indians the natural way, others by the arts and means known to civilization. None now reside permanently upon the south fork. A few Nez Perces come up every summer to catch salmon, and to kill mountain sheep in the fall, and in the winter return to the milder climate of the lower valley.

On the south fork a number of [mining] claims are running

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and their owners are reported doing better than usual (June 14, 1873 issue).

SHEEPEATER CAMPAIGN ON THE SOUTH FORK

But, the Nez Perce did go to War in 1877, and the Shoshone-Bannock tribes in 1878. However, it was the "renegade bands" of Sheepeater Indians mentioned by Willey that physically touched the lives of the folks living along the South Fork of the Salmon River in 1879.

In the Spring of 1879, five Chinese miners were murdered on Loon Creek, supposedly by Sheepeater Indians. Shortly thereafter, Hugh Johnson and Pete Dorsey were found murdered on the South Fork of the Salmon River. Again the Sheepeaters were blamed. Troops were called in to capture the remaining Sheepeaters and remove them to a reservation.

The story of the Sheepeater Campaign has already been told, but one fact that often slides by in the telling is the part the South Fork residents played, particularly Pony and Mollie Smead.

We have no information naming the Indian tribe Mollie Smead belonged to. The only information, as noted earlier, in the 1880 Census records, reveals only that she was a full-blooded Indian and had been born in Idaho Territory, about 1858.

It seems questionable she was with her own family when she was traded to Pony Smead. The value of a child in a tribe, particularly a family member, makes it difficult to believe she would have been sold, by either the Nez Perce or Northern Shoshoni. The chances are more likely she was a slave, a captive, or an orphan, and looked upon as just another mouth to feed.

Whatever her tribal affiliation, Mollie and Pony allowed their ranch to be used as a command post and camp site for troops hunting the Sheepeater Indians during the 1879 campaign. The Smead ranch was located and identified on maps made by Col. W.C. Brown when he later re-created those used by the military during the Sheepeater Campaign (Brown 1926).

Brown's map (1879) shows the routes and trails taken by the troops. The Smead ranch is strategically located east of Warren on the Pony Creek trail, leading down the canyon to the South Fork of the Salmon River. The ranch is also situated on the north-south trail along the west bank of the South Fork of the Salmon River, near the Elk Creek river crossing. The trail accesses the area east to Big Creek and the Middle Fork of the Salmon River. Brown's map also notes the locations of Hugh Johnson's ranch, the Smith ranch, and the Rains ranch.

Willey's correspondence with the Idaho Statesman on August 1, 1879 points out:

Col. Bernard's command arrived at Smead's Ranch on the South Fork of the Salmon, 12 miles from here [Warrens], day before yesterday. Robbins and Ramey came into town for letters and dispatches and returned the same day. Col. Bernard broke camp and passed through here yesterday, taking the road to

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Weiser...[Catley] left Rains' [at the mouth of the South Fork] over two weeks ago and is supposed to have gone up the main river [Salmon River] or on to Big Creek...

On August 16, Willey reported, "Col. Bernard made the circuit from this place to the Payette Lakes, thence down Long Valley some distance, thence across the mountains to [the] South Fork, thence down that stream to the Smead's ranch" (Idaho Statesman, 8/26/79).

On September 5, Willey wrote, "We have no news from Col. Bernard or the lower part of Big Creek, during the week. Lieut. Farrow is camped at Smead's ranch and is making every effort to get his men remounted" (Idaho Statesman, 9/16/79).

Shortly thereafter, the Smead's neighbor and friend, James P. Rains was murdered at his ranch by Sheepeater Indians, his crops and buildings burned. Military pursuit continued to the very brink of winter before Lieut. Farrow and his scouts captured the Indians near the Middle Fork of the Salmon River in early October of 1879.

MINING AND FISHING

Although Pony Smead farmed his South Fork ranch, he was like other early pioneers living in the area, he was a miner at heart, and always on the lookout for a new strike. The Idaho County Free Press reported in 1886:

Among the Warrens boys interested in the new bonanzas [in the Alton District near Yellow Pine] are Frank Smith, John Dillaboe, Pony Smead...The new discovery was made two miles down the creek from Logan mountain...Three-Fingered Smith is said to be building a bridge at the Solon Hall bridge crossing of the south fork to accommodate the anticipated travel to the Alton District next summer (9/24/86).

Pony must have had some luck prospecting in 1886 for the Idaho County Free Press noted on April 15, 1887, "Pony Smead and his family spent the winter in Warrens."

Mollie must have stayed in Warren that summer and fall so her children could attend school. The newspaper noted in its September 2nd. issue, "The citizens of Warrens with their usual public spirit subscribed \$180 towards the establishment of the school now running in charge of Miss M.C. Benedict. The young lady is giving great satisfaction and will probably conduct the school next season."

Mollie and Pony Smead's children are among those listed in the October 28, 1887 issue of the Idaho County Free Press, when the school report for Warren was published:

WARREN SCHOOL REPORT--District No. 15

For the year ending Oct. 7, 1887, the following pupils deserve a place on the

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ROLL OF HONOR

Ida Smead*	Maggie Smead*
Jesse Rains*	Nellie Smith*
Henry Rains*	Willie Smead
Orin Rutherford	Carrie Hexter
Charlie Smith*	Adah Smith*
Mary Smead	

Those pupils marked with an asterisk (*) were not absent during the term. Number enrolled, 17.

(signed) Mary C. Benedict

At the close of the school term, the newspaper reported, "The families of Frank Smith and Pony Smead have folded their tents and fled away to the sunny banks of the South Fork" (11/4/87).

The following year, 1888, it appears Pony was busy prospecting. The "Free Press" noted on August 17, "Pony Smead and Geo. Dyer are opening up some of their numerous properties." On September 21, 1888 the paper issued this report:

John Babion (Towhead John) and Pony Smead are prospecting the Foolhen Lode, the float from which is very rich. A small crushing last summer yielded a 44 oz. bar of bullion...

Pony Smead and George Dyer are prospecting Martinez hill for the Foolhen lode and found 1500 pounds of rich float last Friday...

Pony Smith and Three-Fingered Smith have evidently got onto a good thing in the Bamboo Chief, a three-foot ledge of fine looking rock on Martinez hill.

While Pony prospected, Mollie fished. Carrey noted:

There is a fishing hole in the river called "Molly's Fishing Hole." Molly would keep everyone on the river in fish. They claimed she could catch fish when no one else could (Carrey 1968:38).

Molly and Pony were apparently living or staying in Warren in the fall of 1889, for the newspaper noted "A girl baby was born to the wife of Pony Smead in camp a few weeks ago" (Idaho County Free Press, 12/20/89).

PONY SMEAD, JUSTICE OF THE PEACE

All that "city" living and prosperity must have effected Pony, for in the Fall of 1890, he ran for public office. The "Free Press" captured a bit of Pony's personality when it noted:

B.B. Day and Pony Smead were elected justices of the peace and Warren Helm constable for Warrens Precinct. Pony's stump speech, delivered from the wood wagon, was the greatest effort of his life (10/24/90).

As Justice of the Peace, Pony would perform one of Warren's most famous wedding ceremonies, the marriage of saloon owner Charlie Bemis to his Chinese companion, "Polly," Lalu Nathoy. The

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wedding certificate reads:

This is to certify that on this 13th day of August 1894, I have joined in the holy bonds of matrimony Chas. A. Bemis and Miss Polly Nathoy at the residence of C.A. Bemis. August 13, 1894. Warrens, Idaho Co.

Witnesses (signed)

-- W.J. Kelly

--George L. Patterson

(signed) A.D. Smead, Justice of the Peace

TRAIL'S END

On January 18, 1899, Amasa Daniel "Pony" Smead, age 72, died at his home on the South Fork of the Salmon River, of heart trouble. According to the Idaho County Free Press:

The deceased leaves a wife and seven children to mourn his loss, all of them being at his bedside during his last illness. He passed away without a struggle. He was a kind husband and loving father (2/17/99).

Mollie was left alone with the youngest children at the ranch on South Fork. The 1900 Census (Warren Precinct, Idaho County, State of Idaho), lists Mollie Smead, age 39, as head of house, along with her children, Ethel, age 11; Earl, age 7; and George, age 4. This is the last time Mollie Smead is listed in the census records.

Other publications indicate Mollie died in 1912, however, the 1910 census does not record a Mollie Smead, but it does note that Mollie's youngest son, George Smead, age 13, is living as a ward of Carl and Ida Brown.

Grace Jordan, in her book, King's Pines of Idaho confirms that George was living with the Brown family on the South Fork:

One of Betty's [Brown] new companions was George Smead [sic], a part-Indian boy of 16, who came to the ranch to "help out." From Warren Carl brought a .22 rifle and told George to bring in all the grouse he could. George took the gun when he went for the cows, and usually returned with something for the pot. When George milked, Betty tried to be there to get a squirt of warm milk right in her mouth (Jordan 1961:27).

It appears Mollie Smead died at her ranch on the South Fork before 1910. A check of documents does not list a Mollie Smead among those recorded living anywhere in the State of Idaho in 1910 (Precision Indexing 1993:1025). It should also be noted that Mollie's death was not recorded in the Idaho State Death Records during the years, 1907-1930. Apparently it was not reported.

John Carrey indicates that Bailey Dustin later bought the ranch from the Smead children (Carrey 1968:38).

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MOUNTAIN MEMORIAL

There are many isolated graves and family cemeteries along the South Fork of the Salmon River. The bodies of Hugh Johnson and Pete Dorsey were buried at Elk Creek after they were found murdered at the beginning of the Sheepeater Campaign.

James Rains' body burned in the fire that destroyed his ranch house. Friends recovered his bones, and buried them at his home at the "forks" of the river.

When he died at age 63, S.S. "Three-Fingered" Smith was wrapped in a buffalo robe and buried in a sluice box on his ranch at the confluence of Elk Creek and the South Fork. Other members of Smith's family are buried in the family cemetery at the ranch including Smith's son, Bobby, and his wife. Like Mollie Smead, very little is known of Mrs. "Three-Fingered" Smith, not even her first name (Reddy 1995).

According to John Carrey, George Woodward and George Dyer were buried at the Smead ranch. Mollie, Pony, their baby daughter Ella and a few friends were buried next to the river in the little family plot. Today the Smead Ranch cemetery and its graves lie on privately owned property, their location and condition, unknown.

Like other South Fork pioneers, the mountains and the river where Mollie and Pony Smead lived and raised their family, became their memorial. It had been a good place for staying.

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Also used: United States Census and Agricultural Records for Washington Precinct, Idaho County, Idaho Territory, 1870, 1880; and Warren Precinct, Idaho County, State of Idaho, 1900 and 1910.

Cover Photo: Mollie Smead (center), and Pony Smead to her right. Others and date unknown. Courtesy of the Idaho State Historical Library, Photo no. 75-228.35/8, Boise, Idaho.