

How Blackfoot John Smith Got His Name

After having spent several years in the Northern Rocky Mountains between the years 1826 to 1830, John Smith realized that there was no profit in trading furs to the company at the annual rendezvous. Having an aptitude for Indian languages, he concluded that the work of a merchant trader was much more to his liking than the life and risks of the trapper/hunter. So he determined to take his furs directly to St. Louis and there get outfitted for business.

He built a bullboat of buffalo hides and set off down the Missouri River alone. Along the way he endured many hardships, including hitting a snag with the bullboat which overturned the craft. Fortunately all of the beaver packs were securely lashed inside the craft, and so nothing of value was lost. Even though wet and chilled, for security reasons he was unable to start a campfire, and so spent a cold and miserable night. By morning he had developed a raging toothache, the pain becoming unbearable. Although the nearest doctor was perhaps thousands of miles away, Smith knew that he could obtain relief for his pain at Fort McKenzie. On his arrival at the fort he pulled a couple of beaver pelts from one of the packs and went up to the fort to dicker for a bottle of laudanum and jug of alcohol. Dosing himself with the laudanum, he was soon spinning merrily down the river in his bullboat.

After some time traveling in his pain free bliss, he lost all track of time and space. The current swept his small craft close to the shore, and in that vulnerable position, he was seen by five Blackfoot Indians. A shot was fired, and he was signaled to come ashore. To ignore the command would almost certainly result in him being shot, but coming ashore would almost certainly have the same results. Smith chose the latter, for the additional few minutes of life it offered. Pulling out the paddle, he brought the ungainly craft to the shore.

There the Blackfeet met him. They took his hands and dragged him from the boat, afterward helping themselves to all his property. Then they slit the bullboat with their knives and sent it drifting away, sinking as it went. They led Smith up the bank and out upon the prairie. Up there the wind was chill and disagreeable. Herding Smith before them, the five warriors rode their ponies to a sheltered spot not far off, where they dismounted and built a fire to roast the meat they had found in the bullboat. Smith saw that they were going to eat first and probably murder him after. Meanwhile they had found the alcohol; it made Smith laugh to see them try to swallow the raw spirit. But hoping to get them all drunk, he showed them how to dilute it with water, so that they could get it down.

By this time his dose of laudanum had lost its power, and he took another dose from the bottle in his pocket. This aroused the curiosity of his captors; they tried to take the bottle from him. Smith would not let them have it. He would rather have lost his scalp than that bottle. He told them it was dangerous "medicine." But he offered to give each a little....He gave each one a dose to knock him out. When the drug took effect, one after another fell asleep. Smith relaxed. He had got the best of them. Smith helped himself to their powder and lead and buffalo robes, cleaned and reloaded his guns, picked a fast horse to ride, and filled his saddle-bags with meat. He broke all the bows and arrows, threw them on the fire, and tossed all the guns and knives into the creek. Then he round up the ponies and was ready to start....

However, just as he was ready to start, two more Blackfeet rode over the hill. Smith did not shoot...He let them come up to the campfire. When they saw the burning bows and their friends lying around as if dead, one of them drew a bead on Smith. But Smith had the first shot and dropped him. The second Injun tried to ride away, but Smith shot his horse and the animal bucked the Blackfoot off on his head. Before he could throw off his daze, Smith was on him... He got the Injun down, stabbed him....

Smith suddenly understood how the Injun fighters felt. He scalped every one of those Blackfeet-seven of them... Smith rounded up the horses, swam them across the river... and struck out for Crow country to the southeast. The laudanum so dulled his aches and pains that he was able to ride day and night as long as the horses could travel. On the Yellowstone he fell in with a party of trappers traveling with some friendly Sioux. Smith gave each of the Sioux a horse from his band-the animals were pretty well worn down by that time-and so made himself welcome in their camps. They dubbed him "Blackfoot".

Smith never made it back to St Louis. He eventually fell in with some Cheyenne Indians, and married a Cheyenne woman. From there the travels of the tribe eventually brought him down into Bent's Fort country, where he came to the attention of William Bent. Bent quickly recognized Smith's talents and skills and hired him as a trader for the Bent and St. Vrain Company.