

*Adventures on the American Frontier*

# Following the Frontier West

Part Four

Jim Bridger, Mountain Man



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After the Santa Fe Trail opened in 1822, people began using it on their journeys west. But for many years before that, most people who went west started by going up the Missouri River. Even after the Santa Fe Trail was created, the river was still the best way to travel to the great northwest.

A boy named Jim Bridger was growing up in St. Louis in the days just before the Santa Fe Trail opened. Jim, like all of the other boys in those days, dreamed of going west up the Missouri River.





But there was little time for dreaming  
in Jim's boyhood days. His family was poor.  
To feed his children, Jim's father ran a  
ferryboat across the Mississippi River and



worked as a blacksmith between trips. He died when Jim was thirteen years old, and Jim took over the hard work his father had done.

Jim saw the keelboats being loaded for the trips to the fur-trading posts far up the Missouri River. He heard the stories, told year after year, of the men who had traveled to the faraway outposts. He kept on swinging the blacksmith's hammer, but in Jim's heart, he longed to go with the mountain men.

“I’m going,” he decided one day in 1822 when he was eighteen years old. General William Ashley’s keelboats were ready to leave for a trip up the Missouri River. General Ashley was one of the owners of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company.

When the steersman in charge of General Ashley’s boat crews bellowed, “Set poles for the mountains!” Jim was on board one of the boats. He had signed up for three years in the mountains, and he felt as if his life was beginning anew.



An accident with one of the boats kept General Ashley and his partner, Major Henry, from going all the way up the Missouri River. The men went trapping around the Yellowstone River instead, which flows into the wild Missouri. They built small forts that they went back to with their furs after short trapping trips.

Jim learned the work of a trapper fast. An old mountain man named Hugh Glass showed him many of the things a trapper had to know in order to catch beavers.