

*Meet John Simpson Smith*



*Real People! Real Stories!*

*Santa Fe Trail Hall of Fame*

**John Simpson Smith**

(1810 – 1871)

- Trained as a Tailor
- Fur Trader
- Spoke several languages & was an interpreter for several councils
- Guide, interpreter & translator
- Was at Sand Creek and a son was killed there
- Testified before U. S. Congress about the Sand Creek Massacre

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**John Simpson Smith**, aka Uncle John and Blackfoot Smith, was born in Frankfort, KY, in 1810. Little is known of his early life except that his family moved to St. Louis and that Smith was apprenticed there to a tailor. In 1830, Smith headed west to join the fur trade, probably as an employee of one of the major fur companies operating out of Saint Louis. Smith earned his nickname in 1830 when he outsmarted a group of seven Blackfoot Indians who had captured him as he was trying to float his winter's cache of furs down the Missouri River. In the years that followed, Smith married a Cheyenne woman, Wapoola, who bore him several children. He also learned four Indian dialects plus French and Spanish and would serve as an interpreter at several important councils.

In 1846, Smith was working as a trader for William Bent, working out of Bent's Fort and trading with the Southern Cheyenne. When Louis Garrard wanted to experience the life of a trader, he was partnered with Smith on a trading venture and recounted the experience in *Wah-to-yah and the Taos Trail*. In 1847, the young Englishmen George Ruxton visited the Fort and described Smith as one of the interpreters working to translate the words of Arapaho and Cheyenne into English. In 1851, Smith was employed as one of the translators at the treaty signing in Fort Laramie.

In 1864, Smith persuaded Black Kettle and his Cheyenne followers to camp at Sand Creek, CO, where Smith was assured that the Indians would be safe. However, on November, 700 soldiers under the command of Colonel John Chivington attacked the camp while most of the fighting men were away on a buffalo hunt, massacring over 100 Indians, mostly women and children. Smith, his Cheyenne wife, and children were there and his son Jack was killed. Smith later gave testimony before a congressional committee investigating the event, testimony that contradicted Chivington's claims that 500-600 Cheyenne warriors had been killed in the battle.

In 1865, Smith served as interpreter at the Treaty of the Little Arkansas. In that treaty, his surviving children, William and Armama, were each awarded 640 acres of land in the Arkansas River Valley as a "courtesy" by the government. That land was fewer than 10 miles from Bent's Old Fort and the Santa Fe Trail crossed it. After the Treaty of the Little Arkansas Smith moved with his family to the Cheyenne Reservation in Oklahoma where he died in 1871.