



# James Ohio Pattie: California Fur Trader, Mountain Man, and Explorer (1922)

*Robert Glass Cleland*

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Robert Glass Cleland, 1885-1957, was an educator, historian and scholar who received his Ph.D. from Princeton University in 1912 and served as professor of history.

Pattie was one of the first American citizens to traverse widely through the entire Rocky Mountain frontierland. The trail he blazed from New Mexico to California became a well-traveled trail for fur traders and trappers in the 1830s, and for California-bound emigrants after the U.S.-Mexican War of 1846–48.

In June of 1824 James Ohio Pattie, then in his early 20's, left Kentucky with his father, Sylvester, and headed west. They reached Taos, New Mexico, traveled down the Rio Grande, fought with Indians, rescued two white women who had been captured by Comanches, crossed over the Mogollon Mountains (they had to eat one of their horses; later they had to eat their dogs also), and for a while ran a mine and fought more Indians for the Mexicans near Silver City.

In southern New Mexico, a party of French trappers, against Pattie's advice, consorted with the wrong Indians and they were massacred, their body parts strewn around the Indian village. The Patties and thirty others joined together "under a genuine American leader, who could be entirely relied on" to take revenge on the village:

"Two of our men were then ordered to show themselves on the top of the bank. They were immediately discovered by the Indians, who considered them, I imagine, a couple of the Frenchmen that they had failed to kill. They raised the yell, and ran towards the two persons, who instantly dropped down under the bank. There must have been 200 in pursuit...We allowed them to approach within 20 yards, when we gave them our fire. They commenced a precipitate retreat, we loading and firing as fast as was in our power...In less than ten minutes, the village was so completely evacuated, that not a human being was to be found, save one poor old blind and deaf Indian, who sat eating his mush as unconcernedly as if all had been tranquil in the village. We did not molest him."

After the battle and some similar adventures, the Patties resumed trapping and followed the Gila west to Yuma, trapping beaver and fighting with more Indians, and then crossed the California desert, reaching San Diego in March of 1828.

In San Diego, the Patties and their American companions were promptly arrested by Governor Echeandia, who confiscated their fortune in furs and threw the men in jail. There they languished, and the elder Pattie died. Ever resourceful, young James struck up a romance with a woman of high station. He recuperated under her care, and began working part-time from jail as a translator for the governor.

Finally, news reached the governor of a smallpox epidemic in the north. Rather fortuitously (ahem), Pattie had a quantity of smallpox vaccine with him. He made a deal with the governor: his own and his companions' freedom in exchange for vaccinating the populace. During his six month trip up the coast from San Diego to Fort Ross, just north of today's San Francisco, Pattie claims to have vaccinated nearly 22,000 Mexicans, missionaries, Indians, and settlers.

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