

This Day in History... April 26, 1798

Birth of Jim Beckwourth

James Pierson Beckwith (later Beckwourth) is believed to have been born on April 26, 1798 (or 1800), in Frederick County, Virginia. He was a figure from the old West, serving as a trapper, scout, trader, rancher, and more.

Born into slavery, Beckwourth's father was also his master and he was the third of 13 children. His father moved them all to Missouri around 1809 and later apprenticed Jim to a blacksmith so he could learn a useful trade. He was eventually fired for arguing with the blacksmith. Beckwourth's father emancipated him in 1824.

Beckwourth then went to school in St. Louis before joining the Rocky Mountain Fur Company as a wrangler. He learned the skills necessary to live in the wilderness, becoming a skilled trapper and mountain man. In 1825, a fellow trapper began spreading a rumor that Beckwourth was the child of a Crow chief and that he had been stolen by the Cheyenne and sold to a white family. Beckwourth normally wore Native American dress, and many believed the story.

Later that year, Beckwourth was reportedly mistaken for the lost son of a Crow chief and was accepted into their nation. (Some accounts claim the Rocky Mountain Fur Company planned this, to increase trade with the tribe.) For nearly nine years, Beckwourth lived with the Crow, married the daughter of a chief, distinguished himself in battle, and eventually became a high-ranking chief of the Dog Clan.

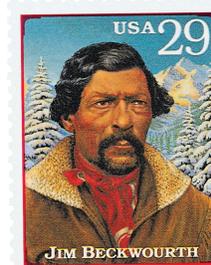
While with the Crow, Beckwourth also had a contract with the American Fur Company. When that contract was not renewed, he returned to St. Louis in 1837 and joined the US Army in the Second Seminole War. Over the next several years, Beckwourth worked as an Indian trader and ran a trading post in Pueblo, Colorado. For a time, he traded on the Old Spanish Trail in Mexico, but returned to the US to join the Army during the Mexican-American War, participating in the Taos Revolt.

Like many Americans, Beckwourth went west with the California gold rush of 1848. He opened a store in Sonoma and made a living for a time as a professional gambler. In 1850, Beckwourth discovered a pass through the Sierra Nevada Mountains, which was named in his honor. Located near present-day Reno, this pass became part of a major emigration route to California. The following year, he improved a Native American trail through the mountains, which was also named after him. The pass made it easier for settlers traveling to California to avoid 150 miles of dangerous terrain.



Beckwourth, California was named in his honor.

Beckwourth moved to Denver, Colorado, where he worked as a storekeeper and Indian agent. In 1864, he was made a scout with the 3rd Colorado Cavalry. He participated in actions against the Cheyenne and Apache, but was banned from trade with them after a massacre in which men, women, and children were killed. Beckwourth returned to trapping and was then made a scout during Red Cloud's War. As his health declined, he returned to his former Crow village, where he died on October 28, 1866, or 1867.



Beckwourth was honored on the famed 1994 Legends of the West sheet.

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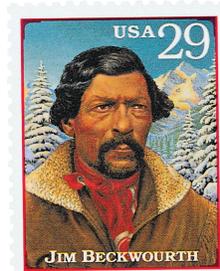
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