

Jim Baker, The Forgotten Man

Jim Baker: Trapper, Guide, Army Scout, Businessman and Pioneer

By David Carter

Often referred to as “the forgotten man,” Jim Baker (Figures 1 and 2) was a trapper, guide, army scout, Indian fighter, map maker, homesteader, pioneer rancher, businessman, husband, and father many times over, whose adventurous life was long and colorful, apropos to his 6’4” frame and bright red hair. He was friends with Jim Bridger, Kit Carson and other long-remembered mountain men, and he was one of General John C. Fremont’s favorite scouts.

He has been called the forgotten mountain man, as found in the Daily (Colorado) Tribune, June 28, 1923: “While



Figure 1. Oil painting by C. Waldo Love, 1935 Colorado Historical Society, Denver, CO.



Jim Baker, living, had never meant so very much to Coloradans, Baker dead was remembered as Colorado’s first citizen, the original settler in that state, along with Wyoming.”

Jim Baker was born in Belleville, St. Clair County, Illinois on December 19, 1818, of Scottish/English ancestry.



Figure 2. Oil painting by Lansdale Fox, 1924 Colorado Historical Society, Denver, CO.

Not much is known about his early days other than that he developed a life-long love of the outdoors. He attended school until he was old enough to apprentice as a shoemaker. The apprenticeship lasted only about a year.

He "borrowed" \$20.00 from his mother and left for St. Louis, the gateway to the West, at the age of 20. Walking down the street in St. Charles, at over 6 feet tall with bright red hair, he was noticed by Jim Bridger, who hired him to work for the American Fur Company. They left soon on the steamer St. Peters for the beaver country in the West, traveling up the Missouri, then overland to Ft. Laramie, then west over South Pass to the 1839 Green River Rendezvous.

At the rendezvous Baker met Kit Carson and started life as a trapper. Baker spent 1839 and all of 1840 trapping on the Green River and into the Wind River Mountains in what is now Wyoming. In the fall of 1840, about 60 mountain men and 800 Shoshoni Indians gathered in Brown's Hole for the winter. Henry Fraeb, along with Father De Smet and his family brought supplies for the last rendezvous that year. Bridger, Fraeb, Baker and Jack Robinson spent the winter on Henry's fork of the Green River.

In 1841, with his two year contract completed, Baker headed back to Illinois to see his family. After a limited time with his family and old friends, he realized that he couldn't live where "people were so thick." Going back to St. Louis, Baker caught a wagon train going to California, captained by Thomas "Broken Hand" Fitzpatrick and accompanied by Father De Smet. Baker became the supplier of meat for the train. Upon reaching the Green River, the train met Henry Fraeb and his party of 20 hunters and trappers on July 23, 1841. The train split, with Father De Smet going on to Oregon with half the settlers and the other half going on to California to become the first Americans to arrive in California by overland travel. Jim Baker returned to his friend Jim Bridger on the Henry's Fork and the mountains, where he would remain the balance of his life.

Henry Fraeb and his 20-man party had gone east to the Little Snake River Valley, an area just north of present day Baggs, Wyoming. Bridger received word that a large band of Sioux, Arapahoe, and Cheyenne were on the warpath and intended to wipe out the trappers and hunters. Bridger sent Baker and two others to warn Fraeb. Shortly after their arrival, another trapper came in and said that the Indians had killed his companions and were headed toward Fraeb's group. On August 20, 1841, Fraeb moved his camp to an island at the junction of a stream (now named Battle Creek) that entered the Little Snake. The men, numbering 25 whites and about 20 Shoshoni warriors, set up a fort on the island and fought against more than 500 attackers. The attack continued through the 21st. Fraeb was killed and Baker, age 22, assumed command. Since the Sioux would

not fight at night, the trappers used darkness to reinforce their small barracks. During the morning of August 22nd, the Indians withdrew, having suffered many losses. Stories of Baker's bravery, daring, leadership and marksmanship were told by the survivors and his reputation as an Indian fighter was assured. Baker, in 1886, gave an interview to the *Denver Republican* and said that the Indians made about 40 charges against the small log barracks on the island and, using mostly bow and arrows, came within 10-15 paces of the trappers before being shot. All estimates were of approximately 100 attacking Indians killed with the loss of only four trappers.

Shortly after, Bridger, Baker and ten others left for the Southwest, going down the west side of the Rockies toward the Little Colorado. There they encountered Apaches, had several fights, lost 4 men and turned back towards the Green River until they ran into the Utes, who convinced them to stop trapping and leave the area. Nine months later, they arrived back at Bridger's camp.

General Fremont returned to Brown's Hole on the Green River from his exploits in Utah, where Bridger and Baker joined Fremont's party with Kit Carson. They explored the three central "parks" of Colorado, arriving at Pueblo on June 29, 1844. They went on to Bent's Fort, and then Taos, the home of Kit Carson.

Baker spent the winter of 1845-46 (called "the worst winter on record") near the North Platte River west of the Medicine Bow Mountains of Wyoming. Temperatures of 60 below killed not only the horses, but all the buffalo, deer, moose and elk, leaving Baker and his companions to survive on rose hips and cottonwood bark. Having heard stories from Fremont, Carson and Fitzpatrick of tremendous horse herds ripe for the taking, Baker and a few others set off for California after acquiring the necessary horses and pack animals. Baker's crew arrived in California in the spring of 1846, gathered a herd of 10,000 horses, then headed back east. They were well-armed enough to drive off the various Indians and Mexican vaqueros, losing only a few horses along the way. Their real enemy was the desert between the Sierra and the Rockies. When they finally arrived back at Black's Fort on the Green River, they only had about 4,000 horses to trade with the Indians.

In the fall of 1846, Baker and his horses settled in with a band of Shoshoni near the Wind River for the winter. Although never very good with a bow and arrow, he was unmatched with a rifle. Kit Carson often said that Baker was the best shot in the West, next to himself. Since he loved to hunt, he was always welcome as a hunter for the winter. While out hunting with the bands' braves in the spring, a Blackfoot party raided the camp, killing several old people, kidnapping two young girls, taking all the horses and burning the tipis. Chief Arizona organized a party of his best warriors,

along with Jim Baker, to go after the Blackfeet party. They found the Blackfeet party at nightfall. Baker went into the camp to rescue the girls while the others took all the horses. After a small fight, the Shoshoni and Baker returned with the Shoshoni horses, the Blackfeet horses and the two girls. One of the rescued girls was the Chief's daughter, Marina. Jim married Marina, the first of six Shoshoni wives for him.

In 1849, with too many miners traveling west to the gold fields in California, Baker left for the Milk River country in Montana with a few friends. After a successful trapping trip north of the Yellowstone River and many run-ins with the Sioux and Blackfeet, they arrived back on the Wind River in June 1850, having covered 1200 miles.

In 1851, Kit Carson organized a new trapping trip, with written invitations to his old friends. Baker received his invitation at Fort Hall in Idaho and left the next day for the 700 mile trip to Rayado (Carson's home) in April of 1852. Of the 18 trappers, half were old friends. They traveled north on the Arkansas River, then to the South Platte River; in Wyoming, to the Sweetwater River; then down the Green River and south across the Grand and Colorado Rivers and finally through Raton Pass to Rayado. With several thousand dollars each, they parted after a great party thrown by Kit Carson. They realized that this was the last trapping trip they would take together.

Around 1853, Baker acquired a second wife, Meeteetse, whom he renamed Mary. She and Jim eventually had ten children. In 1850, Baker operated a ferry across the Green River at the Old Overland Crossing on the Oregon trail. His brother John recorded that Jim was making as much as \$600 per day during the high water, when as many as 55,000 people passed through the area in a season. In 1849, the Mormons' "State of Deseret" proclaimed control over Fort Bridger and the surrounding area, including the Green River crossings. The Mormons granted an exclusive right to operate ferries from 1853 to 1856 to a church leader and sent a force of 150 men to take the ferries and arrest Jim Bridger. Bridger and Baker sold out and left. The whereabouts of Baker during the next two years was unknown, but it was assumed that he returned to the Wind River area with the Shoshoni.

In 1855, Baker, along with several other mountain men, arrived at Fort Laramie and spent considerable time drawing maps for the military with Lieutenant Warren. The Sioux wars were just starting, and the military wanted maps. Only the mountain men knew the West. Baker's sketched map is located in the New York State Library. It included the area from Ft. Laramie south into Colorado, west to the Salt Lake, north into Idaho, east of the Yellowstone, then back to Ft. Laramie. Baker became chief scout at Ft. Laramie for several years.

The Mormon problem escalated with raiding, burning and basic guerrilla warfare on the settlers and travelers going

west. Baker was sent to the site of the Mountain Meadows Massacre and filed a report naming the Mormons as the perpetrators, which caused Brigham Young to offer a reward of \$5,000.00 for Jim Baker, dead. Finally, when Colonel Albert Sidney Johnston arrived at Ft. Bridger on November 18, 1857, he found everything burned as the Mormons retreated west.

On November 24, Captain Randolph B. Marcy was ordered to select a unit of volunteers from Ft. Bridger and head 650 miles southeast for supplies at Taos, New Mexico. Marcy's unit left on November 27 with 40 volunteer troops, 25 civilian mountain men, and 65 mules. Baker and his friend Goodale were the guides for the 25-day trip. They traveled southwest into the Uintah Mountains, across the Green River and the Colorado River, finally arriving at the Gunnison River in southwestern Colorado. Marcy, behind schedule, directed the unit east through the San Juans into an area of deep snow, with no knowledge of the area as neither Baker or Goodale had ever ventured there. Fifty-two days later, having existed on mule meat and dried wild horse mint (a coffee and tobacco substitute), the men reached Fort Massachusetts (north of Taos) on January 18th, with only three rideable mules. Six and a half months later, Capt. Marcy arrived back at Fort Bridger with relief: sheep, cattle, mules and 194 troops.

Jim Baker later served as scout and guide for Colonel Steptoe for the area between Fort Walla Walla into the Colville Mining district (in northeastern Washington State). He was hired as a scout by Jim Bridger at Fort Phil Kearny in Wyoming and was involved in the Wagon Box fight after the Fetterman massacre. Baker was a wagon driver for the woodcutters whom the Sioux attacked. The guards and drivers used the wagon boxes as a makeshift fort. The troop had the "new" 1866 50/70 trapdoors and not the muzzleloaders of the past, and the Indians continued to attack. With muzzleloaders, they would have overrun the small number of defenders. Reports are that Baker used seven rifles with three troopers loading. He apparently accounted for about 100 Sioux. In 1875, Baker scouted with three others for Custer in northern Wyoming, but when their time ran out, they left because they didn't like the way Custer gave orders. Baker's last service for the military was in 1879, when the Utes overran Major Thornburgh's command on the Milk Creek after the Meeker Massacre.

In 1859 Baker moved his family to Colorado, and homesteaded 160 acres on the Vasquez Fork (later named Clear Creek) of the South Platte, where the Old Cherokee Trail crossed on its way to Boulder. Jim built a ferry across the river, en route to the mines of Gold Hill and Central City.

He later opened a store, supplying the migrants and locals with necessary items, including meat, which he procured as a hunter and guide. Baker filed the first coal

mine claim in Colorado on Coal Creek, near the present town of Erie.

After his wife was drowned in Clear Creek, he decided he could wait no longer, and finally built a toll bridge over the river in 1865. The Baker School District, the Baker Precinct for voting, the Baker Neighborhood and the Baker crossing named after him all added to the expanding area of Auraria, later named Denver.

In 1865, Major Oakes was named Indian Agent for the mountain Utes, and being a long time friend of Baker, hired Jim to be his guide and interpreter. The Ute treaty of 1868 covered most of western Colorado Territory. The amendments to the treaty in 1873 included the building of a mission by Meeker in the northwestern region of Colorado, on the Milk River.

Many reports describe Jim as extremely handsome, but generally scarred from his toes to the top of his head by bear fights, riding accidents and Indian battles. His worst accident occurred when a “modern repeating” Spencer carbine was given to him by General Cunningham at Ft. Leavenworth. It was then that he gave up his beloved Hawken rifle. In June of 1867, Jim and Major Oakes were visiting a Ute camp west of Denver and were invited to participate in a shooting match with the Indians. The Spencer magazine—which is located in the buttstock—exploded, seriously injuring Baker, breaking his chin, lacerating his neck, right shoulder, and severing several fingers (or portions thereof). Besides losing a thumb and part of his trigger finger, from the time of his recovery he wore a beard to cover the scars and his badly disfigured chin. He vowed to never use a repeating rifle again.

The population of Denver was growing, and in 1870 the census listed 4500 residents. In 1872, Jim was hired to guide the surveyors of the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad for a route to Salt Lake. By 1873, the population was almost 16,000—more than Baker could take. The *Boulder News* on June 6, 1873 reported: “Old Jim Baker, a resident of Colorado for 30 years, has pulled up stakes from his well-known ranch on Clear Creek and gone over the range to Snake River.” Jim, with his four daughters and a son-in-law, arrived on the Little Snake River and built his home (Figures 3-6) almost on the line between Colorado and Wyoming. It was also very near the Indian battle with Fraeb, 35 years earlier. Built out of large cottonwood logs, the



Figure 3.

ground floor was 16×31 feet divided into two rooms, with two windows in each room and a door at each end.

The upper floor was a single room, 15 feet square, with two windows on each side, and a small watchtower or turret on the roof, reached by rope ladder. The house resembled a fort rather than a house, and that was what it was. Placed on a hill, Baker could see the area for a long way and with his



Figure 4.



Figure 5.

new Sharps rifle could defend his family. He stated that the “Utes don’t like me” and he expected an attack at anytime.

In 1875, after building his fort, Baker ordered a new single shot rifle—a Sharps Model 1874 Octagon Sporting rifle in .44 caliber (serial number C53955). After receiving it he was displeased with what he got and wrote several letters of complaint to the Sharps Company. One letter was in regards to the type of rifling, as it was not the same as Baker had seen in other guns. The company responded that he lived in a “sandy” area and needed deeper rifling to combat the wear from the grit. In addition, the calibers were not correct. The company’s explanation was that as he was in a hurry for the guns and these were the closest to what he wanted, the company thought that they would work. Serial # C53955 was certainly the gun Baker used. Later, he had J.P. Lower’s gun shop in Denver re-chamber the gun from .44 to .45-100. An original receipt shows Jim Baker as the customer and the serial number of the gun to be the same. This means that he shot .45 caliber ammunition through the .44 caliber gun.

In 1879, the Utes massacred the Meeker mission and cornered the Army’s relief units, who were finally relieved by General Merritt. He then asked Jim Baker to guide his four companies of cavalry to Milk Creek. General Merritt’s notes state, “we arrived at the appointed junction of the Milk River



Figure 6.

and found Jim Baker waiting on his horse with his Sharps rifle tied to his saddle.”

Baker spent the rest of his days on the Little Snake, hunting, ranching, and raising his daughters and grandchildren. In 1895 and 1896, he accepted the invitation to be the Grand Marshall of the Denver Festival of the Mountain and Plain, which started in 1895. He was not accustomed to electric lights and refused to ride the elevators in the hotel. His only reason for coming to Denver was to see his old friends and spend time telling stories with those that were left.

In 1897, he fell ill and had his kidney removed in Denver. Realizing he would “walk with the wind on the trail we all must follow,” he prepared a will, gave land to each of his daughters, and settled his affairs. He died in his sleep on May 15, 1898. He was buried (Figures 7 and 8) in the family plot on a hill overlooking the Little Snake River between Savery and Dixon, Wyoming, shadowed by Baker’s Peak to the Southeast.

Jim Baker lived 60 years in the West when it was a very dangerous place, as 75–80% of mountain men died within the first year of trapping. He was involved in many Indian fights, bore many scars, and helped explore the area that we call home today.

Not much was known about Baker, because after Kit Carson’s story was published, Jim and several other mountain



Figure 7.

men refused to talk to either authors or journalists, because what they said was not what was printed. Baker and his fellows did not trust the reporters. Over the years, various references to Baker have been uncovered in journals, books, and news articles that have shone light upon his extensive exploits. Various parks, neighborhoods, statues, and even a stained glass window in the Colorado State Capital speak to his contributions to the West, Colorado and Wyoming in particular.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Nolie Mumey, *The Life of Jim Baker 1818-1898*, The World Press, Inc., Denver, Colorado, 1931.



Figure 8.

M. Wilson Rankin, *Reminiscences of Frontier Days*, Smith-Brooks, Denver, Colorado, 1935.

Leighton L. Baker, *Jim Baker The Redbearded Shoshoni*, Golden Lifestyles' Books, Tavares, FL. 1983.

Rocky Mountain News, Archives, Denver Public Library, Colorado Springs Pioneers Museum, *F W Cragin Collection*, Colorado Springs, CO.

LeRoy R. Hafen, *The Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West*, The Arthur H. Clark Company, Glendale, CA., 1966.

Westminster Historical Society, Westminster, CO.

Denver Public Library, Western History Division, Denver, CO.