

HISTORY OF THE WEST WITH JEMMEY FLETCHER; **BIRTH OF A FRONTIERSMAN**



IMAGE VIA WIKICOMMONS: [HTTPS://COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG/WIKI/FILE:SQUIRE BOONE CROSSING THE MOUNTAINS WITH STORES FOR HIS BROTHER DANIEL.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Squire_Boone_crossing_the_mountains_with_stores_for_his_brother_Daniel.jpg)

BOOK ZERO OF THE JEMMEY FLETCHER SERIES
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Jeb Fletcher gave the cabin one last look before tossing the torch onto the roof. At first, one might have thought the torch was going to flicker out and spare the cabin the burning. Jeb knew better. After a few minutes, the frontiersman saw heat waves shimmering off the rooftop; a sure sign the flames had taken hold. Casually, Jeb turned his back and walked a short distance into the wet woods where his furs were stashed. As he approached, the faithful brown cur lifted its head and wagged its tail as Jeb sat down. The two had traveled many hard trails together, and the cold night they faced in the open would be no different.

As he thought about the impending cold sleep, Jeb couldn't remember if it was late winter, or early spring. With this weather, it was hard telling what season it actually was. Add to that, it had been months since he knew what day it was. What did it matter? Dates never meant much to him anyways.

Finding a comfortable place to sit beneath a barren maple tree he turned his attention back to the cabin. Flames now danced high off the roof, and the building was quickly being consumed by fire.

This wasn't the first cabin he'd torched, and the way folks were pouring in from the east, he didn't figure it would be the last either. It wasn't that Jeb didn't like folks; in fact, he liked folks just fine. Play him a good fiddle tune, pour some corn spirits in his cup, and Jeb Fletcher was right personable. No, it wasn't the dislike of people that kept him constantly driving further into the western frontier.

It was the freedom.

Jeb couldn't stomach seeing a neighbor move in even five miles away. It was too close for his liking. When one neighbor settled in, Jeb knew it wouldn't be long before a heap of other people set down roots and ruined the hunting. Sure, they'd bring their churches, their towns, carve a road or two, heck they'd even bring law to this wilderness.

Law, the thought exasperated Jeb. *If folks lived out in this wilderness, they wouldn't need no law. Heck, we keep our space and don't transgress folks unless they transgress us. And those that do harm others...well;* Jeb had enough memories of seeing the terrified eyes of a man about to die to know how cowards went out of this world. It was frontier justice, enforced by men with iron wills and straight shooting flintlocks, that Jeb favored. Somehow, good always seemed to prevail.

Over the next day and a half, Jeb lazily watched the cabin burn, until eventually it was just a smoldering pile of charcoal. As soon as the heat had mostly dissipated, he got up and approached the ugly black mass.

Too bad, he thought to himself. *That was perhaps the finest cabin I had ever built. No sense in frettin' too much over it though. A man can't get too attached to things of this world anyhow.*

As he knelt down in the remains of his burned cabin, he started his search through the rubble. Carefully, he sifted through black timbers, looking for his prize. It didn't take him long to find one, two, three, then a dozen more.

Must have been the door, he thought to himself as he withdrew each of the nails. As was customary on the frontier, Jeb had burned his cabin and in order to retrieve the nails before moving on. Nails were, of course, handmade, and Jeb had built enough cabins to know the effort he would save if he could collect a poke full of nails before moving on.

By the middle of the afternoon, Jeb had his poke full, and he was every bit as black as the charred timbers he had been sorting through. Swinging the poke up on his shoulder, he strode over and picked up his scant belongings; a blanket filled with some essentials, a few furs, his shooting bag, two hunting knives, a long barreled flintlock, and a sharp tomahawk. Loading the blanket and furs on his back, grabbing the rifle in his hand, he called the dog and swung east. He still had one more thing to do before striking out.

He had to have a talk with that nephew of his.

It took several days travel for Jeb Fletcher and his dog to reach his brother's cabin on the Missouri frontier. It was late in the day when he arrived, and he should have guessed what he found.

His brother David was sitting in the shade of the lean-to off the house. Though there was still plenty of light left to work, David was already sucking off the whiskey jug. As a boy, David had been a stalwart young lad growing up in western North Carolina. The two of them had often gone into the woods for days at a time, hunting deer, bear, buffalo, and other animals for their hide, meat, and tallow. Back in those days they were known as some of the finest frontiersmen in the area. He remembered hearing their names mentioned along with older men like Daniel Boone, Lew Wetzel, and Kasper Mansker. Even as a boy, Jeb knew that to hear their names with those men meant they were doing something right.

Yet, over time, David had fallen off course. Seeing him dozing on the hickory stump, Jeb could hardly see his energetic brother through the slack-faced man dressed in tattered clothes slumped in front of him.

Reap what you sow, Jeb reminded himself.

Without saying a word to his brother, he turned his gaze to the young boy he had walked all this way to see. Out in the field, swinging an axe like a man, was a short and square faced boy in a tattered checkered shirt. Although he was a small boy, Jeb noticed something in the determination in which the boy swung the axe. It was as if every stroke chipped not at the stump, but at something unseen that bound the boy. Smiling a bit, Jeb had a hint of an idea at the boy was really swinging at.

A true Fletcher indeed, Jeb thought to himself. He needed to do that boy a favor, and tell him what he had traveled this far to say.

Turning his attention back to his brother, Jeb strolled over to the lean-to. As he approached the shelter, Jeb casually leaned a shoulder against one of the poles. For a moment, neither he nor David spoke a word. Then, David looked up at him through bloodshot eyes and sneered as he spoke.

"What say you, brother?" He mocked. "You bring a fortune of furs with you?"

Jeb simply shook his head before replying. "You know better than that, brother. Furs don't make a man rich; besides, I ain't never needed more than a few bars of lead and some powder to keep me sassy. Too much money would just slow me down."

An uncomfortable silence hung between the two before Jeb spoke up again.

"I'm leavin' the country, David. Too many settlers pouring in. I'd like to talk with young Jem one last time 'fore I go. If nothing else, I imagine the young sprout would surely like to pet my old dog one last time."

It seemed to Jeb like the thought went through David's head like the last few drops of slop drip from a bucket after cleaning pig stalls. Sullenly, the churlish brother shook his head.

"I don't know, Jeb," David said sourly. "We got plenty of work needin' done."

"Well, then why ain't you up doin' it?" Jeb retorted with a serious stare.

Jeb may as well have kicked his brother in the gut.

"I uh, uh..." Dave stammered before formulating his excuse. "The mules pert near run me over and I got me a bum knee. Yep. Day before yesterday they did. Cain and Able darn near kilt me they did, brother."

David took a deep drink of whiskey then smacked his lips in satisfaction.

Looking at Jeb with a matter-of-fact expression, he stated flatly, "Yep, Jeb, I'm lucky to be alive."

You got that right, Jeb thought to himself. Being a drunk is one thing, being a liar is another.

Still, Jeb realized things would go better for his nephew if he could get David's consent for the conversation. Jeb pressed him a little more. "Well, you being stove up and all, what say you let the boy go for the afternoon. The day's most gone anyhow. It'd do the boy some good to get out in the woods. Heck, him going with me might give you some time to rest."

Then Jeb paused. A memory crept up in his mind.

"You used to enjoy tramps through the woods well enough yerself as I remember."

David's flashed as he snapped his head and glared angrily up Jeb. Jeb only returned the stare with an emotionless expression. All he wanted was to take that boy away. If he stepped on his brother's toes, what was the difference?

Then, angrily, David hissed, "Yeah, take him. But don't take him long, and no fishing! He's got work tomorrow. I can't afford to have him out foolin' around an' sleepin' in late."

With that, David's gaze went back to the ground as he pulled another drink off the jug.

Without another word, Jeb turned and crossed the clearing. His moccasined feet were unused to the feel of farm ground beneath them. As he approached Jemmy, he could see the young man's face light up when he saw his favorite uncle.

"Uncle Jeb!" Jemmy shouted before he took one final swing with the axe. It took a deep bite in the stump, and then Jemmy left it stuck there as he came charging over.

"How ya been?" Jemmy asked his uncle as he bent down and eagerly began scratching the brown dog. At first, Jeb couldn't tell who was happier; Jemmy or the dog.

Jeb smiled the crooked smile that always spread across his face whenever he saw the boy and the dog.

"I been good, Jem. Just pulling out of the country. I wanted to stop by and say goodbye before I left."

"You're leaving?" Jemmy asked looking up. His square face showed his displeasure.

"Yep, Jem. Too many settlers for me. I'm afraid I'm heading further west."

"Where will you go?" Jemmy asked earnestly.

"Don't rightly know I guess," Jeb replied shrugging his shoulders. "Wherever the huntin' is good I expect. I met a man named Thomas Fitzpatrick a few months ago, and he said the Rocky Mountains was good."

Jeb went on to tell Jemmy all about his meeting with the mountaineer, and the fur boom of the Rocky Mountains. As he talked, the two Fletchers and the brown dog walked leisurely through the woods. Jeb told story after story about his meeting with the mountaineers. He told about how one old ornery cuss had filled him in on all the happenings out west. He said there were buffalo herds that stretched clear across the horizon. He told Jem about a petrified forest, Indian fights, and the place where hell met the earth. As his story came to an end, Jeb laughed.

"I don't know though," he said to Jemmy, "I also heard if a man follows the Santa Fe trail he can then make a long ride out to a place the Mexicans call California. It's supposed to be right nice country. Might end up out there too."

"The Rocky Mountains... California..." Jemmy said in a far off voice. Jeb could almost see the dreams floating through the boy's mind. He smiled, knowing all too well the feeling.

Right then, Jeb knew he had been right all along. It was time to tell Jemmy the truth.

Then Jeb spoke up, breaking the train of dreams, "I got something for you, Jem," he said, reaching into his belt.

Curiously, Jemmy peeked around as Jeb withdrew the item. His eyes widened as he saw his uncle reveal a large hunting knife encased in a rawhide sheath. Thoughtfully, Jeb handed it to the boy.

"Here," he said, "You take it. You'll need it on those huntin' trips you'll be taking as you grow up. I expect a young man like you has lots of adventures ahead of him."

Jemmy shook his head, "I don't know, Uncle Jeb. Pa says we got too much work to be done to be out trekking around."

Jemmy sighed. Even as he said the words, something stirred inside of him when he thought about The West. *Maybe someday*, the boy thought to himself.

Just then, Uncle Jeb laid a hand on his shoulder. As Jemmy looked up into the old hunter's eyes, he saw they were filled with honesty.

"Jem," his uncle said, "I want you to know something before I go. I know what yer feelin' on the inside. You got the Fletcher itch, boy, I can tell. You'd do yerself a favor and just come to terms with it. All Fletchers got it. We're frontiersmen, Jem. Dyed in the wool I expect. Grandpappy always said us Fletchers was like geese in the sky. Like the geese, you can always tell a change was coming when you seen a Fletcher show up."

Jeb sighed as he thought back on his young life. "Most folks in the world won't understand it, but that don't make it wrong, Jem. Sure, they'll try to tell you this and that, but you stay yer course. Ain't no sense in living life anything but what you are. You're sure enough Fletcher, and that stands for something.

"The West is a big place, Jem, and there's opportunity for a man willing to take a chance. You got the heart, and you got the blood, all you need is the experience. Now, when you get the chance, don't be afraid to take it. You come from

a long line of frontiersmen. I'd hate to think you'd spend too much time behind the plow, rather than out in the wilds where you belong."

The old hunter pressed the handle of the knife firmly into Jemmy's hand, and then said with a smile, "and when you take yer chance, you take this old knife with you. It's got a sharp edge, and it'll take care of you, if you take care of it."

Jemmy looked down thoughtfully at the knife. He felt that somehow he was getting a torch passed on to him. It was as if Uncle Jeb was handing him off more than a knife; he was handing him a tradition. Jem had never held much pride in the Fletcher name before, what with Pa being how he was and all. When Uncle Jeb talked about it though, Jem held his head just a little higher. His uncle's words ran through his mind.

You're sure enough Fletcher, and that stands for something.

Sensing the boy realized what he was telling him, Uncle Jeb smiled in satisfaction. If he could just plant the seed in the boy's mind, it just might grow into something. It had been worth the walk over.

Satisfied he had done his duty, Jeb slowly extended his open hand for a handshake. Jem took it, and felt the strong grasp of his frontier uncle. They shook hands, neither sure if they would see the other again.

"See ya, Uncle Jeb," Jemmy murmured.

"I'll be seeing ya, Jem," Jeb replied. "Remember what I said about being a Fletcher. It's in yer' blood, and you can't deny it."

Then, calling his dog, Jeb turned and walked silently into the woods headed west. As he did, he thought to himself, *that boy will make it. If he can find a way off that Godforsaken homestead, he'll make it. Too much Fletcher blood to stay hobbled up like he is.*

Little did he know about the great adventures that awaited Jemmy Fletcher.

Video Extension

Access this QR code, or search "How to Sharpen a Knife" on Frontierlife.net, to learn how to sharpen a knife with a rock. This is a skill frontiersmen would have had to be familiar with, and is still a skill you can practice.



Vocabulary

Cur – Name for a common dog.

Flintlock – A type of firearm popular on the frontier that used a piece of flint to set the main powder charge off.

Poke – Another term for bag or pack.

Questions:

1. What does Jeb do to his cabin before he leaves?
2. Why did he do that?
3. How is this different from our modern world?
4. How would construction project be different if we still made each and every nail by hand?

Extension Activity

Read the following diary passage recorded by Johann David Schöpf in the late 1770's (found on Keith Burgess' blog "A Woodsrunner's Diary") when describing the character of the American frontiersman.

..The Capitan was not at all pleased that the neighborhood was beginning to be so thickly settled. 'It spoils the hunting,' he said, 'makes quarrels; and then they come and want to collect taxes; it is time some of us were leaving and going deeper into the country.' Hence we supposed we should find a thickly settled region, but had to go not less than seven miles before we came to the next neighbor.

..."These hunters or 'backwoodsmen' live very like the Indians and acquire similar ways of thinking. They shun everything which appears to demand of them law and order, dread anything which breathes constraint. They hate the name of justice, and yet they are not transgressors. Their object is merely wild, although natural freedom, and hunting is what pleases them...."

Follow Up

1. What stands out to you after reading the passage?
2. How would you describe the character of the "backwoodsmen"?
3. Why do you think they "shun...law and order", but "yet they are not transgressors"?
4. If you could ask a backwoodsman one question, what would it be, and why?

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