

**HISTORY OF THE WEST WITH  
JEMMEY FLETCHER:  
RIDE TO RENDEZVOUS**



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PUBLISHED BY CODY ASSMANN**

**2019**

# CHAPTER 1

The house was dark when Jemmy Fletcher first opened his eyes. As usual, the first thing he felt was the dread of another day. He wondered what today would be like. Would he be able to just work the fields in peace and quiet? Or, would he be in for another whoppin? Would there be more yelling and cussing? He closed his eyes and wished he could simply return to the dream he was having about a deer hunt. Oh, how he wished he could spend the day in the woods hunting deer. In the woods, he always felt right.

Although Jemmy wanted to close his eyes and sleep, he battled the feeling and escaped the grasp of his tattered blankets and sat up in his trundle bed. Staying in bed or going on a deer hunt simply wasn't in his future. As he stirred, he

could feel the ropes that supported the straw tick mattress beneath him move just slightly. Next to him, his little brother Abraham lay still in sleep. Not wanting to disturb him, Jemmey silently swung his feet to the cold oak planks of the cabin's loft floor and dropped his head into his hands.

For just a moment, Jemmey sat on the edge of the bed and rubbed his eyes. Although he was only 16, he felt old this early in the morning. A fog of sleep clung to him and made him feel drowsy, begging him to simply collapse into the trundle bed and begin the deer hunting dream again. After taking a deep breath and letting out a yawn, Jemmey stretched his arms before rising for the day.

In the soft darkness of the cabin's loft, Jemmey did his best to pull on his trousers and work shirt without waking his brothers and sisters. Even though he was small for his age, being the oldest of the children, his parents expected more from him. Add to that, he knew Pa would take the belt to him if he made too much of a ruckus this early in the morning.

After getting dressed, Jemmey gingerly felt his way down the ladder until he felt the dirt floor of the cabin's main room. The feeling of cold earth on his feet sent a chill up his spine, and he shuddered just a little. From the darkest corner of the cabin, he could hear rustling come from his parent's bed. Then Pa's gruff whisper sounded through the darkness. "You get yer chorin' done yet, Jem?"

"Not yet, Pa. I just woke up and come down."

"Well, get to it," his pa barked, still in a whisper. "We don't got all day for you to get chorin' done. If it ain't rained and the dirt's dry, we ought to get the plowin' started today. You best get Cain and Able harnessed up, too. Hurry now and git!"

Cain and Able were the family's black mules and were a whisker meaner than old Pa. In his mind Jemmey sighed, but he dared not out loud. That would be a whoppin' for sure.

"Yes, sir," he whispered back. Another rummaging sound assured him Pa had rolled back over for a few more minutes' sleep.

Quiet as a mouse, Jemmey crossed the dirt floor, pulled on his brogans, slipped into a tattered old coat he and his younger brother shared, pressed his brown wide brimmed hat onto his head, and silently lifted the latch to the cabin door. Stepping out into the chill of the spring air, Jemmey could see his breath crystallize in the grayness of the eastern horizon. It was early spring, and the air had a chill that crept between the stitching of his shirt. As usual, the cold morning air sent a shiver through his body. Pulling the door shut behind him, he started across the yard for the barn. Chickens were darting out of their coop, ready to begin their morning search for grit. As Jemmey approached, the flock scattered in a flurry of feathers and clucks.

As he opened the barn door, he was hit with the familiar dank smell of animal urine, manure, and musty hay. He drew a deep breath and felt the sting travel up his nose and open him up on the inside. Even after all these years, he never did get used to it. Farming like this never had agreed with him, and he was getting plumb sick of it. Too much time in the dirty barn and down in the mud planting corn. If it were left up to him, he'd just as soon be out squirrel hunting or building a fish trap. Still, better to do as he was told than risk a whoopin'. Every once in a while, though, he got it in his mind he could take his pa if it came down to it. He'd been growing the last few years and was feeling strong. The fact was he had gotten an idea he might just quit this farm and head out on his own. It all had started with Uncle Jeb.

Uncle Jeb was as tough a frontiersmen as any Fletcher ever was. He'd tramped over pretty near all the country, always one step ahead of the towns, roads, and churches. He'd told Jemmey that was the way of the Fletchers, always out in front of folks, and never scared to take a chance. When he had stopped by the cabin a few months back, he was telling Jemmey tales of men coming down the Missouri River not far from here. Uncle Jeb said he'd seen Thomas Fitzpatrick's men, and they had a pack train of horses and mules loaded with beaver pelts headed for St. Louis. Jeb even said he loaned some tobacco to one of the trappers coming down river and had spoke with him a bit. Although he was a dirty cuss, as Jeb put it, he said the man told of all sorts of adventures in the mountains. He said he'd fought Indians, trapped beaver, hunted buffalo, and traveled country no white man had ever seen. According to Jeb, it sounded like the West was a big land, though it took a big man to make a living out there, too.

On this early morning, Jemmey thought about Uncle Jeb, and what his life must be like, away from the plow, garden, milk cows, pigs, and the darn wood splitting. Something deep inside urged him to just skip the barn and keep walking until he hit the river. It was an urge that came deep down from the bottom of his belly, and he wanted nothing more than to just listen to it. He thought about the old hunting knife his uncle had given him. What was it he had said? *Yer' sure enough Fletcher, and that stands for something.*

The thought gave Jemmey hope he may one day get the chance to explore the wild lands far away from this cabin. Even so, this morning he knew it was probably better to just put his head down and get to chorin'.

Crossing through the dark space between the stalls, he eventually came to the old Jersey milk cow he'd named Star for the white spot on her forehead. She was used to their

morning routine and didn't even bother to cast a glance his way as he tied her up for the morning milking. Grabbing the bucket from the peg on the wall, and the one-legged milking stool, he settled in for a few minutes. His hands quickly worked the cow's teats, and soon, milk was squirting into the bucket. After so many years of the work, his strong hands didn't tire like they did when he was a young boy. Now, he could milk all four teats without so much as slowing down.

By the time he had finished the milking, the sun had raised some, and the barn was beginning to light up. Jemmey untied Star from the stall and returned the stool to its home. Hauling the bucket back to the house, he walked slowly to avoid spilling a single drop of the precious milk. As the sun popped over the horizon, its sharp yellow light filtered between the budding white oaks of the wood surrounding the cabin. As it rose in the east, Jemmey stopped and cast his gaze to the west.

Standing in the chill of morning, he wondered what it would be like out there in the open spaces, where mountains were so tall they held snow all year, where the rivers ran cool and deep, and the buffalo still roamed. Dreams of adventure coursed through his mind, and he could almost feel the wind wash over him as he watched a herd of buffalo stretching to the horizon. In the dream, he was sitting on a tall gelding and had a rifle lying across his lap. Eagles flew overhead, and the towering mountains surrounded him on all sides. Caught up in the dream, everything seemed right about the world. Then, the sound of the opening cabin door snapped him back to reality. The sight of Pa standing angrily in the doorway reminded him he wasn't in a dream world any more.

**Vocabulary:**

Gelding – A male horse that has been castrated.

Brogans – Heavy work boots

**Questions:**

1. What city were the trappers traveling to?
2. Who was the leader of the trappers that Uncle Jeb talked to by the river?
3. Why were trappers targeting beaver?
4. What appealed to Jemmy about the West?
5. In what time period do you think this story takes place? Why?
6. How would the story be different if it took place today?

## CHAPTER 2

Standing in the yard, Jemmey could see anger flare in Pa's eyes. Last night, Pa had sucked down more than his fair share of whiskey. On nights like that, Jemmey knew best just to steer clear. Only problem was, on the morning after, Pa was still as mean as a copperhead, and there wasn't any chance of staying clear of him. Jemmey would just have to bear what came next.

"I thought I told you to get Cain and Able harnessed, Jem," his pa said with a cold and angry look in his eyes.

Jemmey swallowed hard, knowing where all this was headed. He replied, "Yes, sir. Just got done milking Star. I figured to bring in the milk before I caught ..."



“Just watch yer tongue, boy!” Pa shouted angrily. “You been so lazy these days it makes me sick. With as much as you been eating, you ought to be doing double the work anyhow. Seems I might have to remind you just whose boy you are.”

Pa stared at Jemmey and tilted his head to one side as if he was turning a thought over. Jemmey stood still as an oak tree. He could see his pa’s mind working, and he didn’t like where it was headed. Holding the milk bucket in the middle of dirt yard, he felt vulnerable. There wasn’t anywhere to run or hide, and nothing to distract Pa from him. If Pa tried to take him, he’d just have to soak it up the best he could.

For the first time though, the thought of just soaking it up didn’t sit well. Inside him a small fire was flickering. For years, he’d been taking Pa’s whippings. Always, he took them like Pa said he should. Today, he just didn’t feel he had one coming. Sure, if he’d done wrong he wouldn’t balk. The way it was though, if Pa whipped him, it was just because he was feeling mean. Right then and there, Jemmey figured that wasn’t a reason for a whoopin’. The time was coming when he was going to be a man, and a man couldn’t stand for getting whipped for no reason. Feeling proud, his chest swelled a little as Pa’s angry eyes looked him up and down.

Pa must have noticed it because he narrowed his eyes into a hateful stare. “Yes, Jem. You ain’t been carrying your weight around here. It’s time I reminded you what happens to boys who don’t carry their weight.”

Pa’s hand went to the belt around his waist. Jemmey just stared at him with a growing confidence. He should have been scared, but for some reason, he wasn’t. In fact, seeing Pa go for his belt almost made him laugh. After years of getting the belt, he had grown accustomed to the point where he didn’t really even fear it anymore. What did he fear then? Was it Pa?

Looking at Pa's bloodshot eyes and weathered face, Jemmy suddenly realized there wasn't anything to be scared of. Although he was small, Jem had been doing the hard work around here for years and was strong as a mule and tough as an oak because of it. Pa had took to drinking most nights and looked like a man that had been hollowed out. There wasn't anything that filled him up, except for hate, and Jemmy didn't feel like backing down from hate. He stood as tall as he could and returned Pa's dreadful stare.

Seeing his boy defy him made Pa's blood boil. His face hardened, and pure evil seeped through him as he hissed,

"Feeling like a man today, eh, Jem?" He laughed a scornful laugh, and his eyes went to the hickory axe handle propped up against the cabin wall. Turning, he clasped it in his dirty hand, and Jemmy's heart started racing.

*"An axe handle?"* The thought alarmed him, and he almost drew back a step.

Sensing the fear, Pa leisurely swung the axe handle to his shoulder like a man would carry a gun while walking through the woods. He sneered at Jemmy as he stepped closer.

*"The boy will scare like usual,"* he thought to himself.

The problem was Jem didn't seem to be scaring. Fact was, Jem hadn't moved a bit and looked like a grown man standing in the soft morning light. His chest darn near filled out the tattered blue checked shirt he was wearing, and his arms looked lean and strong as they tested the confines of the shirt. His face was still boyish beneath his brown hair, but the youth was wearing off, and he was showing signs of growing to manhood. Rather than sensing Jem being scared, Pa felt a growing sense of dread rising in him.

Jemmy watched, and as Pa drew closer, he stood his ground. Blood was heating up in his veins and running fast. His body was tingling with a mix of fear, dread, and hatred

boiling over from all the years of whippings. Breathing hard, he didn't know what would happen next, but he knew it would be good. Finally, he set the bucket down and clenched his scarred fists, ready for what he knew was coming.

Anger flashed again in Pa's eyes as he closed the last few steps. Without a word, he swung the hickory axe handle straight toward Jemmy's midsection. Instinctively, Jem's hand went up, and it smacked loudly as he caught the handle in mid air. Without flinching, Jem turned his eyes back to his Pa and snapped, "Don't! I'm done with your whoopins, Pa!"

"We'll see about that!" Pa exclaimed as he tried to wrestle the axe handle back.

Suddenly, Pa realized he couldn't wrestle it away. Panic replaced the anger in his pa's eyes, and he tried harder to wrestle away the axe handle. After holding the handle securely for a few seconds, Jem released it back to him. He was still riding on a buzz of hot blood, and, for the first time in his life, Jem was looking forward to this fight with Pa.

Awkwardly, Pa stumbled back after wresting away the handle. For just a moment, he paused and looked at his son through the haze of his hangover. Rather than a timid boy, a young man now stood proudly defying him on this chilly morning. Realization hit him that the tables had been turned, and his mind raced for a solution.

Unwilling to admit defeat, Pa barked, "Go hitch up Cain and Able and plow the west field!"

"I ain't plowing the west field, Pa" Jem responded. "My farmin' days is through."

Unable to control his anger, Pa charged in again, swinging the axe. Cleverly, Jem stepped backward, easily managing to stay just out of reach of Pa's wild swings. One, two, three, four times he avoided. Frustration broke his Pa's spirit, and the hollow man roared as he took a final swing.

Nimbly, Jem stepped in and stopped the swing with his left arm. With a quick motion, he wrested it from his pa's grasp and suddenly found himself holding the hickory axe handle. Without even realizing it, he continued the quick turn and brought the handle smashing into his Pa's side. Instantly, the feeble man collapsed to the cold dirt and lay writhing in pain.

Watching Pa moaning on the ground, Jem shook his head. "*It shouldn't have turned out like that,*" he thought. Now, there was only one thing Jemmy could do.

It was time to leave the farm.

**Questions:**

1. What kind of wood was the axe handle made from?

**Extension Activity:**

1. Imagine you are in a similar situation as Jem. Create a journal entry about the day you decide to leave home for good. Imagine what it must be like with no money, no home, no one to look to for help, and nowhere to go, combined with the relief of being away. In order to empathize with Jemmy, imagine you are in the middle of a wilderness when you decide to leave.

## CHAPTER 3

It had been three weeks since Jemmy had left his frontier Missouri home. Three full weeks since he had stepped over Pa's writhing body to collect his things; a wool blanket, the hunting knife Uncle Jeb had given him, flint and steel, and a scarf. Even though it wasn't his, he also took the old rifle hanging over the doorway. Not too long before, Pa had traded out locks on that old gun. Rather than the traditional flintlock, he had swapped out for a fancy new percussion cap lock. Jem knew Pa was mighty proud of it. Before taking the shooting bag from the wall, Jemmy looked that lock over. Was he taking the life from his family?

*"They'll be ok with the pigs and chickens for a while,"* he convinced himself.

In three full weeks, he still hadn't forgotten the look in Ma's eyes. Wide and scared, they had been. Although she was scared, she still managed to pack him a few old biscuits and a hunk of salt pork for the trip. "I'll tell him you stoled them, Jem," she wept as she hugged him for the last time. "God help you, son."

Her crying had hung to him like a stubborn cocklebur over the past few weeks. Even now, camped on the banks of the wide and muddy Missouri, he thought about her crying. No man, which is what he figured he was now, liked to see a woman cry, especially his ma. It didn't sit right with him. Traveling through the woods, he had stopped at several houses to ask for some grub. Often times, he had been taken in and fed by a woman who reminded him too much of Ma. Deep inside him, he knew he still missed her and wondered if he always would.

Sitting in his camp that morning, he knew there wasn't a chance to go back and check on her. By now, Pa would have patched up his ribs and would surely be on the lookout for his son to return. Jem had never been away from home this long before. Growing up, he had only struck out from home for a few days at a time. Camping had always agreed with him. Uncle Jeb said that was the way with Fletchers. They always found the quiet of the woods comforting, and were the type of men who could fend for themselves. These past weeks along the Missouri had been plentiful, with wild turkey and squirrel for the spit each night, and he soaked up the freedom each day offered. Still, after three weeks, he was getting a little homesick.

Sitting by the fire, cooking a squirrel he shot yesterday afternoon, he shook the thought from his mind. "Only one way to go," he quietly said aloud to himself as he looked west.

“What’s that?” a voice unexpectedly piped up from behind him.

Spinning around, Jemmey quickly looked to identify the source. In these parts, a stranger might mean welcomed company or a man looking to do him harm. You never did know who you might meet.

Turning, he caught sight of a peculiar man sitting astride a leggy flea-bitten gray mule. The man looked to be dirtier than any beggar Jem could imagine. From head to toe he was wearing fringed buckskins, and looked like an Indian. However, they weren’t clean buckskins. These buckskins were covered in dirt, grim, blood, and anything else Ma would have scrubbed off a set of clothes. On top of his head, sat a wide brimmed hat that had likely been cream-colored once. Now, between all the stains, ribbons, and feathers, it looked to be a good match for the dirty buckskins. What caught Jem’s attention most of all was the man’s eyes. They were as blue as the bluest china cup. In fact, they were bluer than even that.

Sitting atop that mule, the man leaned in with those blue eyes, as if to get a better look at Jem. His face was weathered, redder than an Indian’s, and looked like a piece of old harness leather. Dirty creases ran deep through his skin as if a heavy rain had carved them out. The man had a bushy white beard that moved as he shifted a chaw with his tongue. Still, his eyes, sky blue pierced him with such intensity Jem felt they might stare a hole clear through him; were what held Jemmey. As the man studied him, Jem noticed his hand rested leisurely on the rifle lying across his lap. Apparently, he, too, wondered what sort of meeting this would be. Jem cast a glance at his rifle propped up against a tree about 20 feet away. Silently, he wished he hadn’t set it so far out of reach.

Reading Jem’s mind, the man laughed out loud. “Ha! I’ll bet ya’ wished that thar rifle was laying a mite closer?”

Jem didn't reply but only looked back at the man, trying not to let his apprehension show.

The man spit a stream of dark tobacco juice. "Don't worry none, boy. I ain't aimin' fer scalps this morn. Though, if I was you, I'd git in the habbit of keepin' her by yer side. A man never know jist when he's gonna need it."

Relaxing a bit, Jem hoped the stranger was being honest. "Thank you, mister. I do believe that's good advice."

Silence hung between the two, as the mule shifted its weight, apparently glad to be afforded the chance to rest. Jem was still feeling unsettled after being caught off guard like this. If this man wanted to rob him, there wasn't much Jem thought he could do to stop him. He looked a might saltier than poor drunk Pa, and Jem didn't imagine he could whoop this fella. For a minute, the two just sat and watched each other.

Then, the man spoke up, "Well, hell. I guess ifn' you ain't gonna invite me fer breakfast, I jist might have ta go find my own."

Jem's eyes went to his squirrel. True, it was common courtesy to share a meal with a hungry man, no matter how far it set a body back. That was just the way folks on the frontier lived. In turn, a man just never knew when you might need someone to set him up for the night. Traveling like he was, Jem had sort of forgotten his manners. Quickly, he straightened himself up like a man should.

"Well, yes, sir. I guess you're welcome to help yourself to some breakfast."

Jem swallowed hard, feeling intimidated by the dirty stranger. Trying to sound unafraid he spoke as confidently as he could, "I ain't got much, but help yourself to a few bites."

Rather than tipping his hat and swinging down for a few bites, the man responded with a gravelly laugh that made his hard face look almost soft for a moment.



"I tell you what, boy," he said with jovial ring in his voice, "I'll let you eat yer fill this morn. Now, when you catch enough to feed *two* mice, jist let me know." The dirty man chuckled heartily at his own joke.

Somewhat embarrassed, Jem looked at his roasting squirrel. It certainly wasn't much.

"Now," the stranger continued after shifting his weight in the saddle, "just what's a kid like you doing here on the Missouri all by hisself?"

Jem didn't know what to say. If he told the truth, that he was a runaway, the man might trot back to the nearest town and report him to the sheriff. Searching, he eventually drummed up the best answer he could, "Just headin' west I suppose."

"Heading west!" The dirty stranger bust into a laughter that sounded like what a laughing black bear might sound like. "Jist what are you hopin' to find out west, besides yer hair on a Pawnee lodge?"

"Not sure," Jem responded honestly. Fact was, he didn't rightly know. Uncle Jeb had made the West sound like a grand place where a body didn't really need to do much. That answer wouldn't sit though. Jem knew it made him sound foolish. "Might do some beaver trappin' I guess," he said as boldly as he could muster.

"Beaver trapping!" Again the man burst into laughter. "Hell, son, I guess I'd best get up the trail a ways ifn' I'm to catch any beaver a'tall this season. You might plumb clean out the Three Forks, Yellerstone, and Marias by the look of you!"

Again, the man laughed heartily at his own joke. That he was needling Jem was obvious. The thought rankled him, but he didn't quite know what to say.

"I tell you what," the dirty man said as he again shifted his weight on the big mule, "I've got to keep movin' this morn'

and make some meat fer the company. Ifn' you think you can keep up, grab yer possibles, an' you can tell me all about yer plans. You don't look like ye' eat much, an' look like ye' might have some salt to ya. Who knows," the man quipped, "you might be able to teach me a thing or two I don't know 'bout the Upper Missouri."

Not waiting for a response, the dirty man nudged his mule in the ribs and slowly walked him past Jem's camp.

Quickly, Jem looked around at his meager belongings. "*Would it be best to strike out with him for the morning?*" he wondered. He didn't think the man would rob him; he'd already have done that if he wanted to. Add to that, Jem didn't really have a plan as where he was going, and the man was headed upriver. Plus, he did look like a fella that Jem might be able to ask a question or two.

Scrambling to his feet, he grabbed his scant belongings, scarfed down the last of the squirrel meat from the fire, kicked some dirt over the flames, and struck out after the dirty man on the gray mule. What lay in store Jem had no idea, but he was still pointed in the right direction; west.

TO SEE WHERE THE ADVENTURE TAKES JEMMEY FROM  
HERE, PICK UP A COPY OF *RIDE TO RENDEZVOUS* AT  
AMAZON OR FRONTIERLIFE.NET!

**Video Extension:**

Open this QR code to access video to better understand how black powder guns work. You can also visit [frontierlife.net](http://frontierlife.net), and search "How Black Powder Guns Work" to open the same content.



**Vocabulary:**

Locks - The mechanism that caused frontier guns to fire.

Flintlock - A lock that caused ignition by sparking a piece of flint (rock) against a frizzen (steel).

Percussion Cap Lock - A lock that used a small cap to create the ignition for the shot. This would have been new technology in Jemmy's world.

Flea-Bitten Gray - A horse or mule with a white undercoat spotted with small dark gray dots all over its body.

Possibles Bag - A small bag that carried everything a mountain man could "possibly" need.

**Questions:**

1. What animal was the stranger riding?
2. What was he wearing for clothes?
3. What was customary behavior with travelers on the frontier?

**Extension Activity:**

1. Use the first QR code, or search "Horse and Mule" Frontierlife.net, to research how horses and mules are different. Then write a short response to the prompt:  
*What is a mule, and how does it differ from a horse?*

*OR*

2. Use the second QR code , or search for “Mountain Man Clothing” at [frontierlife.net](http://frontierlife.net), to learn more about how mountain men dressed. Once done, make a sketch of a properly dressed trapper.

### Horse vs. Mule QR Code



### Mountain Man Clothing QR Code



