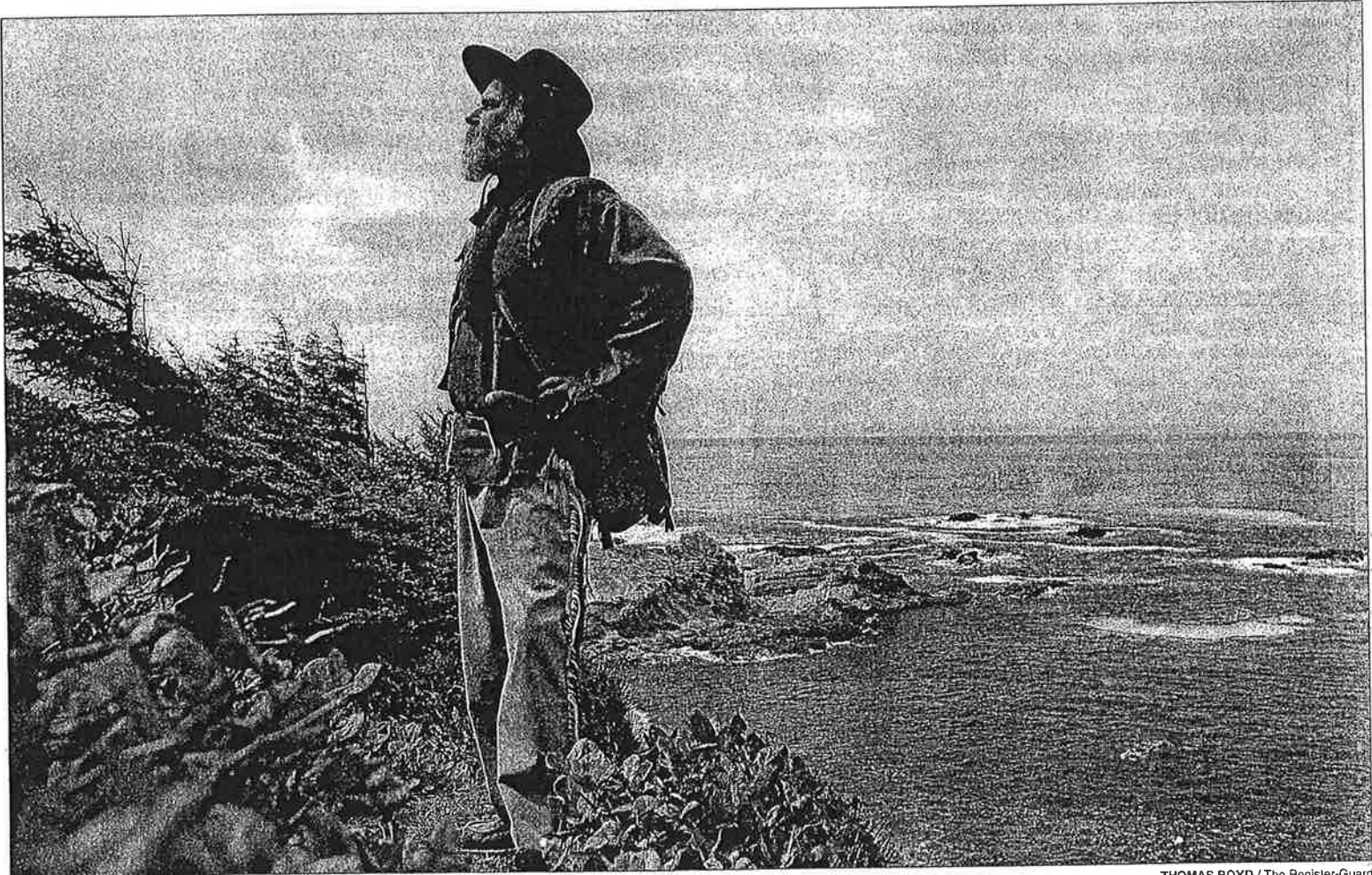


**SUNDAY**

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# The Register-Guard

**JUST LIKE JEDEDIAH**

THOMAS BOYD / The Register-Guard

Al LePage is hiking from Smith River near Crescent City, Calif., to Oregon's Smith River near Gardiner, retracing an 1828 expedition by Jedediah Smith.

## Hiker follows in explorer's footsteps

■ **"Man on a mission":** Al LePage wants to draw attention to the need to preserve the coast and to create more foot trails.

By LARRY BACON  
The Register-Guard

COOS BAY — In fringed buckskins and a black felt hat, he walks along the beach, over the headlands and through the streams, following as best he can the 172-year-old footsteps of Jedediah Strong Smith.

And sometimes 46-year-old Al LePage imagines he is Jedediah Smith, the first white man to travel much of Oregon's south coast and a key explorer of the vast

western United States.

Smith, described by historians as a mild-mannered Christian man with a reputation for bravery, once wrote of his desire "to be the first to view a country on which the eyes of a white man had never gazed."

"I try to put myself in Smith's shoes," says LePage, director of the Portland-based National Coast Trail Association, a group pushing for completion of a West Coast trail as well as a system of

footpaths and waterways that would encircle the nation.

"I pretend I've got 250 horses and mules behind me. I've got to get forage for them. I've got to find water. I think about morale — whether the men are tired and hungry."

Thanks to the 1,000-member association, the federal government recently granted a "Millennium Trail" designation to a 200-mile section of coastline traversed by an 18-member party of fur trappers led by Smith. That, in part, is what prompted LePage to assume the character of Smith and retrace the route of the

### SMITH EXPEDITION

■ **Meet Al LePage** at 11 a.m. Thursday at a dedication of an early explorer's mural at the Umpqua Discovery Center in Reedsport, 409 Riverfront Way.

■ **Smith biographer James Auld** will give a slide show at 1 p.m. and 7 p.m. Thursday at the Discovery Center. Call 271-4816 for information.

■ **For more about the Jedediah Smith expedition and LePage's route**, visit the Web site, [www.coasttrails.org](http://www.coasttrails.org).

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expedition.

He started his journey June 23 at Smith River, north of Crescent City, Calif., and each day since has traveled the same distance the Smith party covered on the corresponding day in 1828.

LePage walks up to 18 miles some days and only a few miles on others, when the Smith expedition was slowed by its herd of animals. The group planned to sell the animals at Fort Vancouver on the Columbia River.

LePage's trek will end, as did the expedition's, on July 14 near Gardiner, where Oregon's Smith River runs into the Umpqua River.

It was there that a large band of Indians attacked and killed most of the expedition members. Only four, including Smith and two others who were away from camp during the attack, escaped and made their way to Fort Vancouver.

The attack apparently stemmed from encounters with the Smith party that some Indians viewed as humiliating. In one of the incidents, Smith put a rope around the neck of an Indian believed to have taken and buried one of the expedition's axes. The threat of the noose reportedly convinced the Indian to tell where the ax was buried, and he was freed.

LePage, who has grown his usually close-trimmed beard long and bushy for the trek, smiles when asked why he's retracing the expedition's route.

He's been asked the question by many people along the way, and he has a canned answer: "To honor the past and imagine the future."

Not enough people know about the rich history in their own backyard, he says.

Maybe this journey and the "Meet Jed Smith" lectures he's

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**AL LePAGE**

*Retracing Jedediah Smith's  
Oregon coast expedition*

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giving along the way will draw attention to the great explorer, who died at age 32 in a run-in with Comanche Indians along the Santa Fe Trail.

LePage, a former teacher who founded the association five years ago, also hopes to call attention to the need for trails, such as the Oregon Coast Trail that traverses areas rich in history and natural beauty.

He meets and talks with people along the way, sometimes displaying his gear — a tomahawk, single-shot pistol and bundle of trade goods that include brass thimbles and blue beads.

He gets a little preachy about the need to fill in about 50 miles of "missing links" in the Oregon Coast Trail, where hikers must walk along highways to avoid private

land.

LePage also contends more must be done to protect and preserve the beauty of the state's coastline.

The only hope for such improvements is public concern, and that's what the hike is all about.

"I'm a man on a mission," he says.

No he doesn't get paid for hiking. And as far as LePage knows, he's the only person who has hiked every part of the 1,800 mile West Coast Trail.

The Jedediah Smith hike has been one of his hardest, especially the long beach stretches against a strong north wind.

"Port Orford to Cape Blanco was like someone had a sand blaster on me," he says.

Just like Smith, LePage sleeps on the ground every night, but the ground is outside a headquarters building near Bandon. That way he can use a phone to line up public appearances, although it means he must drive back and forth between Bandon and the trail segments.

As he hikes, LePage reads the journals of Smith and another expedition member, Harrison Rogers, and tries to relate their experiences to his own.

The journals describe the journey but offer little clue to the character of the men or what they were feeling. There are no comments about the beauty of the coastline.

"But these guys were surrounded by natural beauty all the time," LePage says. "Did they take it for granted? I don't know."

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## NATIONAL COAST TRAIL ASSOCIATION

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