

# Mountain Men

A Historical Background of the  
Men of the American Frontier



# Historical Background of Mountain Men

## THE FUR TRADE



In Europe there was a big demand for beaver fur which was used to make felt hats.

The history of the Missouri frontier is mostly a story of the quest for fur, primarily the fur of the beaver. Long before settlements and farms appeared in Missouri, men roamed the frontier seeking fur. The furs were obtained mostly by trading with Native American tribes who had inhabited the Missouri country for thousands of years.

A beaver's fur consists of two kinds of hair-coarse outer or guard hair and downy soft under hair. Through a microscope, the under hair appears as slender strands studded with tiny barbs. This barbed characteristic results in superior felt. In an era when most occupations were outdoors and required sturdy headgear, high quality felt was important. For centuries, beaver felt was the primary material used in the construction of hats.

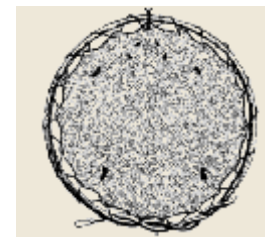
The French began the quest for beaver fur in the New World around 1600. They started in the north in what is now Canada, moved down the St. Lawrence River and split at the western edge of the Great Lakes.

One branch of the trade continued west through the northern river systems, while the other branch followed the Mississippi River south to the mouth of the Missouri River then up the Missouri to the Rocky Mountains.

The French pioneered the quest for beaver, followed by the English, then the Americans. Thus, several types of frontiersmen appeared on the Missouri frontier, dressed and equipped according to the mix of their own culture and the native cultures among which they lived.

Throughout most of the fur trade, business was conducted by bartering with the Native Americans. European or American goods such as blankets, beads, jewelry, guns, ammunition, whiskey, sewing awls, cloth, mirrors, knives, cooking vessels and iron tomahawks were traded to the Native Americans in return for beaver pelts.

Later, following the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, Native Americans became more aggressive toward intruders on their lands. Europeans then had to abandon the barter system and take up steel traps. While beaver pelts were the basis for much of the fur trade in this area, they were not the only furs of value. Deer hides and buffalo robes also were in demand. These furs, like beaver, were bundled and shipped east for tanning, then manufactured into garments, shoes and boots.



Traders and trappers moved westward in search of beaver pelts.

The skins were stretched on willow frames to dry, then bundled and shipped for tanning.



Louisiana Purchase, 1803

# PEOPLE OF THE FUR TRADE

## Traders

The earliest fur merchants on the Missouri frontier were called *coureurs de bois* (kur-rur-duh-bwa) "runners of the woods." These swarthy Frenchmen set out from settlements along the Mississippi with loads of trade goods. They circulated among the Native American tribes until their goods were traded away; then they returned to the settlements. There they sold the accumulated furs, paid off any debts and either re-outfitted or used their earnings to launch into some other business.



*Coureurs de bois* carried trade goods to the native Americans.

Many of these early frontier business-men enjoyed life among the Native Americans and spent most of their time on the frontier. Often they took Native American wives and adopted some of the religious and social attitudes of their chosen tribe. Technically, the *coureur de bois* was an outlaw. Trading licenses were controlled by the French government and were restricted. Politics and a healthy bribe were usually necessary to procure a license. Even then, part of the proceeds of trade went to the government.

## Trappers

The traders dominated the Missouri fur business from its beginning in the late 1600s until the early 1800s. Between 1800 and 1820 trading began to give way to trapping. The trappers, rather than bartering with the native American tribes, went after furs themselves. Each man carried 6 to 12 steel traps which were set in shallow water along river or stream courses. Above the trap, a willow twig, with its exposed end dipped in beaver scent (castor), was jabbed into the bank. The trap was anchored on a chain staked in deep water. A beaver swimming up to investigate the scent would put a foot into the trap. Once captured, the animal swam instinctively for deep water where the burden of the trap and chain caused it to drown quickly. When steel traps were in short supply, trappers borrowed the native American methods of snares and deadfalls.

Beaver skins were stretched on circular willow frames and allowed to dry. Then the dried pelts were compressed in a fur press, wrapped in deer hide and bound. Bales of beaver hides were shipped east for processing. St. Louis, founded in 1763 a few miles from the mouth of the Missouri River, quickly became a world center for the fur trade.



Trappers went after their own furs.

## Boatmen



The keelboat, a unique creation of the Missouri River fur trade, was powered by sail, pole or tow rope.

Besides trappers and traders, there were others on the frontier. Furs often went to market on boats, thus a need for boatmen. Lone traders might simply chop down a cotton-wood, hollow it out to make a dugout or pirogue, and transport the furs themselves. Larger operations, however, employed boatmen.

The voyageur (vwa-a-jur') was the truck driver of the eighteenth century. He piloted the great freight canoes used by the French fur companies. These canoes ranged from 25 to 36 feet (7 to 11 meters) in length and carried 1 to 3 tons (1,016 to 3,048 kilograms) of cargo and a crew of 4 to 8 people. A jolly, hardworking lot, the voyageurs dressed in bright colors and sang incessantly. In the north where portages were often necessary, these sturdy river men would shoulder 95- pound (43-kilogram) bales of fur, sometimes several at a time and jog the portage trail. Most of them were less than 5 1 / 2 feet tall (1.7 meters). Smaller men took up less space in the canoe.

The voyageur was replaced on the Missouri frontier by the keelboat man. The keelboat was a unique creation of the Missouri River fur trade. It was 60 to 80 feet long (18 to 24 meters), had a small central cabin flanked with two walkways and was capped with a mast. The keelboat was powered by sail, pole or cordelle (tow rope).



Voyageurs piloted the large freight canoes that carried bales of fur to St. Louis

## Women

Women played a role in the early fur trade, although pioneer or European women were rare on the frontier. The woman of the fur trade was usually a Native American woman. Traders often took a Native American wife (sometimes while also maintaining a home in some downriver settlement). The skills of Native American women made them valuable partners. They could handle horses, make and break camp speedily, cook, make clothing and, when necessary, handle weapons. In addition, part of the dowry of a Native American bride was a large assortment of relatives. When a trader married into a village, he immediately acquired a host of in-laws as customers. There are few instances of traders or trappers bringing their wives from the East onto the frontier. Gentlewomen were found generally in isolated forts and trading houses where they did their best to maintain some of the comforts of civilization.



The woman on the frontier was usually a native American woman.

## Native Americans

The relationship the fur men had with the native Americans changed drastically through the 200 years of the fur trade. At first, traders found an eager market for trade goods and great support from the native Americans. Traders were encouraged to marry into the tribes and trade relationships were jealously guarded. As more Europeans poured onto the tribal lands, tensions developed. The use of alcohol as a trade item contributed to the decline of relations. Finally, animosity between the races and growing competition for land and wildlife resources led to open hostility. outweigh the gains of dealing in furs. And finally, the beaver almost disappeared. Relentless trapping eventually reduced the beaver to near extinction. Not until people began practicing modern game management did beaver populations recover their former abundance.



Native American women were valued for their skills.

## Mountain Men

As relations with the native Americans deteriorated, trading became more difficult and trapping became more efficient. Groups of trappers, called brigades, worked river systems for beaver, frequently in defiance of treaties and federal laws. The peak of the trapping era came with the emergence of the mountain man. Often sited as examples of supreme independence, these free spirits roamed the West for the last 30 years of the fur trade. Most worked for large companies, but a significant number were free trappers who worked alone. They gathered furs to sell to the highest bidder at the summer rendezvous, when trappers met with fur companies and other traders at a camp in the north to buy supplies for another year.



The mountain man marked the peak of the trapping era from the 1820s to the 1840s.

The mountain man appeared in the early 1820s and faded with the collapse of the fur trade in the late 1840s. A combination of circumstances caused the fur trade to end rather abruptly. First, silk replaced beaver felt as the primary material for fashionable hats. Native American hostility made the risks outweigh the gains of dealing in furs. And finally, the beaver almost disappeared. Relentless trapping eventually reduced the beaver to near extinction. Not until people began practicing modern game management did beaver populations recover their former abundance.

## Other Pioneers

As the fur trade abated, traders and trappers also passed from the scene. In their place came the buffalo hunters, cowboys, miners and sod-busters-all pioneers in their own right, but their lifestyles never required the same self-reliance and understanding of nature as those who went after fur.

## Time Line for Missouri Frontier

- 1673 - Marquette and Joliet discovered the mouth of the Missouri River
- 1673-1764 - Missouri visited by French fur traders
- 1722 - Ft. Orleans built near mouth of Grand River in central Missouri
- 1764 - St. Louis founded by LaCledé and Chouteau
- 1769 - Ownership of Louisiana which included all lands drained by Missouri River transferred from France to Spain
- 1789 - Juan Munier granted exclusive trading privilege with Poncas on Niobrara River (Nebraska)
- 1790 - Jacques D'Eglise opened trade with Mandans (North Dakota)
- 1794 - Jacques Clamorgan and other St. Louis merchants organized Company of Explorers of Upper Missouri (Missouri Company)
- 1800 - Louisiana Territory reverts to French by secret treaty
- 1802 - British traders reached Powder and Yellowstone Rivers
- 1803 - Louisiana Purchase
- 1803-1806 - Lewis and Clark expedition
- 1807 - Manuel Lisa and Pierre Chouteau Jr. lead fur trading expeditions out of St. Louis
- 1808 - St. Louis Missouri Fur Company founded American Fur Company organized in New York by John Jacob Astor
- 1808 - Fort Osage built near Kansas City
- 1813-1817 - War of 1812 interrupted fur trade
- 1822 - First Ashley Henry expedition-European trappers instead of traders
- 1825 - First trappers' rendezvous on Henry's Fork of the Green River (Wyoming)
- 1830 - First use of wagons to outfit rendezvous-route was beginning of wheeled traffic, eventually becoming Oregon Trail
- 1838 - Last rendezvous-decline of fur prices, scarcity of beaver, hostility of native Americans and use of silk to make hats, all spell doom for the mountain men

## Shelter

Another type of protection from the elements important to frontier survival was shelter. Trappers and traders used a variety of shelters. The choice depended upon the season of the year, circumstances and lifestyle of the user.

### Types of shelter

Shelters were made of either hides or canvas. Construction ranged from simple to elaborate. The most sophisticated design, the tepee, was borrowed from the Plains tribes.

The simplest shelters were half-shelters and lean-tos. They were easily and quickly constructed, portable and reasonably protective. The shelters, which were pitched to block a prevailing wind, kept users out of the rain and snow. An open front allowed heat from an outside fire to radiate into the enclosure.

#### HALF-SHELTER

The half-shelter was made with a semi-circle of hide or canvas stretched over a willow frame. Thumb-sized willows, trimmed of branches, were stuck in the ground in a shallow ellipse (about 7 feet or 2.1 meters along the open side by 3 to 4 feet or 1 to 1.5 meters at the deepest point). The free ends of the willows were bent together and lashed, creating a half-dome. A cover was then stretched over the frame and fastened.

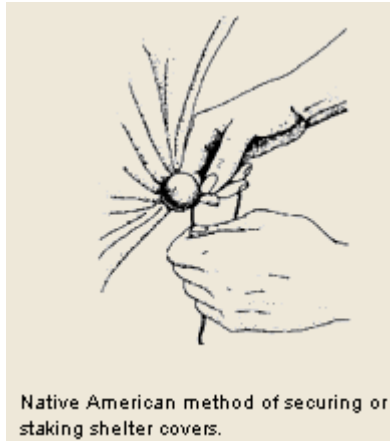
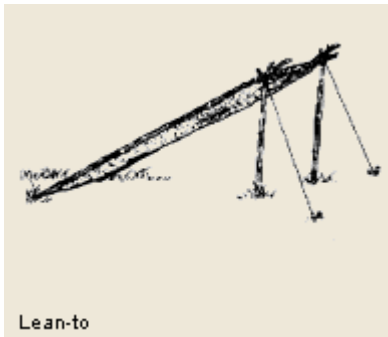
#### LEAN-TO

Lean-tos were constructed from a simple frame such as the one illustrated here. The cover was fastened over the frame. The Baker tent, a more elaborate version of the lean-to often seen at modern-day historical events, was not used on the early frontier. It appeared at a later time.

Coverings were fastened to the wooden frame in a manner borrowed from the Native Americans. A pebble or rifle ball was twisted into the cover near the edge. A length of rawhide or cord lashed around the twisted fabric held the object in place and kept the lashing from pulling

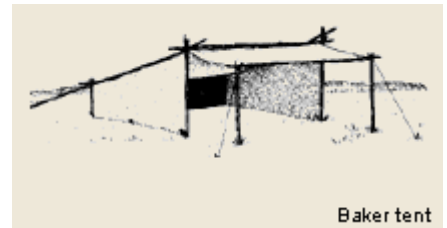
loose. The free ends of the cord were used to tie the cover to the frame. The cord ends also could be knotted together to make a loop for a stake.

When time was short and materials were limited, other shelters were also constructed. They often used an A-frame, tripod or no frame at all. Frameless shelters were constructed by suspending the cover from a tree limb and staking the shelter edges.



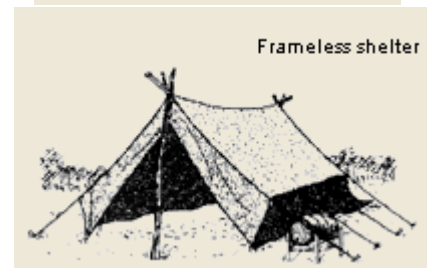
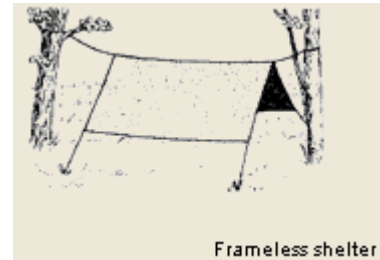
## WALL TENT

A more permanent shelter, often used by trapping and trading parties, was the wall tent. The tent offered more protection from the elements but was less handy because of its more elaborate frame. Also, its narrow entrance and floor flaps prevented an outside fire from warming the shelter. Fires were not possible inside the shelter because of poor ventilation and close quarters.

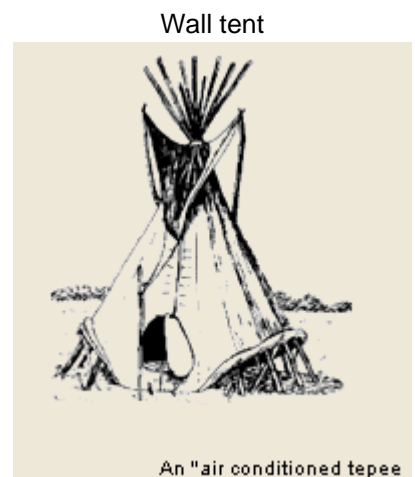


## THE TEPEE

The most elaborate shelter was the tepee. This was used by trappers and traders living among native Americans or those who had married native American women. (In many native societies, the tepee or lodge belonged to the woman.) Although it was portable, the bulk of the tepee (poles and cover weighed several hundred pounds) made it an impractical shelter for parties traveling light and changing location frequently.



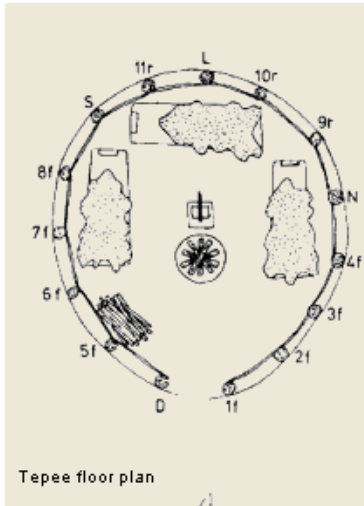
The tepee, at first glance, seems to be a simple shelter; yet, its design is actually highly sophisticated. Over the centuries, it evolved among nomadic tribes whose sustenance depended on their ability to follow the roving herds of buffalo. The tepee was extremely stable in high winds, offered better ventilation than most tents and stayed reasonably warm in winter and cool in summer. In addition, it was one of only two primitive portable shelters that were safe to build a fire inside. Some have described the tepee as a great chimney- a well-pitched tepee was never smoky inside, thanks to its design.



The tepee's frame consisted of 3, or sometimes 4, poles lashed together near one end, stood upright and spread to form a tripod. Upon the tri-pod were placed 10 to 16 poles that served to stretch the cover. These support poles were placed around the tripod in a specific sequence. To get the chimney effect, poles were arranged so their bases created an oval, with the wider portion toward the back of the tepee.

The cover of hide or canvas was stretched over the pole frame so that the back of the tepee faced the pre-vailing wind. The door was on the opposite side. Above the door was a large slit-like opening flanked by two flaps. This was the smoke hole. Draft for the interior fire was regulated-ed by the position of these smoke flaps. The flaps were controlled by two cords attached to their base and staked in front of the tepee and by two long poles whose upper ends were attached to the smoke flap tops while the bottom of the poles rested on the ground behind the teepee.

Inside the tepee a liner of hide or canvas was suspended from a cord running around each pole at a height of about 5 feet (1.5 meters). The liner and cover were both staked to the ground near the poles to create airspace between liner and poles. This helped insulate the tepee and also created a chimney effect with hot air rising from the fire carrying cooler air up along the sides of the tepee. The draft prevented smoke from building up inside.



The tepee has enjoyed something of a resurrection among those people interested in getting back to nature and frontier history buffs. (Native Americans have never stopped using them completely.) A modern-day rendezvous usually has many tepees.

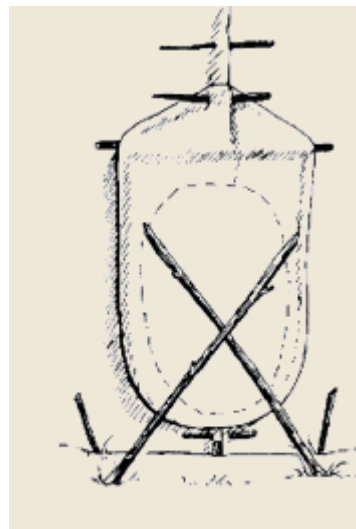
To the Native American, the pitching, orientation and interior floor plan of the tepee reflected mystical as well as practical beliefs. Elaborate practices evolved around the use of tepees and tepee etiquette is still practiced by many who use the shelter.

To follow proper tepee etiquette, you should not enter without first asking permission. A greeting, such as "Hello the lodge," can be used. Crossed sticks over the door indicate that the owner is away or does not wish to be bothered. In this case, an outsider should not enter the lodge. The position opposite the door of the tepee is occupied by the owners. When entering, the person seated at that position will direct the new arrival toward a seat. Never pass between the fire and seated individuals. Walk behind them or, if this is not possible, ask permission to pass in front. Never pass between the lodge owner and the fire. This area was sacred to its native American owners and was the site of their family altar and religious effects.

## Clothing

### Truth and fiction in frontier clothing

The image of the frontiersman carried by most people is a mixture of fact and fiction. For example, it is true that early fur traders and trappers dressed primarily in fringed buckskin. But the handsomely tailored, honey gold buck-skins of television and movies bear little resemblance to the loose-fitting, grease-stained, gray-black skins found in museum collections and early journal accounts. Clothing, more than any other aspect of the life, reflects the position of the frontiersman-suspended between primitive and civilized worlds.



### Types of clothing

The clothing of the trader or trapper was a mixture-part native American and part Anglo-Saxon. When available, wool trousers and wool flannel or linen shirts were preferred. Coats made of blanketing, called capotes, served as outer wear. A low-crowned, broad-brimmed hat protected the wearer from the prairie sun. Boots were favored when starting out, but they wore out quickly. Away from the settlements they were soon replaced by moccasins.



While crossing rough terrain, trousers fell victim to brush patches, wet weather and scorching heat. Without protection, cloth shirts suffered the same fate.



On the Frontier Native American clothing soon replaced "civilized" clothes.

As "civilized" garments disintegrated, the trader or trapper turned to the clothing of the Native Americans he lived among. Trousers were replaced by buckskin leggings and a breech-clout (a long, wide cloth passed between the legs and suspended in front and back from a leather belt). The leggings were held up by the same belt that supported the breech-clout. Strips of colored cloth called garters were bound around each legging just above the knee. When the leather became wet from wading or walking in wet grass, garters absorbed some of the additional weight, preventing the soggy leather from pulling loose at the belt.

Loose-fitting leather shirts replaced cloth ones. They sometimes consisted of nothing more than two tanned deer hides sewn or laced together, with openings left for head and arms.

Both leggings and shirts were decked with fringe. The fringe served to wick water away from soaked leather, which could be cold, clammy and uncomfortable. Fringe also served as decoration and a ready repair kit since individual strands could be cut off as emergency lashing material. The fringe may have acted as camouflage, breaking up the distinctively human silhouette of the wearer.

While leather garments were simple, they were not without style. The mountain man and trader acquired some native American tastes in decoration. Beads and quillwork brightened many garments. Designs were also painted directly on the leather using dyes made from native plants. Necklaces of animal teeth, claws, cast metal objects and bones provided ornamentation.

A wide leather belt held the loose-fitting shirt to the body. Into the belt were thrust a knife, a tomahawk, pistols and a leather pouch containing fire-making materials, a pipe and tobacco. French voyageurs and coureurs de bois wore a brightly colored cloth sash in place of a leather belt.

## Accessories

Over one shoulder went a hunting pouch containing bullets, a bullet mold, patching material, spare flints, a patch knife, a screwdriver, a powder measure and more. Over the other shoulder went a powder horn filled with gun powder. In addition, he often carried a small leather bag fastened to his belt. This possible sack held items such as a fire-starting kit, eating utensils, pipe and tobacco, pocketknife and other essentials. Thus equipped with such accoutrements, the mountain man was not only a walking fortress, but also a hardware store, tailor shop and butcher shop.

## Clothing construction

Construction of leather garments began by preparing the hide. The animal was skinned and fleshed (a process of scraping all connective tissue and muscle from the skin). If desired, the hide was dehaired by soaking it in water or a mixture of water and wood ashes. The hide could then be dried to make rawhide. Or, the hide could be tanned and worked over a rope or wooden beam for greater softness and permanence.



Powder Horn

## TANNING

Tanning was done by taking a mixture of animal brains and fat, and working it into the hide. The hide was then stretched and worked over a beam to soften it. This method, a so-called "Indian tan," is still superior

to most modern chemical tans. Once tanned, the leather was cut and sewn into garments using sinew-  
strands of animal tendon that served as a very tough thread.



## DECORATION

Leather garments were decorated with dyed porcupine quills, beads or painted designs. Native Americans used quills before glass beads were introduced by European traders.

Trading beads to Native American tribes was a big business. In Europe, where the beads were manufactured, bead makers' guilds protected production secrets. Anyone who revealed his methods was severely punished.

Beads were often sewn directly on the leather. Trade silver was a general term covering a variety of metal jewelry. Animal figures, religious symbols and other designs were cast or cut from pewter, tin or lead. These were sewn directly to garments, leather bags and rifle cases. Tin cones about 2 inches (5 centimeters) long were often affixed to garment fringe. They made a tinkling sound as they knocked together when the wearer walked. Native Americans sometimes wore rifle parts or pieces of mirrors as decoration.

For most clothing, the hair had to be removed from the hide.

Painted designs were made using dyes manufactured from local plants. Designs were artistic or, if the trapper or trader had adopted some of the native religion, symbolic. The prevalence of Native American dress and decoration expressed both the inclinations and the lifestyle of the wearer. Many traders and trappers took Native American wives who were skilled in beading, quilling and sewing. As civilization spread westward, tailored buckskins appeared on the frontier. These combined with the durability of leather.

Not all garments were made of leather, however. Heavy coats made of wool blanketing and shirts made of linen, wool flannel or cotton could be obtained from settlements or trading posts. Cloth shirts were loose-fitting with dropped sleeves and narrow cuffs and collars. Patterned fabrics had simple designs with only two or three colors. Colors were subdued because of the poor quality of dyes available.

Trousers were either drop-front or French-fly (fly front with buttons instead of a zipper). They were made out of wool, linen or cotton broad-cloth and usually held up by cloth or leather suspenders (called galluses), instead of belts.



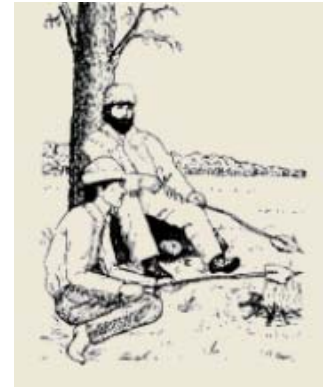
Clothing was decorated with a variety of items--bead, quilts, bones, shells, teeth, metal and painted designs.

## Food on the frontier

Food and water were number one priorities for a frontiersman. Skills necessary to find nourishment were essential for anyone venturing beyond settled lands.

Fur traders and trappers mostly ate meat. When necessary, they could subsist on vegetable material-digging tuberous roots and eating ripe berries like a bear. They didn't consider themselves well-fed, however, unless they had prodigious quantities of meat. Accounts of mountain men eating 5 to 7 pounds (2 to 3 kilograms) of meat at a sitting are not uncommon and certainly within reason. The meat of game animals is lean and large quantities are needed to provide enough energy for outdoor living.

Meat was obtained mostly by hunting, but also as a by-product of trapping. Boiled or roasted beaver tail was considered a delicacy. Most meat, however, came from hunting large game animals such as bison, elk, antelope and deer. Small game was less important because the amount of meat obtained seldom justified the effort. Hunting or shooting an animal was termed "making meat" by mountain men.



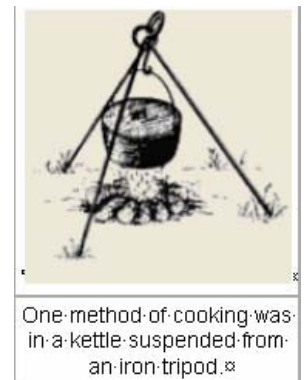
The Mountain men ate up to 5-7 pounds of meat at a sitting.

### Early cooking methods

Meat was processed according to its intended use. If it was to be eaten immediately, it was cooked (usually, but not always). The cooking methods most often used were roasting, boiling and frying.

#### ROASTING

Roasting meant skewering the meat on an iron or green wood spit and suspending it over a fire. A good roasting fire had an abundance of coals and little flame. Meat was turned periodically for even cooking. On occasion, pieces of meat were simply tossed onto the fire. When done, they were pulled out, the ashes dusted off and the meat eaten. Since no skillets or pots were required, roasting was popular, especially among groups traveling light and fast.



One method of cooking was in a kettle suspended from an iron tripod.

#### BOILING

Meat was occasionally boiled in a kettle. Native Americans also boiled meat; however, they used a skin or rawhide bag suspended from a tripod until they acquired an iron kettle. A fire could not be used because it would burn the hide. Therefore, the water was stone boiled, a method of boiling by adding rocks heated on a fire located some distance away.

#### FRYING

In early accounts, frying is mentioned less often than roasting or boiling. Frying produces less cooked meat for the preparation time since meat must be in contact with the heated surface. Also, the leanness of most game meats may have discouraged frying. A skillet or griddle was mostly used to prepare breads such as johnnycake or bannock.



Bread was often made in a skillet.

#### UNCOOKED









