

History of the Mountain Men

The legends and feats of the mountain men have persisted largely because there was a lot of truth to the tales that were told. The life of the mountain man was rough, and one that brought him face to face with death on a regular basis - sometimes through the slow agony of starvation, dehydration, burning heat, or freezing cold and sometimes by the surprise attack of animal or Indian.

The mountain man's life was ruled not by the calendar or the clock but by the climate and seasons. In fall and spring, the men would trap. The start of the season and its length were dictated by the weather. The spring hunt was usually the most profitable, with the pelts still having their winter thickness. Spring season would last until the pelt quality became low. In July, the groups of mountain men and the company suppliers would gather at the summer rendezvous. There, the furs were sold, supplies were bought and company trappers were divided into parties and delegated to various hunting grounds.

The tradition of the rendezvous was started by General William Ashley's men of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company in 1825. What began as a practical gathering to exchange pelts for supplies and reorganize trapping units evolved into a month long carnival in the middle of the wilderness. The gathering was not confined to trappers, and attracted women and children, Indians, French Canadians, and travelers. Mountain man James Beckworth described the festivities as a scene of "mirth, songs, dancing, shouting, trading, running, jumping, singing, racing, target-shooting, yarns, frolic, with all sorts of extravagances that white men or Indians could invent." An easterner gave his view: "mountain companies are all assembled on this season and make as crazy a set of men I ever saw." There were horse races, running races, target shooting and gambling.

After rendezvous, the men headed off to their fall trapping grounds. Contrary to the common image of the lonely trapper, the mountain men usually traveled in brigades of 40 to 60, including camp tenders and meat hunters. From the brigade base camps, they would fan out to trap in parties of two or three. It was then that the trappers were most vulnerable to Indian attack. Indians were a constant threat to the trappers, and confrontation was common. The Blackfeet were by far the most feared, but the Arikaras and Comanches were also to be avoided. The Shoshone, Crows and Mandans were usually friendly; however, trust between trapper and native was always tenuous. Once the beaver were trapped, they were skinned immediately, allowed to dry, and then folded in half, fur to the inside. Beaver pelts, unlike buffalo robes, were compact, light and very portable. This was essential, as the pelts had to be hauled to rendezvous for trade. It is estimated that 1,000 trappers roamed the American West in this manner from 1820 to 1830, the heyday of the Rocky Mountain fur trade.

In November the streams froze, and the trapper, like his respected nemesis the grizzly bear, went into hibernation. Trapping continued only if the fall had been remarkably poor, or if they were in need of food. Life in the winter camp could be easy or difficult, depending on the weather and availability of food. The greatest enemy was quite often boredom. As at rendezvous, the motley group would have physical contests, play cards, checkers and dominos, tell stories, sing songs and read. Many trappers exchanged well worn books and still others learned to read during the long wait for spring, when they could go out and trap once again.

The equipment of the mountain man was sparse and well used. Osbourne Russell provides an apt description of the typical mountain man from one who was there.

"A Trappers equipment in such cases is generally one Animal upon which is placed...a riding Saddle and bridle a sack containing six Beaver traps a blanket with an extra pair of Moccasins his powder horn and bullet pouch with a belt to which is attached a butcher Knife a small wooden box containing bait for Beaver a Tobacco sack with a pipe and implements for making fire with sometimes a hatchet fastened to the Pommel of his saddle his personal dress is a flannel or cotton shirt (if he is fortunate to obtain one, if not Antelope skin answers the purpose of over and under shirt) a pair of leather breeches with Blanket or smoked Buffalo skin, leggings, a coat made of Blanket or Buffalo robe a hat or Cap of wool, Buffalo or Otter skin his hose are pieces of Blanket lapped round his feet which are covered with a pair of Moccasins made of Dressed Deer Elk or Buffaloe skins with his long hair falling loosely over his shoulders complete the uniform."

The Fur Trade: "Beaver Powered Mountaineering"

There were essentially two realms of trade: The Rocky Mountain Fur Trade and the Upper Missouri. The two regions had different circumstances and hence very different methods of operating business. The Upper Missouri trade relied on the Indian tribes to bring their buffalo skins to trading posts. There, the robes were bought and sent to St. Louis via the river.

The Rocky Mountain Trapping system was quite different. In the Rockies, beaver was the fur of choice. It was trapped mainly by the Euro-American mountain men traveling in company groups. The pelts were sold at a yearly rendezvous where the buyers would travel overland to the designated site and then haul the furs via mule train and wagon to the city to be sold. This system allowed the mountain men to stay in the wilderness year round, as they did not have to travel to a trading post to sell their catch. These two systems were not sealed from one another. Depending on the terrain, available capital, and the attitude of the nearby Indian tribes, a fur company would often use both the rendezvous system and trading posts.

The first of the fur giants was the British **Hudson's Bay Company**, chartered in 1670. The Hudson's Bay Company dominated the trade of Northern Canada and the Oregon territory well into the 19th Century. The first substantial American venture was the **Pacific Fur Company** started by John Jacob Astor in 1810. Astor's dream was to create a corporation that covered all of the West, starting with a fort at the mouth of the Columbia River. He sent one group by ship to build the fort and another by land to establish a useable overland route. The fort "Astoria" was erected as planned and the overland group arrived in 1811. The French **North West Company** was already trapping in the vicinity and provided keen competition for Astor. With the coming threat of British invasion during the War of 1812, Astor sold his fort to the **North West Company** for a fraction of its cost. The British did invade and take over the fort, renaming it Fort George. After the United States won the war, the post was returned to America, but not to Astor.

The American fur trade was dormant from 1814 to 1819 due to the economic and political turmoil caused by the War of 1812. The loss of Astoria and trouble with the Blackfeet Indians on the Missouri also dealt a blow to the trade. Manuel Lisa did manage to run the Missouri Fur Company from about 1807 to 1820; this group built Fort Raymond in 1807 and trapped and traded with the Indians on the Upper Missouri.

In 1822, John Jacob Astor again made a debut into the fur industry by establishing the Western department of the **American Fur Company** in St. Louis. A year earlier, the **Hudson's Bay Company** and **North West Company** had merged, resulting in British dominance of the Columbia River. Also in 1822, William Henry Ashley advertised for "*one hundred young men to ascend the Missouri River to its source, there to be employed for one, two or three years.*" This marked the beginning of the **Rocky Mountain Fur Company**. Though it would change hands several times, this company would innovate the industry by creating the "free trapper system" and the rendezvous.

Both Astor's new **American Fur Company** and the **Rocky Mountain Fur Company** would be successful in creating the Rocky Mountain trading system. As both companies branched out, they would eventually compete for control of the Upper Missouri trade. The stiff competition ended with the American Company's collapse in 1834. This was just as well. By 1834, the decline in demand for beaver hats (the fashion had turned to silk) combined with an increasing scarcity of resources (the beaver had been nearly trapped out) to weaken the market. In the early 1830's, beaver was worth almost \$6/lb in Philadelphia; by 1843 the price was not even \$3/lb.

The fur companies were a central force in the lives of the mountain men. They provided the economic system and often the initial capital that was necessary to the trapper's life. But if the fur giants helped the trapper operate, they also controlled him. The mountain man was a slave to the fur market created by the competition between companies. The amount of control a company had over a trapper depended on what contract for his services he was under. "**Engages**" were men that were supplied and salaried by the company. The furs which they collected were all company property. "**Skin Trappers**" or "Share Croppers" were outfitted by the company in exchange for a set share of the pelts at the end of the season. The "**free-trapper**" was at the top of this social pyramid. He was beholden to no company. He outfitted himself and trapped with whom and where he pleased. In the edited words of mountain man Joe Meek:

"They prided themselves on their hardihood and courage, even on their recklessness and profligacy. Each claimed to own the best horse; to have had the wildest adventure; to have made the most narrow escapes; to have killed the greatest

number of bears and indians; to be the greatest favorite with the indian belles, the greatest consumer of alcohol, and to have the most money to spend."

The free trapper did pay a high price for his freedom as he was at the whim of market fluctuations and he was sometimes still at the mercy of a company to give him credit at the end of a bad year.

All told, the typical trapper, though he might have a good season, or a good year, never got out of debt. It was the company owners and suppliers back in St. Louis that reaped the economic harvest

Voyageurs

Beginnings

New France had barely been established by Cartier before a lively trade in furs and European goods began in the Maritimes and along the St. Lawrence. This trade was very well established in a pattern before Champlain's arrival in the early 1600's. The Wendat (named *Huron* by the French), a strong nation based in what we now call Huronia, the upper part of Simcoe County, had, long before, become traders. Their commodity for no one knows how long was fish, caught at The Narrows through the aid of the weirs, dried, and sold to other Native peoples. Now, with the advent of European goods in exchange for furs, their commercial enterprises expanded. They secured furs from their trading partners, carried them to meet the Europeans, and brought back the trade goods for future deals.

On the other side of Lake Ontario, the Natives, dominated by the Iroquois, were trading with the Dutch, who had occupied Manhattan and the Hudson River area.

All would have gone along smoothly for some time, had not the Iroquois coveted a larger portion of the fur trade than they were getting. The rivalries between these two nations eventually brought about the destructive wars that eliminated the Huron as a power.

Because of the presence of the Iroquois on Lake Ontario, the Huron used a cross-country route that let them approach New France from the north - the route that became the fur highway for over two centuries. From Georgian Bay the canoes carried the furs up the French River, across Lake Nipissing, down the Mattawa and Ottawa Rivers to meet the European traders. In time, Montreal, where the Ottawa flowed into the St. Lawrence River, was established as a market town for the trade. As early as 1603, when the French began a permanent colonization on the St. Lawrence, the Huron were well in control of Native trading north and west of the river and Lake Ontario.

Samuel de Champlain, arriving in 1608, had a vision for France in the New World: a partnership of equals, all following the same Faith - in his view, the Catholic Faith. It was to cement relations with the Huron, to begin the process of conversion, and to assist that nation with its quarrel with the Iroquois, that Champlain undertook his famous journey in 1615 into the Huron country - a journey that unwittingly brought about the fall of that nation: European diseases that decimated the population, and weakened the group so severely that they could not put up a resistance to the Iroquois attack of 1649. With the dispersal of the Huron, that phase of the fur trade came to a close.

Now the French, instead of waiting for the furs to come to them, set out to trade independently among the Native groups. These *courier de bois*, as they came to be called, were soon bringing in so many furs that the market was glutted and the values dropped. Clearly, to maintain a profitable industry, there had to be regulation.

The Fur Industry Under the French Regime

By 1681 the government of New France attempted to restrict the number of traders - thus unintentionally cementing the power of those who were already well established, both in understanding how to operate the trade, and with the financial means to pursue it. The restriction came in the form of a limited number of permits (conges). Now controlled by a few Montreal merchants, for the next eighty years New France, for the sake of the fur trade, pursued a policy of expansion of territory, taking in the lands north and west of the St. Lawrence, including Ontario, Michigan, and the lands through which flowed the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers to the Gulf of Mexico, thus hemming in the British Thirteen Colonies along the seaboard, east of the Appalachian Mountains.

This expansion of New France was achieved by explorers and traders, all in the pursuit of furs. Forts and trading posts were set up throughout these areas, trade treaties were made with Native groups, and the business was pursued for big profits by means of a well-organized system.

The system

Bourgeois: These were the traders, who managed the money. They might be independents, shareholders in small companies, or members of a larger amalgamation. They secured the trade goods and supplies, hired the personnel, and marketed the furs. Their duties often involved visiting the posts, or even wintering at one.

Commis: These were the clerks who did the paper work. They were usually young men, relatives of the *bourgeois*, in training to rise in the ranks. Their heaviest duties were keeping the records. The contents of every bale of trade goods or supplies were meticulously recorded, along with weight, and destination. At the posts, they must record the disposition of each item, and keep similar records of the fur bales going to Montreal. Theirs was the task, also, of keeping track of crews and freight loads of each canoe. And they had especially to record any exchange of money. They traveled to the posts in the canoes, and might often spend a number of years at a trading post or fort situated among Native peoples. "In the field" they would be in charge of the post, must oversee the *voyageurs* wintering there, or even manage the building of a new post. These *commis*, isolated from Quebec for long periods of time, often took Native women as wives, and established families in the west.

Voyageurs: This term was used to designate the crews hired to man the canoes. Without them, there could have been no fur trade as it was developed after 1681. A voyageur might be hired for a one, two, or three-year term. The task, simply, was to get the canoes to their destination.

Those engaged for one year took the canoes loaded with supplies and trade goods to the *rendezvous* post; and brought back to Montreal the canoes carrying the furs. These *voyageurs* were nick-named *mangeurs de lard* (pork eaters) from the diet they received during the trip to and from Montreal.

Those engaged for two or more years, already well-experienced and proven capable, the *hivernants*, took the trade goods and supplies from the *rendezvous* post to the far-flung posts of New France. Here they wintered over, continued throughout those months to negotiate trade in Native villages, and in the spring carried the furs garnered over the winter back to the *rendezvous* post.

The Rendezvous

The term *rendezvous* applies to both a place and a period of time. Certain posts were established as points for the exchange of goods. Three special ones were used under the French Regime: Detroit, at the mouth of the St. Clair River, Michilimackinac, guarding the entrance from Lake Huron into Lake Michigan; and Grand Portage, at the head of Lake Superior. At one of these posts the *canots du nord*, with their loads of trade goods and supplies for the posts, would arrive in early August, having left Montreal in May, manned by the *voyageurs*, and taken along the well-established north route. About the same time, from the west and southwest, the smaller *canots du nord*, loaded with furs, arrived. Now for two or three weeks the clerks were busy opening bales, counting and recording items, repackaging bales, marking destinations, designating carriers, and all of such work not trusted to the *voyageurs*. In those weeks, the *voyageurs* partied, repaired their canoes and clothing, played games, and generally relaxed and restored their energies for the return trip. When the clerks were finished, the canoes were loaded, the *canots du nord* with trade goods and supplies for the posts, the *canots du maitre* with bales of furs. Then all set out again.

Under The North West Company

Hemmed in between the Appalachian Mountains and the ocean, the British, wishing to settle land to the west, were in conflict of interest with the French and the Natives. With the Treaty of Paris in 1763, all came under British rule except Louisiana, which France had recently ceded to Spain.

However, the trade continued, as British traders took over, and continued to carry on with the system that had been established. Now the conflict of interest was between would-be settlers, and traders who wanted no change to the *status*

quo. The War of Independence resolved some boundaries, and gave greater latitude to the Americans, but the trade went on as before.

To strengthen their position, the British traders formed a loose organization named the **North West Company**. From about 1776 until 1821, this company controlled the trade of British North America, with the exception of Rupert's Land, the domain of The **Hudson's Bay Company**. By means of trading agreements with the Native peoples of the Mississippi and Missouri Valleys, and of the western plains, it held a strong position against any encroachment by the Americas. These Native peoples, because of these agreements and their confidence in the North West Company, became strong allies of the British during the War of 1812 - a much-underestimated factor in the progress of that war.

Although, by agreement with the Americans, the posts of Detroit, Michilimackinac, and Grand Portage were handed over to the U.S. in 1796, the British carried on, using the newly built Fort William on Lake Superior for rendezvous. The first two of these posts were reclaimed during the 1812 War, and played a vital role in saving Canada; but were given back in the peace settlement. By that same peace settlement, the British, and consequently the **North West Company**, lost the American mid-west. The company now had to search for furs in the lands north of the U.S. boundaries.

As a result, the **North West Company** and the **Hudson's Bay Company** came into direct conflict, and into competition for furs. The latter company had generally relied on the furs coming to their posts. Now they employed *voyageurs* to carry traders and explorers to the west. The **Nor'Westers** also pursued the trade far to the northwest. The consequence was that the western lands were explored through the MacKenzie Valley and as far as the Pacific Ocean. Eventually, the rivalries were resolved, and cooperation worked for the benefit of all when the two companies amalgamated in 1821 under the name of The **Hudson's Bay Company**.

Under The Hudson's Bay Company

This company received its charter from the British Government on May 2, 1670. A joint-stock company with a centralized bureaucracy, it had wide powers, including exclusive trading rights in the territory traversed by rivers flowing into Hudson's Bay. This vast area was named 'Rupert's Land'.

Until the formation of the North West Company, the HBC had been content to maintain a few posts/forts on Hudson's Bay and let the trade come to it. With the NWC setting up posts on the borders of Rupert's Land, or even within those borders, the HBC began an aggressive policy of going after the furs by having its own posts crowding on the trading areas of the NWC. The new policy forced the company to hire French Canadian voyageurs, the only ones who could manage the transportation needs, or negotiate trade agreements with Native groups.

The 1821 Amalgamation

When the two companies amalgamated in 1821, they kept the name of the **Hudson's Bay Company** because it had a Royal Charter.

Now all of the traders and *voyageurs* were working together toward greater success. However, the long-feared settlement could not be prevented, and as it increased, the availability of furs decreased. By 1850, the trade was dwindling, although it has been said that a million dollars' worth of furs passed through Penetanguishene in that year.

As the trade diminished, the company diversified into land development and retailing. Today it is still a strong and wealthy company.

The American Fur Company

This was formed after 1776, and pursued the trade through territories claimed by the British until after the War of 1812, when boundaries were redefined, very much in favour of the United States. This company also employed French Canadian *voyageurs*, because they had qualities unmatched by men of British origin.

The Independents

Under the French Regime and during the days of the North West Company, there was much room in the fur trade for independent operators of trading posts, although they used the facilities of the large organizations to obtain supplies and market furs.

Two of these independents had posts in Simcoe County.

One was George Cowan, who operated Cowan's Trading Post on Matchedash Bay, an inlet of Georgian Bay. In 1778 he established this post, employing six *voyageurs*, who carried his furs to Michilimackinac and brought back supplies and trade goods. About 1802 he gave up the post to become an official interpreter to the Native people.

The other was Laurent Quetton de St. George, a French émigré with experience as a merchant. He arrived in Canada with the de Puisaye Settlers destined for Markham Township in York County. Though the settlement failed, St. George established a fur-trading and retail-merchandising empire. He had posts at The Narrows between Lake Simcoe and Lake Couchiching in Simcoe County (1802), at Niagara, at Queenston, at York, at Kingston, and in settlements on the route to Windsor. At these stores (posts, emporiums) he combined fur trading with retailing goods from Europe to supply the needs of the settlers.

Buckskinner's Lament

Well sir,

This past year in the Rocky Mountains

Has been of a customary nature

The Bannacks stole my traps

Met a grizzly that took half my ear

The Blackfeet shot my horse

Went through the ice on the Gallatin

The Blackfeet stole my cache of beaver

Lost my mules to the current on Henry's Fort

The Crow took to give me a musketball in the thigh

Broke through a limestone crust and

Boiled my horse in YellowStone

And beaver's getting scarce.

But thank God I'm not in St. Louis

-author unknown