

## MOUNTAIN MAN TRUNK CONTENTS

Beaver Pelt	Belt
Bullet Mold	Castor Bottle
Clay Trade Pipes (2)	Cloth Caps (2)
Cloth Shirt	Deck of Playing Cards
Flintlock Pistol	Flintstone
Glass Trade Beads (3)	Green River Knife
Hawk Bells (6)	Horn Comb
Jaw Harp	“Jim Bridger” Wool Hat
Knife Sheath	Lead Balls (3)
Lead Bar	Leather Bag
Moccasins	Percussion Lock Piece
Possibles Bag	Powder Horn
Steel Beaver Trap	Steel Points (3)
Steel Striker	Tinder
Tinder Box	Tobacco Canteen
Tomahawk	Trade Cloth (2)
Trade Mirror	Trade Silver Pieces (2)
Trousers	Twist Tobacco
Wooden Dice (4)	Wooden Water Canteen

Video: Legacy of the Mountain Man

Books:

*Mountain Men*

*The North American Beaver Trade*

Teacher’s Guide

Grey Museum Folder (Masters for Duplication)

## **DESCRIPTIONS OF TRUNK ITEMS**

**BEAVER PELT:** The primary fur-bearing animal trapped during the era of the mountain man. It was traded with fur companies for essential materials needed to survive a winter in the mountains.

**BELT:** This belt, made of heavy tanned leather with a hand-forged buckle, was worn outside of the shirt and held a knife, tobacco bag, and other personal items. It was wider than the inner belt which was used to hold up trousers, when one was used at all.

**BULLET MOLD:** These came in various sizes, depending on the size or type of the bullet that was needed. (Included are two different sizes of bullets.) The size of the bullet determines the “caliber” of the weapon. Hot liquid lead was poured into the mold and cooled to form the round ball.

**CASTOR BOTTLE:** Taking a peeled willow wand, the trapper would dip into his castor bottle, which contained castoreum produced from beaver glands. He would spread this yellowish substance near his trap, generally on a limb poised above it. The castoreum produced a scent that attracted beavers from miles away to the location of the trap.

**CLAY TRADE PIPES (2):** The practice of smoking tobacco was common among most of the fur trappers and Indians. Clay pipes were light and could be packed anywhere. They were cheap to make and were used for trade between whites and Indians.

**CLOTH CAPS (2):** Caps were worn by mountain men chiefly during the winter months for warmth. The styles were so numerous that rarely two were alike. The stocking cap was highly popular with the French-Canadian voyagers. Most were personally decorated with furs, feathers and quilled or beaded designs. Scottish bonnets were worn by trappers from Scotland and decorated with trade silver pieces.

**CLOTH SHIRT:** Cloth shirts were worn in the summer when the heat made buckskin clothing uncomfortable. These shirts could be worn under buckskin in the winter for additional warmth. They could be made of cotton, wool, linsey-woolsey, calico, muslin, linen, or pillowticking and were commonly used as a trade item.

**DECK OF PLAYING CARDS:** Many mountain men passed the long winters, and the Rendezvous, gambling with playing cards. Take note of the colored face cards, which include four U.S. Presidents.

**FLINTLOCK PISTOL:** The preferred firearm of the mountain men during the fur trade era was the flintlock. “Flintlock” refers to the ignition system used to fire the weapon. A piece of flint fit into the hammer and, when fired, struck the steel to cause a spark. This spark ignited the black powder in the pan and burned into the barrel to fire the weapon. (There is no powder included in this trunk, so the flintlock may be safely fired by the teacher to demonstrate the “spark.” **PLEASE TREAT THIS WEAPON AS IF IT WERE LOADED AND NEVER POINT IT AT ANYONE.**)

**FLINTSTONE:** The flintstone and striker were used to start fires much the same way that we use matches. The flint would be struck on the steel to produce a spark. The spark could be “captured” on charcloth and placed into tinder in order to start a flame. (The flint could also be used in a flintlock ignition system to fire a rifle or pistol. See also Steel Striker.)

**GLASS TRADE BEADS (3):** There were numerous styles of glass beads that were used as trade items with the various Native American tribes; a few have been included as examples.

**GREEN RIVER KNIFE:** This was the trapper’s favorite type of knife. The knives were practical, light, abundant and relatively inexpensive. Because of hard use, the knives frequently wore out but were easy to replace. They were named “Green River” after John Russell’s forge on the Green River in Massachusetts. (**CAUTION: THIS BLADE HAS BEEN DULLED BUT SHOULD BE HANDLED VERY CAREFULLY.**)

**HAWK BELLS (6):** These were traded to the Indians for the purpose of decorating clothing.

**HORN COMB:** The cow horn comb included in the Trunk has “teeth” of two sizes. The larger teeth were used to straighten the hair while the smaller teeth were used to comb out lice.

**JAW HARP:** Also known as a mouth fiddle and gewgaw, the harp was used as a musical instrument and often accompanied the jovial and out-of-tune singing of the mountain men. The origin of the harp is not known but it can be traced to the 16th century.

**JIM BRIDGER WOOL HAT:** Hats, styled such as this, were what made the beaver so popular. Although the hat included in the trunk is made of wool, the shape was common to the period and viewed as fashionable in Europe and America.

**KNIFE SHEATH:** Case for the blade of a knife made of buckskin or rawhide.

**LEAD BALLS (6):** Round bullets of the type used before modern ammunition. (Bullets are .67 caliber.)

**LEAD BAR:** Bars similar to this were brought to the mountains and served as the raw material for bullets. The lead would be heated until it was in liquid form and then poured into a bullet mold. As it cooled, the lead would become solid and formed into the desired size for bullets.

**LEATHER BAG:** A handy drawstring pouch such as this was ideal for carrying the mountain man's flint and steel, musket balls or dice.

**MOCCASINS:** These were worn by virtually all the mountain men. They were comfortable, durable and more suited to their mountain lifestyles than store-bought shoes. They also enabled the trapper to move about quietly.

**PERCUSSION LOCK PIECE:** A type of ignition system for firearms of the period. A brass cap is placed on the nipple and when struck by the hammer, a spark is sent into the breach to fire the weapon. The percussion/cap system was more efficient than the flintlock system and by 1850 the majority of firearms being made were of this type.

**POSSIBLES BAG:** This bag served as the carrying pouch for items the mountain man might "possibly" have needed, such as tools for the firearms, tinder to start fires, bullets and personal gear.

**POWDER HORN:** A hollowed out horn from a cow or buffalo was used to store the black powder needed to fire a pistol or rifle.

**STEEL BEAVER TRAP:** Traps varied in size, style, and method of setting, but the most commonly used beaver traps were double spring and weighed about four to five pounds each. A mountain man would carry six or seven traps in his leather trapsack. **(TRAP SHOULD NOT BE SET!)**

**STEEL POINTS (3):** An item used for trading with the Native American tribes. Indians substituted the more efficient steel point over the stone point for their arrows. This allowed them to use the time that would of been used to make arrowheads for other activities.

**STEEL STRIKER:** The striker was used to start fires much the same way that we use matches. The flint would be struck on the steel to produce a spark. The spark could be “captured” on charcloth and placed into tinder in order to start a flame. (See also Flintstone.)

**TINDER:** Tinder was used to start a fire. Charcloth was also used which consisted of cotton squares that had been charcoaled with fire so that they will readily hold a spark. A magnifying glass could be used instead of the flint and striker to produce a spark on the tinder or charcloth.

**TINDER BOX:** This style of box is similar to that issued to the trappers by the Hudson’s Bay company during the fur trade era. Tinder along with the flint and striker could be carried in the box and used to start fires. A magnifying glass could be used instead of the flint and striker to produce a spark on the charcloth. The charcloth consists of cotton squares that have been charcoaled with fire so that they will readily hold a spark.

**TOBACCO CANTEEN:** Made from rawhide sewn together when wet, pounded full of sand and allowed to dry. Popular for storing tobacco, but can be used to store beads, percussion caps, small caliber lead bullets, and other items.

**TOMAHAWK:** This was an item that figured prominently in both the trade and personal life of the mountain man. Tomahawks and trade axes of numerous styles circulated widely throughout the fur trade region. Sometimes designs such as weeping hearts were cut into the blades of the “hawks.” Brass tacks nearly always adorned the handle and beaded pendants were frequently seen on Indian-owned tomahawks.  
**(CAUTION: EDGE HAS BEEN DULLED, BUT STILL REQUIRES CAREFUL HANDLING.)**

**TRADE CLOTH (2):** Since Native Americans did not produce cloth, this item was one of several that was transported to the mountains and used by the mountain men to trade for furs or other items they might have needed.

**TRADE MIRROR:** Another item used for trading with the various Native American tribes.

**TRADE SILVER PIECES (2):** During the later years of the fur trade era, the mountain men traded silver to the Plains Indians in exchange for furs. The Indians used the silver as ornaments on their clothing and in their hair.

**TROUSERS:** These 1820s men's trousers are made of cotton canvas with pewter buttons to which suspenders were attached. Cloth pants like these were brought from back East. As they disintegrated due to the wear and tear of the rigorous outdoor life, many men patched the trousers with deerskin or lined them with animal skin to extend their useful life. Ultimately the cotton trousers fell apart and they were replaced by clothing fashioned from animal skins, as the mountain man left behind Anglo culture and embraced native American culture in order to survive in the mountains.

**TWIST TOBACCO:** A form of tobacco used by mountain men. Tobacco was either chewed or smoked or put against a tooth to alleviate a toothache.

**WOODEN DICE:** Many mountain men passed the long winters, and the Rendezvous, gambling with dice.

**WOODEN WATER CANTEEN:** Pinewood construction with nailed wooden hoops, lined with brewers pitch. Common among many fur trappers.

# UNIT ONE

## **INTRODUCTION TO THE FUR TRADE**

### **TOPICS COVERED:**

- A brief history of how the American Fur Trade began.
- A discussion of the first mountain men in Wyoming.
- Discussion of the beaver; why they were important, how they were caught, and how Native American views of the animal were changed by European contact.

### **STUDENT GOAL:**

- Explain why beaver was so important in the 19th century, and how the beaver trade began in western America.

### **SUGGESTED OBJECTS:**

- Teachers may want to use the following Trunk objects to help explain material.

Beaver Pelt

Beaver Trap

Book on the North American Beaver Trade

Castor Bottle

## **HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN FUR TRADE**

It was the search for the famed “Northwest Passage” which revealed America as a source for the fur-bearing beaver. The Northwest Passage, which would have provided a faster and more direct route to the Far East, was, of course, never found as it does not exist. What was found, however, was an over-abundance of beaver in the lakes, streams and rivers of the North American continent. As beaver were extinct in Europe, this was a magnificent find. Beavers were highly desired for their fur which was utilized to manufacture the fashionable hats of the period. The first to discover this great wealth were the French of 17th and 18th century Canada. However in 1763, Britain’s victory over France in the French and Indian War revealed a new leader of the American fur trade, and the Hudson’s Bay Company along with independent trappers monopolized the business for the next two decades. By 1787, the independent trappers formed a coalition under the name of the North West Company and challenged the supremacy of the Hudson’s Bay Company, rivaling for the rights to establish forts in what is now west-central Canada and on the Pacific Coast.

Inevitably, the clashing of interests led to arguments, bribery, thievery, arson and even murder. The rivalries between the companies knew no bounds. When London got hold of the scandal in 1821, the British government forced the two competitors to unite as an enlarged business under the single name of the Hudson’s Bay Company. With the two forces joined, their tactics were now turned to eliminating the opposition, the American Fur Company, which had been secured by a charter from the state of New York on April 6, 1808. To further complicate matters, the Russians had also found an interest in the Pacific Coast where sea otter were in abundance. The Russians were transporting furs to the Siberian coast where they were then shipped to China. One of the Hudson’s Bay Company’s first major moves was the establishment of Fort Vancouver at the mouth of the Willamette River in Oregon Country. The new manager of the joined company, George Simpson, encouraged his men to range as far west and as far south as possible and to trap the beavers to extinction. This would in turn create a “buffer zone” or “fur desert” that would be worthless to American fur trappers. As Britain and the United States had agreed by treaty to share the occupation of this territory, this blatant attempt at monopolization ignited American tempers.

Meanwhile, the Hudson’s Bay Company had discovered a new and competent rival in John Jacob Astor whose American Fur Company by 1810 was already a dominant force in the region of the Great Lakes. Astor was a commercial genius; a German immigrant who had landed at Baltimore in the spring of 1784 to seek his fortune. He traded the small assortment of musical instruments he had brought with him from Germany for beaver pelts which he sold to London for profit. His modest beginnings soon developed

into the start of a small fortune and by 1800 Astor had become a powerful man of the trade. With his American Fur Company already an established success, Astor attempted to attain a monopoly of the entire region with the creation of the Pacific Fur Company on June 23, 1810 as a subsidiary of his present company. Astor planned to build a large post, Astoria, at the mouth of the Columbia River in Oregon Country as a direct rival to the still existing North West Company. In September of 1810, the *Tonquin* was dispatched from New York under the command of Captain Jonathan Thorp to sail around Cape Horn and on to Astoria.

The *Tonquin* had barely set sail when dissention started between Captain Thorp and the ship's passengers, four of Astor's partners and twenty-nine employees of the company. Finally, after a stormy seven-month journey, the *Tonquin* reached land and with the small party that remained began construction of Fort Astoria on the southern bank of the Columbia.

Soon after their arrival, the *Tonquin* began trading with the coastal Indian tribes. All went well until in anger, Captain Thorp slapped a Chinook chief across the face. The avenging Indians countered with an attack on the *Tonquin*, killing all but five of the men aboard. Four of these men were later captured and tortured to death and the fifth, again escaping detection, blew himself and the ship to pieces the following day as the Indians returned for a final looting of the ship.

At the same time the *Tonquin* was dispatched, a second expedition was preparing to journey overland to Astoria. The party of overland Astorians left St. Louis in early 1811 under command of Wilson Price Hunt, following the trail that Lewis and Clark had earlier used. Detours from this trail were taken, however, to avoid attack by the Blackfoot Indians. The party followed the Snake River in canoes. When the river became unnavigable, the party separated into smaller groups and traveled by foot, reaching Astoria in the winter of 1812 in very poor condition. By the following June, the War of 1812 had broken out between Britain and the United States. The Astorians had little choice but to sell their fort and all its equipment, stores and outposts to the North West Company in 1813. The first United States attempt at establishing control of Oregon Country had failed to realize Astor's ambition. However, the attempt later played an important role in the treaties of 1818 and 1828 with Britain in which the two nations agreed to share control of Oregon Country; and, later, in the negotiations that recognized Oregon as part of the United States.

Prior to Astor's venture to the Pacific Coast, other Americans had been trapping in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States. With the return of the Lewis and Clark Expedition in 1806 other Americans began to develop a fever for the fur-bearing creature.

As Lewis and Clark were about to start the final leg of their journey from the mouth of the Yellowstone River, they met two American trappers heading West to the Rockies. John Colter was asked to accompany the trappers as a guide and, with the permission of the captains, spent the fall and winter trapping beaver on the Yellowstone. Tiring of the mountains, Colter started his return trip to St. Louis down the Missouri alone. At the mouth of the Platte River in the spring of 1807, he met a new brigade of trappers commanded by Manuel Lisa, one of the most successful fur traders of St. Louis, and was once again persuaded to return West. Colter returned at the end of the season with a wealth of pelts which Lisa brought to St. Louis for trading. This success enabled Lisa to form the St. Louis Missouri Fur Company whose first brigade of trappers was sent upriver in 1809. However, the party returned in failure in July of 1811 and therein led to the Company's downfall. Between 1812 and Lisa's death in 1820, the Missouri Fur Company underwent several reorganizations. With the loss of Lisa and thus the company's driving inspirational force, the Missouri Fur Company lasted only until June of 1830.

After a lull in the fur trade caused by economic and political repercussions of the War of 1812, the American fur trade once again revived in the 1820s. William Henry Ashley and Andrew Henry, a former partner of Lisa's, began the establishment of the Rocky Mountain Fur Trade Company by placing an advertisement in St. Louis newspapers in 1822. The ad read simply: "To enterprising young men. The subscriber wishes to engage one-hundred young men to ascent Missouri river to its source, there to be employed for one, two, or three years." The expedition left St. Louis around April 15th of that year with men such as Jim Bridger, William and Milton Sublette, Hugh Glass, Thomas Fitzpatrick, Jim Beckwourth and Jedediah Strong Smith. The men traveled up the Missouri River by boat to establish a fort and trading post. Trouble arose with the Arikara Indians and Ashley decided to abort the river expedition due to the impending dangers. Instead, he would send his men overland in small groups with a year's provisions "on credit" in return for the year's pelts, which would be exchanged at a predesignated meeting place in the mountains. The men would trap on their own rather than trading American goods with the Indians for pelts, as had previously been the arrangement. Rather than having the men spend considerable time to travel to St. Louis, Ashley would bring the supplies to the trappers. Thus was born the tradition of the Rocky Mountain Rendezvous and the free trapper who bore the name of the "mountain man."

Henry retired in 1824 while Ashley continued to journey to the yearly rendezvous through 1826 when he left the mountain life to pursue a political career. On July 18, 1826, the articles of agreement were signed and the company passed to the hands of Jedediah Smith, David Jackson and William Sublette with the newly formed name of

Smith, Jackson and Sublette. In 1830, Smith and his associates sold their company to Thomas Fitzpatrick, Jim Bridger, Milton Sublette, Robert Campbell and Henry Fraeb. The final downfall of the company was marked by the rendezvous in the Green River valley during the summer of 1834 when, amid many discouraging conditions, Campbell and Fraeb sold their interests in the partnership the following fall. The company continued under the control of Fitzpatrick, Bridger and Sublette who sold the company to the American Fur Company the following year.

The year 1824 marked a tremendous increase in the number and activity of those entering the business of the fur trade. American trappers had now begun to penetrate the southern and central Rockies from new bases at Taos and Santa Fe, rivaling the well established base at St. Louis. About April 1, 1824, the first Santa Fe expedition was organized in Franklin, Missouri. After a successful expedition, the party returned home to Franklin on September 24, 1824. American fur traders had been drawn to this region after the independence of Mexico from Spain and during the next decade the fur trade and the Santa Fe trade had developed in direct proportion with each other, constituting a primary portion of the overland commerce to Missouri.

But America's greed for the fur-bearing beaver had all but depleted its supply and, coupled with lower prices for pelts and the new trend towards Chinese silk in European fashions and coonskin caps in Poland, Russia and Germany, the fur trade began its rapid decline. With the sale of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company in 1834, the American Fur Company had achieved a monopoly. However, Astor, foreseeing the inevitable end of the fur trade, sold his shares to the company before the deal had been completed. By the mid 1830s the beaver trade was doomed. By the 1840s, the beaver trade was finished. Trading activity passed from the rendezvous site to key trading posts like Fort Laramie, Fort Bridger and Bent's Fort.

For several trappers the end of the beaver trade was the beginning of fame, if not fortune, as guides for emigrant wagon trains traveling west to Oregon and California. Some guided the U.S. Army on exploratory expeditions into the Rocky Mountains. Others will become famous army scouts fighting the Indians, who were once their partners in the beaver trade.

*Though their days of glory lasted little more than twenty years, these rugged individuals left a permanent mark on the history and legend of the west.*

## MOUNTAIN MEN OF WYOMING

It is a documented fact that John Colter, after leaving the Lewis and Clark expedition to travel with Manuel Lisa, traveled through Pryor Gap and passed through the present city of Cody and Yellowstone Park. Some believe that he wintered in Pierre's Hole on the Idaho side of the Tetons; however, the only evidence of his stay is a much disputed rock measuring 4x8x13 inches and bearing the profile and name "John Colter" and the date "1808."

The overland Astorians on their journey to Fort Astoria entered northeastern Wyoming near the Big Horn Mountains in late summer of 1811. That fall, the party observed the magnificent Tetons before following the Columbia River to Astoria, arriving in January, 1812.

On October 21, 1812, Robert Stuart led a party of returning Astorians through South Pass on their return to St. Louis, bringing news to Astor's agents about the loss of the *Tonquin* and her crew. The path he followed would one day become the famous Oregon Trail that led thousands of emigrants to their new homes in the Pacific Northwest. It should be noted, however, that some historians believe South Pass was discovered by Andrew Henry in 1811. Still others argue that the Pass was not found until later by Etienne Provost, Thomas Fitzpatrick and Jedediah Smith. Credit, none the less, is given to Robert Stuart for the discovery of South Pass.

Ten days following Stuart's discovery of South Pass, he and his party happened upon a striking fall of water which he named the "Fiery Narrows."

*This landmark is today located off highway 220 near Alcova, thirty miles west of Casper.*

At Bessemer Bend, Stuart's party built the first cabin in Wyoming, planning to spend the winter. Due to hostile Indians, however, the party relocated near present-day Torrington, establishing a second camp on New Year's Day. On March 20th the party broke camp and followed the Platte to the Missouri, arriving in St. Louis on April 30, 1813.

In 1820, a fur trapper named LaRamee told companions that he was heading up a tributary of the Platte River to trap beaver. He planned to return the following spring and when he did not appear, his friends became worried and sent out a search party. He was found dead in a cabin about twenty-three days from the mouth of the river.

Years later in 1868, Jim Bridger told John Hunton, an old time resident of Fort Laramie, that while in his teens, he had been a participant of the search party which had been sent to find LaRamee. Bridger claimed that the party found an unfinished cottonwood cabin and one broken beaver trap but no LaRamee. Two years following the search, the Arapahoes had told Bridger that they had killed LaRamee and placed his body under the ice in a beaver dam. Nevertheless, the name of LaRamee lives on in its corrupted American version, Laramie. His name was left to the Laramie River, Laramie Peak, Laramie Plains, Laramie County, Fort Laramie, the town of Fort Laramie, and the city of Laramie, Wyoming.

It is interesting to note that Fort Laramie began as a fur trading post named Fort William, after William Sublette. In 1834, Sublette and Robert Cambell joined forces against the all-powerful American Fur Company and built Fort William on the Laramie River, more commonly called Fort Laramie. In the fall of 1834, the fort was sold to Jim Bridger, Thomas Fitzpatrick and Milton Sublette, who subsequently sold the fort to the American Fur Company the following year. In 1841, the American Fur company rebuilt the fort buildings, replacing the log with adobe, and renamed the post Fort John. With the decline of the fur trade, the fort began to take on military significance as a supply post due to its strategic western location. By the 1860s and 1870s, Fort Laramie had become the most important post on the Northern Plains, serving as a Pony Express and Overland Stage Station, an army base, and a supply center and protective shelter for ranchers and homesteaders.

*The fort was abandoned in 1890 and lay idle until 1937 when the State of Wyoming bought 214 acres for the creation of Fort Laramie National Historic Site in 1938.*

In April of 1830, William Sublette set out from St. Louis for the Wind River Rendezvous, determined to see if the trek from St. Louis to the West could be made by wagon. On July 4th, Sublette stopped at Independence Rock on the Sweetwater River and possibly gave the rock its name.

Following closely behind Sublette, Captain Benjamin Louis Eulalie de Bonneville, a Frenchman by birth and a graduate of West Point, entered the fur trade upon a two-year leave of absence from the army. Financially backed, Bonneville's outfit of 110 men with goods and supplies left Independence, Missouri in twenty wagons. Bonneville's wagons went by way of South Pass, over the Continental Divide and to the west of the Wind River Range. On the Green River in western Wyoming, Bonneville constructed a post which trappers graciously nicknamed "Fort Nonsense" and "Bonneville's Folly." Due to competition from numerous fur enterprises in the region and bad business practices Bonneville, at the end of three years, was bankrupt.

There has been much debate as to the mission of Captain Bonneville. Many attest to the belief that he was not simply in the region to reap a profit, but rather as an agent of the United States government, to report on the activities of the British in Oregon Country. There has never been any positive evidence produced in support of this position.

Beginning in 1843 Jim Bridger built Fort Bridger, on Blacks Fork of the Green River. Like Fort Laramie, Fort Bridger enabled the mountain men to get supplies year round when they needed them and not have to wait until the next summer's rendezvous. Later, Fort Bridger will become important as a supply stop-over on the Oregon Trail for pioneers. In 1858 the United States Army rebuilt the trading post as a permanent military post that remained active until 1890.

It is William Ashley's rendezvous, however, for which Wyoming is most famous. Except for two locations in Northern Utah and Pierre's Hole on the Idaho side of the Tetons, all summer rendezvous were held at various sites in Wyoming. The first was held in 1825 on Henry's Fork near present day McKinnon in the southwest corner of the state. Two rendezvous were held on the Popo Agie River near Lander, one on Ham's Fork near Granger and six were held on the Green River, including the last two rendezvous of 1839 and 1840. With its strategic location in the northern Rockies and its abundance of beaver-rich rivers and streams, Wyoming became a true participant in the American fur trade.

## **THE BEAVER**

It was not the fur of the beaver which made him one of the most sought after animals in Europe and North America, but rather the pelt for its barbed, fibrous underhair which was pounded, mashed, stiffened, and rolled to make felting material for hats. Hats of all descriptions were produced from this highly valued hair. Coats of a light coloring were used to make day-time hats and those of a more luxurious dark brown produced the elegant hats of the evening. Many shapes and styles were created to satisfy the fashion demand, formal and informal styles and even some military headgear were made of beaver. From the 17th century through the mid-19th century, no European was without a beaver hat. Then the styles turned to other fabrics such as Oriental silk, and the beaver hat was locked away in the closet.

The beaver is an amphibious creature which averages four feet long from the tip of the nose to the end of the tail. Weighing about forty pounds, the beaver is the second largest rodent in the world. The tail, which is noted for its flat, rounded appearance, is ten to

fifteen inches in length and covered with rough skin that resembles scales. The tail allows the beaver to steer in water and signal other beavers by slapping the water. The beaver is an excellent swimmer, and while under water can seal its ears, mouth, and nostrils. The beaver is generally light brown in color, although some may possess very dark coats. Their teeth are much longer and more powerful than those of most other animals and are used to fell trees which constitute the basis of their vegetarian diet, especially the bark of the birch, willow and cottonwood trees. Aspen trees are the favorite food of the beaver. The beaver uses its front feet to grasp trees and the webbed hind feet to swim. The beaver can cut trees down in a matter of minutes and is considered one of the finest engineers in the world in building dams.

Four glands near the abdomen of the beaver contain a secretion called castoreum, a yellowish substance which is extracted from the animal's food and then conveyed through vessels into the glands. Castoreum (castor) is important because it is used to waterproof the fur of the beaver. The beaver often emits a small quantity of castoreum upon the river bank, which will attract every beaver in the area. The odorous substance is used to "mark territory." Trappers took advantage of this process and collected the castoreum left upon the banks, replacing the substance strategically above the traps. The beaver would be lured by the odor and then caught by the traps which lay beneath the surface of the water.

According to legend, the Indians of early America respected and often worshipped the beaver. The Cherokees believed that the earth was created by Manitou, (a spirit or force of nature, either good or bad, deified in the religion of the Algonquin Indians) who inhabited the water-covered world with beavers. Manitou soon realized that accommodations had to be made for land animals. Unsure of how to accomplish this task, Manitou asked the beavers for advice. The animals dove to the bottom of the ocean, brought up mud and stone and outfitted the world with plains and mountains and valleys.

The Algonquin tribes along the St. Lawrence River believed that thunder was produced by their almighty beaver father, Quahbeet, as he slapped his giant tail against the ground.

The five nations of the Iroquois confederacy were bound together by their common clans, such as the "beaver clan" in which members of the tribe were reincarnated as beavers. In this way, any beaver in the vicinity of the tribe could be a close friend or relative. Many tribes shared this belief, thereby they refused to hunt beaver near their homelands as they might be killing a loved one.

The Flathead tribe thought that beavers were a race of man that had angered the Great Spirit and, as punishment, were sentenced to a life of hard labor.

The Indians' adherence to the legends, however, was treated more casually with the introduction of the white man's materials. The tribes valued the beaver pelts only as winter clothing and as bed robes; therefore, they were quite willing to trade these pelts for the much coveted modern articles from the States.

## **ACTIVITIES**

### **1) THINGS TO DISCUSS:**

- What were explorers originally looking for when they found beaver in America? What European country perceived the importance of the beaver first?
- What were the main reasons Europeans wanted to trap beaver in America? How does their view of fur clothing differ with the views held today?
- How did contact with whites change the Native American view of beavers?

### **2) REPORTS AND PROJECTS ON THE BEAVER:**

- Students should research the beaver and develop a 1 to 2 page report covering what they are, how they lived and the shelters they built.
- As a classroom exercise, students might construct a model of a beaver dam.

### **3) CREATING LEGENDS:**

- Students might develop their own legends about the origins of the beaver. This activity may be done individually or in small groups.

### **4) RECREATING THE BEAVER:**

- Materials needed: Paper and Crayons

Have the students find pictures of the beaver and then draw the animal using the paper and crayons. A bulletin board display can be created with the art works, surrounded by things associated with the beaver habitat such as tree bark and branches.

### **5) FASHION IN FURS:**

- Materials needed: Animal Sheet (provided)

Students should research other animals trapped by the mountain men and write about the four animals on the sheet provided.

### **6) QUESTION AND ANSWER SHEET:**

- Materials needed: Questionnaire (provided)

Have the students answer the questions after discussing the background information on the fur trade industry.

## **7) WYOMING GEOGRAPHY:**

- Materials needed: Map of Wyoming (provided)

Have the students draw in the rivers of Wyoming on the blank map. This activity will allow the students to acquire knowledge about Wyoming rivers and where beaver live in Wyoming.

# UNIT TWO

## DAILY LIFE OF THE MOUNTAIN MAN

### TOPICS COVERED:

- A discussion of the typical characteristics of mountain men, how long trappers were active, and what happened to trappers after the fur trade declined.
- Mountain trappers' equipment, and clothing.
- Methods of trapping beaver.
- Language of the mountain man.

### STUDENT GOAL:

- Describe the background, equipment, and trapping methods of the mountain men.
- Explain why mountain men gave up trapping beavers and how they became useful to other western pioneers.

### SUGGESTED OBJECTS:

- Teachers may wish to use the following objects when explaining the clothing and equipment of mountain men:

Shirt	Caps	Wool Hat
Possibles Bag	Knife Sheath	Trousers
Flint/Striker	Tinderbox	<b>*Flintlock Pistol</b>
Moccasins	Powderhorn	<b>*Tomahawk</b>
Bullet Mold	Lead Balls	<b>*Green River Knife</b>

- **These objects will require *special care and handling*. Teachers may wish to allow students to look only. All handling needs to be supervised!**

## **TIMELINE**

1743 - Verendryes brothers, first Europeans to enter Wyoming

1803 - Louisiana Purchase

1806 - John Colter first white American to enter Wyoming

1811 - Wilson Price Hunt's party crosses Wyoming

1812 - Robert Stuart's party returning from Oregon discovers South Pass

1823 - William Ashley's fur trappers arrive in Wyoming led by Jedediah Smith

1824 - Ashley's trappers cross South Pass westward and find good trapping on the Green River and its tributaries

1825 - First rendezvous held in Wyoming on Henry's Fork of the Green River

1826 - First recorded visit to Yellowstone Park by trappers

1826 - Ashley sells out to Jed Smith, David Sublette, William Sublette

1830 - First wagons being drawn by mules cross Wyoming to rendezvous

1830 - Rocky Mountain Fur Company organized

1832 - Battle of Pierre's Hole

1832 - Captain Bonneville takes first wagons over South Pass

1834 - Fort William built (later Fort John and finally Fort Laramie)

1840 - Last rendezvous held

1842 - Fort Bridger established

## THE ERA OF THE MOUNTAIN MAN

Before the 1820s and the birth of the mountain man, the fur trade of the Rocky Mountains existed as an exchange of goods between Indian and white man, pelts for manufactured articles. However, when several major fur companies entered into the field, the business of the fur trade grew into a complex organization. “*Engages*,” or trappers supplied and salaried by a fur company, worked for the companies headquartered in St. Louis, the fur trading capital of the United States. These men were employed at salaries of two to four hundred dollars a year. The “skin trappers” were those outfitted by a company on credit, who paid their debts at the end of each season by promising their pelts to a designated fur company. With the introduction of Ashley’s rendezvous, the “mountain man” came into being. This man was known as the “free trapper” and owed allegiance to no single company. By 1830, there were several hundred “free trappers” in the Rocky Mountain region.

The mountain men knew the back country by heart and developed close relationships with the Indian tribes of the mountains, often adopting their customs and becoming more Indian than white in appearance. Much of this transformation may be attributed to necessity rather than desire. For example, as their clothing from the states began to deteriorate with the wear and tear of mountain life, they made convenient use of Indian clothes.

The mountain men came from a variety of backgrounds. Some were literate while others were not, some were escaped criminals who were forced to the mountains to escape punishment of their crimes, many possessed tremendous pride in their work and loved the freedom of the untrodden terrain—the mountains, the skies, the plains and the forests. The men were generally young, averaging between twenty and thirty years old. Most never concerned themselves with the prospect of saving money. Zenas Leonard, who passed three years with the trappers, said: “Scarcely one man in ten of those employed in this country ever thinks of saving a single dollar of his earnings, but all spend it as fast as they can find an object to spend it for. They care not what may come to pass tomorrow, but think only of enjoying the present moment.”

The trapper’s language was a strange combination of English, French, and Spanish, with barely a hint of grammatical accuracy and literary correctness. Their humor was of a dry wit, conversations sparsely lined with subtle touches of humor. Rarely were loud echoes of laughter heard from the mountains, this was simply not their way of life.

Life in the mountains was valued for its freedom from legal restraints, but not to be

confused with lawlessness. Life, liberty, and the rights of property were greatly respected. Trust was an essential component of life. No written agreements were ever needed for the “Golden Rule” prevailed.

The era of the mountain man lasted only a few years, from 1822 till 1840. By that time, the trapper had nearly eliminated the supply of beaver in the mountains and the European fashions had turned away from the beaver towards other items such as silk and coonskin caps. The fur trade had died and with it died the mountain man.

The end of the fur trade brought about new dilemmas for the mountain men, who were forced by necessity to seek out new professions. Many became guides for the emigrant trains, protecting them from the hazards of the trail and leading them to their new homes in the Pacific Northwest. Some of the mountain men became scouts for the army, while others became hunters for trading posts. A few, such as Joe Meek, appointed as U.S. Marshal, came to hold positions of authority. Still others served as officers to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, where their intimate knowledge and a genuine concern for the tribes added much to a service that was not noted for its compassion. Finally, some trappers refused to live any other life than that of the mountains, many of them crossing completely over to the Indian culture.

They were the true trailblazers who had set the stage for the establishment of the Oregon Trail. They had uncovered mountain passes and essential waterways. They knew the routes for safe passage to the West and were instrumental in the settlement of Oregon and California. In an unsophisticated yet successful process, the mountain men accomplished the initial phase of Western exploration.

## **THE TRAPPER’S DAILY LIFE**

At the close of the yearly rendezvous, the mountain men would return to the mountains to trap beaver. Till the next summer, they would live on fresh meat and sleep under the stars. The mountain men worked through the fall season till the first snowfall, generally in November. At that point, they made preparations for a winter camp, often constructing a log shelter or a tipi to ease the harsh cold and wind of the winter months. As soon as the ice broke, around late March or early April, the spring trapping season began. This season, which lasted till the advent of summer, was considered the best time to trap beaver as the quality of the pelt was at its prime.

The men set off in groups of a dozen or so for protection but separated into smaller groups of two or three for actual trapping. A trapper’s equipment was carried generally

upon a horse or mule. Each man kept six or seven traps in a trapsack. Other equipment included: saddle and bridle, (saddle blanket), rifle, powder horn, bullet pouch, hunting knife, flint and striker, castor bottle filled with castoreum, hatchet, and a possible sack containing pipe, tobacco, sewing kit, extra moccasins, and other small necessities. Many carried coffee, sugar and whiskey, but these luxuries were used up quickly. The trappers rode Indian ponies and lead a pack horse or mule, sometimes accompanied by an Indian wife on another horse. Osborne Russell described the accouterments of the trapper in detail:

*His personal dress was a flannel or cotton shirt, animal skin, such as deer or antelope, served for an outer shirt. A pair of leather breeches and smoked buffalo skin leggings covered his lower body. Moccasins made of dressed deer, elk or buffalo skins were worn on his feet. A winter coat made of buffalo or otter skin covered his body in winter.*

The men traveled along the main river valleys and trapped the many tributaries. When all the surrounding streams had been exhausted of beaver, the men would move to a new location and the pattern was repeated. Throughout the year, the men would meet at certain times and places to report on their progress, collect and cache the furs, and “count heads.”

In setting the traps, the mountain men first selected a likely site, such as the spillway of a dam or a path made by beavers leaving or entering the stream. The trapper entered the stream some distance away from where the trap was to be set, in order to avoid leaving a human scent. The trap was placed near the bank only a few inches underwater and then anchored by a chain attached to a stick driven into the bottom of the stream or pond some six feet from the shore. A small tree limb was then stuck into the mud in such a position as to hang directly over the trap.

From his castor bottle the trapper would take some castoreum, to be used as bait to attract the beaver, and smear this over the tree limb. The foot of the beaver would get caught in the jaws of the trap and, unless it chewed off its own leg, the beaver would drown from the heavy weight of the trap. After the setting of the trap was in order, the trapper waded a good distance from the area before exiting the stream.

Joe Meek described the details of the trapping procedure:

*He has an ordinary trap weighing five pound, attached to a chain five feet long, with a swivel and ring at the end, which plays round what is called the float, a dry stick of wood, about six feet long. The trapper wades out into the stream, which is shallow, and cuts with his knife a bed for the trap, five or six inches underwater. He then takes the float out the whole length of the chain in the*

*direction of the center of the stream, and drives it into the mud, so fast that the beaver cannot draw it out; at the same time tying the other end by a thong to the bank. A small stick or twig, dipped in musk or castor, serves as bait, and is placed so as to hang directly above the trap, which is now set. The trapper then throws water plentifully over the adjacent bank to conceal any foot prints or scent by which the beaver would be alarmed, and going to some distance wades out of the stream.*

The traps were generally set at dusk and raised at dawn. The beavers would be skinned immediately, along with the perineal glands which yield the castoreum. The pelts were carried back to camp where the camp keepers, often Indian wives, would perform the task of processing the pelt. First the flesh side of the skin was scraped clean, and then the skin was stretched on circular hoops to dry in the sun for a day. The pelts were then folded, fur inward, and compacted into bundles of sixty to eighty skins in preparation for transportation.

The trappers cached furs, merchandise and surplus equipment by burying it in the ground. As such, the cache became the base of the trapper's operation. It was generally made on a rise where the soil was dry. A deep pit was dug, lined with sticks and leaves and the materials carefully deposited. The pit was filled with soil and the ground surface restored to its natural condition so as not to reveal the supplies to the Indians. The cache would be raised while en route to the summer rendezvous.

During the winter season, the trappers went into "hibernation." This was a period of rest, amusement, and acquaintanceship for the mountain men. As the streams were frozen, no beavers were trapped during the winter unless the fall hunt had not been good or food was scarce. Many uneducated men spent the winter months "getting educated" around the campfire, where they learned to read and write.

Around the campfire, men told tall tales which were often both amusing and unbelievable. Joe Meek came upon a forest in the mountains where everything had turned to stone and before him stood hundreds of "putrefied trees in which flocks of putrefied birds sang putrefied songs."

In another tale, a man crawled half a mile pursuing an elk. When he shot at the elk the animal continued eating, paying no attention to the shot. The man fired several shots, each without reaction or success. In disbelief, the man advanced toward the elk where he bumped into a mountain wall of pure crystal. At the base of this wall lay his flattened bullets!

Another story tells of a place in the mountains where a loud voice echoed from a cliff so far away that it took eight hours for the sound to travel back.

But it was Jim Beckwourth who became famous for his stories of heroism and romance, with his imagination often surpassing his veracity. One of Beckwourth's stories took place after his mountain years when Beckwourth had settled in California to have his memoirs written by an anonymous writer. His mountain buddies collected funds and sent a man to California to purchase the book. The bookseller, not having a volume of Beckwourth's book in stock, sold the illiterate mountain man a copy of the Bible. When he returned, the only literate man in the group began to read Beckwourth's book aloud, chancing upon the story beginning at the fifteenth chapter of Judges which tells how Samson destroyed the crops of the Philistines by sending into their corn fields three hundred foxes with firebrands tied to their tails. At this point, At this point, a member from the audience interrupted the reading, saying that "he know that for one of Jim Beckwourth's lies anywhere!"

The trappers learned from the Indians where to find suitable winter sites; sites with plenty of grass, water, and wild game. The mountain men built log cabins or tipis and friendly Indians were welcomed into camp. Their Indian wives could mend and make clothes and cook much better than the mountain men. If game was abundant, the men lived well, supplementing their diets with pemmican stew, dried berries, hominy pudding and other delicacies cooked by the Indian women. During desperate winters, the mountain men were forced to eat boiled moccasins, sleeping robes or the skins of their pelts.

Late in March, it was time to abandon camp and begin traveling. The ice was beginning to thaw and the beavers were starting to emerge from their lodges to feed on the plants of spring. The spring hunt continued until the advent of summer, when the quality of the pelt began to deteriorate and the mobility of the beaver made trapping difficult. At this point, the trappers would collect their caches and head to the annual rendezvous.

# THE TRAPPER'S LIFE

by Gregory Walker

I've lived a trapper's life  
Took a Cheyenne woman for my wife.  
I've trapped for beaver plew,  
Learned to speak the language of the Sioux.

Trapper Doc I be,  
Of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company  
Meet my partners, James  
Alan and Paul are their Christian names.

I trap by day, I rest by night,  
I keep my Hawken within my sight.  
I walk along your mountain streams  
It's in your arms that I live my dreams.

We trapped Rayado Creek  
Shinin' times fer about a week  
Crossed trails with some 'Rapaho  
They stole our plews and they forced us "Go!"

We headed for the Rendezvous,  
Four free trappers without a plew  
We cached at Taos town  
Found ol' Gabe and we all threw down.

The years have come, the years have gone  
Yet these shinin' mountains still sing my song.  
You'll feel it in your bones tonight,  
As you sleep along 'neath the soft starlight.

Shine on, you Shinin' Mountains  
I'll return to you.  
Shine on, you Shinin' Mountains  
You're the only life I ever knew.

And shine on, you Shinin' Mountains  
My soul will always wander here with you.

## THE OUTFIT OF THE MOUNTAIN MAN

His trousers and caped hunting shirt were deerskin. He wore a rawhide belt from which he hung essential equipment, including buckskin used to mend his calf-length moccasins. These were stuffed with deer hair, for warmth, and with white ash leaves, which were believed repellent to rattlesnakes. In his pouchy shirtfront he stored bread and johnnycakes, jerked meat, flax fibers for cleaning his rifle, plus a waterproof bladder from a deer to keep his gun's lock dry.

## LANGUAGE OF THE TRAPPER

**airth:** earth

**beaver kitten:** a newcomer

**blunderbuss:** a short musket

**Bug's boys:** a term used by trappers for Blackfeet warriors

**bull thrower:** nickname for a trapper's rifle

**capote:** a long blanket coat with a hood

**child:** a term used by a trapper when talking about himself

**doomed beaver:** death is about to occur

**fer:** for

**foofaraw:** 1. Indian women's trinkets, trifles, etc. purchased by the trappers for their Indian wives 2. decoration, anything frivolous 3. a great "to-do" over nothing gittin' yore  
hair up: getting upset, or bothered by a situation

**Glass Mountain:** obsidian cliff found in Yellowstone National Park, it is located on the road between Mammoth Hot Springs and Norris Geyser Basin

**gone beaver:** a dead man, or a man deeply in trouble

**greenhorn:** an inexperienced person, someone new to the mountains

**passed in his checks:** died or been killed  
**he was made riddle of:** filled with holes

**hyar's damp powder and no fire to dry it:** a bad situation

**knows fat cow from poor bull:** said  
of an experienced trapper

**leetle:** little

**lost your topknot:** lost your scalp

**old coon:** term used when addressing a  
friend, a friend experienced and skilled  
in the mountains

**old hoss:** a close friend

**parler:** to talk

**peetrified:** petrified

**pilgrim:** a newcomer to the mountains

**plew:** prime beaver skin

**possibles bag:** a leather sack hung over the shoulder which contained the things a  
trapper might "possibly" need, such as needle, bullet mold, tobacco, etc.

**raise meat:** to hunt to obtain meat for the pot

**rite:** right

**saved my hide:** saved my life

**shut-eye:** sleep

**some punkin:** 1. a good thing 2. a good-looking Indian girl

**some time before yore kettle's greased agin:** some time before you eat again

**spin a good yarn:** to tell a story

**struck off on his own hook:** to go his own way

**swallowing fire:** drinking whiskey

**that shines:** something good; an indication of approval

**tonguin':** talking

**war:** were

**waugh:** an exclamation

**whar his stick floated:** where a man was intended to go or what he was intending to do; his destiny

## ACTIVITIES

### 1) THINGS TO DISCUSS-FUR TRADE:

- Who was the mountain man? List some characteristics of the trappers.
- Discuss the differences between the *engages*, the skin trappers and the free trappers.
- List other careers undertaken by mountain men after the 1840s.

- What was the fur-trading capital of the United States?
- What years are considered the “era” of the mountain man?

## **2) THINGS TO DISCUSS-TRAPPING:**

- Discuss the hardships and rewards of the mountain man’s life. How is the life of the mountain man different from ours today? Would you like to lead such a life?
- Discuss the procedure used to trap the beaver.
- What was the cache and what was its purpose?

## **3) STORYTELLING IN THE MOUNTAINS:**

- Materials needed:           Storytelling Envelope with Paper Slips

The teacher will need to cut small pieces of paper, label, and put them in an envelope. Each student should draw a piece of paper from the Storytelling Envelope. Stories, or tall tales, about the mountain man or his adventures should be created according to the theme written on the paper.

- Such themes may be as follows: *happy, sad, exciting, adventurous or dangerous.*
  - Stories should be written, about half a page, and then read aloud to the class.
- Encourage students to use the dialect of the period.

## **4) OUTFITTING THE MOUNTAIN MAN:**

- Materials needed:           Craft Paper and Magic Markers

In this group exercise, draw a life-size figure of the mountain man. This may be accomplished by tracing one of the students. The entire class should participate in outfitting the figure, complete with gear and equipment.

## **5) ITEM IDENTIFICATION:**

- Materials needed:           Item Identification Worksheets (provided)
- This activity may be done individually or in small groups of 2 to 4 students.

Pass out the worksheets to each student or group. Students should draw a picture of the item listed and provide a brief description of its use.

**6) MOUNTAIN MAN LINGO MATCH-UP:**

- Materials needed: Match-up Worksheet (provided)

Students should complete this activity individually.

**7) DIORAMA:**

- As an out-of-class assignment, students might recreate the mountain man's winter home, complete with the trapper, his equipment and the mountain environment.

# UNIT THREE

## RENDEZVOUS

### TOPICS COVERED:

- Reasons for conducting an annual rendezvous.
- Trading and other events which would take place at a rendezvous.

### STUDENT GOAL:

- Describe the reasons for and what would take place at a rendezvous.

### SUGGESTED OBJECTS:

- These objects were ones that mountain men would pick up at the rendezvous before going back into the mountains to continue trapping. (Most of the objects suggested for unit two may also be used for this unit, as they were also acquired at the rendezvous.)

Lead Bar  
Horn Comb  
Trade Mirror  
Hawk Bells  
Arrowheads  
Wooden Dice

Jaw Harp  
Lead Balls  
Percussion Lock  
Clay Pipes  
Steel  
Deck of Cards

Bullet Mold  
Trade Cloth  
Trade Beads  
Trade Silver  
Tobacco

## THE RENDEZVOUS SYSTEM 1825-1840

*The rendezvous was one of the most interesting developments of the fur trade in the Rocky Mountains. It arose from the necessity of carrying the trade into regions remote from navigable rivers, where boats could not carry the annual merchandise nor bring back caravans from the States, and rendezvous were appointed for each year at points convenient for the trappers and Indians to meet the traders. These meetings were great events and form one of the most picturesque features of early frontier life in the Far West.*

From: Life, Letter and Travels of Father DeSmet, p. 216

During the summer of 1825 a unique idea was introduced to the American fur trade. Beaver trappers had prearranged a meeting place with their employer in the Rocky Mountains to sell their beaver pelts. More than any other state, Wyoming has been identified as rendezvous country and the home of the mountain man because most of the rendezvous were held in Wyoming. Eleven rendezvous were held in Wyoming during the period of 1825 to 1840. The sites were chosen deliberately for the grass and water supply and the availability of wood for fuel and game for food and sport. The most suitable site proved to be the vicinity of Horse Creek and Green River, near present Daniel, Wyoming. The rendezvous of 1833, 1835, 1836, 1837, 1839, and 1840 were all held at this location.

The rendezvous was William Ashley's great innovation to the fur trade. The original system had depended on Indians to do the trapping, and white traders operating out of forts, or posts trading for furs. But Ashley saw that his fur men could produce more pelts by themselves. Furthermore, the rendezvous avoided the cost associated with a trading post and the necessity of keeping a garrison on the payroll. At the first rendezvous Ashley collected 9,700 pounds of beaver pelts worth \$48,000 in Saint Louis.

Whether by intention or instinct, Ashley had hit upon a method that succeeded as long as the beaver pelts lasted in abundance. The rendezvous was held for sixteen years and only played out when the beavers had been hunted almost to extinction in the mountains and fashion changed to silk hats.

In order to keep contact with his far-flung fur brigades, and possibly to be sure they would not be tempted into trading with any itinerant rivals, Ashley told his men that in July 1825 he would meet them at Henry's Fork on the Green River with a caravan-load of goods from St. Louis. There he would pay them off for their previous years' work, pick up their furs and reoutfit them for the 1825-1826 season. At the same time, since no trapping was done in midsummer, they could relax and lounge around the river for a few weeks. Ashley also let it be known that if Indians, white freelance trappers, and

employees of other fur companies cared to sell their furs at Henry's Fork, pick up supplies and join in the fun and games, they would be more than welcome. Thus it was that the rendezvous—soon to be the best known social and business institution of the American mountain men—came into existence.

The trapper would come to the rendezvous bringing pelts to trade with the fur company that would arrive with supply trains from Missouri. The trains would be loaded with supplies for the trappers—traps, blankets, knives, guns, gunpowder, lead, coffee, sugar, flour, and whiskey—all over priced due to the scarcity of competitive sellers. After the first rendezvous each major fur company had a supply train at the rendezvous site, creating intense rivalries as the companies competed for the furs of the free trapper.

*Ashley's journal contains some interesting facts about the 1825 Rendezvous; for example, prices for the trading goods were as follows:*

<b>Item</b>	<b>Price</b>	<b>Unit</b>
<i>Coffee</i>	<i>\$1.50</i>	<i>lb.</i>
<i>Sugar</i>	<i>1.50</i>	<i>lb.</i>
<i>Tobacco</i>	<i>3.00</i>	<i>lb.</i>
<i>Powder</i>	<i>2.00</i>	<i>lb.</i>
<i>Fish Hooks</i>	<i>1.50</i>	<i>doz.</i>
<i>Flints</i>	<i>1.00</i>	<i>doz.</i>
<i>Scissors</i>	<i>2.00</i>	<i>each</i>
<i>Knife</i>	<i>2.50</i>	<i>each</i>
<i>Blue Cloth</i>	<i>5.00</i>	<i>yard</i>
<i>Scarlet</i>	<i>6.00</i>	<i>yard</i>
<i>Lead</i>	<i>1.00</i>	<i>lb.</i>
<i>Blankets</i>	<i>9.00</i>	<i>each</i>
<i>(3 point North West Blanket)</i>		
<i>Buttons</i>	<i>1.50</i>	<i>doz.</i>

The rendezvous took place each summer, usually late June or early July, and lasted for several weeks. The mountain men reached the rendezvous after a year of solitary labor in the wilderness. The trading only accounted for one to two days, with the remaining days the mountain men devoted to entertaining themselves with any activity that would satisfy their fun-starved appetites. The raw alcohol that was passed around served to release inhibitions. There were horse races and foot races, wrestling and fighting, gambling, duels, and romance with Indian women. At the end of the three or four weeks, the

trappers would return to the mountains to start trapping in the fall, probably having squandered any profits they may have reaped from last year's trappings.

Jim Beckwourth described the rendezvous as follows:

*. . . On arriving at the rendezvous, we found the main body of the Salt Lake party already there with the whole of their effects. The general would open none of his goods, except tobacco, until all had arrived, as he wished to make an equal distribution; for goods were then very scarce in the mountains, and hard to obtain.*

*When all had come in, he opened his goods, and there was a general jubilee among all at the rendezvous. We constituted quite a little town, numbering at least eight hundred souls, of whom onehalf were women and children. There were some among us who had not seen any groceries, such as coffee, sugar, &c., for several months. The whisky went off as freely as water, even at the exorbitant price he sold it for. All kinds of sports were indulged in with a heartiness that would astonish more civilized societies.*

Some of the more colorful events at the rendezvous had Jim Bridger as the central character of merry making: in 1835 Dr. Marcus Whiteman removed a three inch point from his back that had been lodged in his shoulder for three years while scores of spectators watched in awe; in 1837 William Drummond Stewart presented Bridger with an English full suit of steel armor which created quite an amusement with Bridger clanking around camp with it on.

## **WOMEN AT THE 1838 RENDEZVOUS**

One recorded episode in 1838 at the Popo Agie rendezvous by two missionary wives is very illustrative of eastern opinions of wilderness lifestyles.

### **Mary Walker wrote:**

*“Last night disturbed by drunkards. A large company arrived under command of Capt. Bridger. A no. of them came to salute us. One man carried the scalp of a Black-foot [sic]. The music consisted of tamborines [sic] accompanied by an inarticulate sound of the voice. They . . . fired and acted as strangely as they could.”*

### **Myra Eells was shocked even more:**

*“Last night twelve white men came, dressed and painted in Indian style, and gave us a dance. No pen can describe the horrible scene they presented. Could not imagine that white men, brought up in a civilized land, can appear to so much imitate the Devil.”*

Between the time the rendezvous ended and trapping season began the mountain men remained free to search out new beaver country. Encouraged to wander by the fur companies the trappers became great pathfinders for the future influx of white pioneers. During this time period the mountain men produced a fresh burst of land exploration. Historians are still trying to figure out exactly where all of them wandered. It is certain that by the 1830s, American trappers had explored the mountains of the West from the eastern slopes of the Rockies to the Sierra passes into California, and from the Columbia River in Oregon to the Mojave Desert of Nevada. They were the first white men to look upon such wonders as the badlands of the Great Basin, the chasm at Yosemite, the redwoods of California, and the beauty of Yellowstone Park.

Alfred Jacob Miller, a young artist from New Orleans, received the opportunity of witnessing the 13th rendezvous in the Green River Valley. His eyewitness account and sketches are considered the most thorough and detailed description of this annual festival in its sixteen year tradition:

*At certain specified times. . . the American Fur Company appoint a 'Rendezvous' . . . for . . . trading with Indians and Trappers, and here they congregate from all quarters. The first day is devoted to 'High Jinks,' in which feasting, drinking, and gambling form prominent parts. Sometimes an Indian becomes so excited with 'Fire Water' that he commences 'running a muck' - he is pursued . . . and secured . . . 'Affairs of honor' . . . are adjusted between rival Trappers - one . . . of course, receiving a complete drubbing; - all caused evidently from mixing too much Alcohol with their water. Night closes this scene of revelry and confusion. The following days exhibit the strongest contrast. . . . The Company's great tent is raised; - the Indians erect their picturesque white lodges; - The accumulated furs . . . are brought forth, and the Company's tent is a besieged and busy place. Now the women come in for their share of ornaments and finery.*

The 13th rendezvous was held in June, 1837 with more than 2,000 participants, trappers, Indians and fur company agents all in attendance. Although the price for pelts was lower than expected and the cost of supplies was, as usual, overpriced, the 13th rendezvous lived up to its yearly tradition of wild activity. Though this year, as the mountain man returned to the wilderness, marked the last of the great rendezvous. Only three more would be held and they failed to meet the expectations of all who participated. The falling price of the beaver had made the trip to the mountains from Missouri not worth the expense of travel. Fewer than 120 white men attended the rendezvous of 1840. When the American Fur company, sponsor of the gatherings since 1836, announced that there would be no more rendezvous after 1840, most of the mountain men who had been

working the Rockies soon drifted away. Many went to California, New Mexico, or Oregon. A few went home to Canada, Missouri, Kentucky, or Virginia. Only a minority remained in Wyoming.

Tobert Newell, in a statement to Joe Meek, perhaps best summarizes the feelings of the old mountain man towards the future of the fur trade:

*Come," said Newell to Meek, "We are done with this life in the mountains - done with wading in beaver dams, and freezing or starving alternately - done with Indian trading and Indian fighting. The fur trade is dead in the Rocky Mountains, and it is no place for us now, if ever it was. We are young yet, and have life before us. We cannot waste it here; we cannot or will not return to the States. Let us go down to the Wallamet and take farms . . . What do you say, Meek? Shall we turn American settlers?"*

Thus died an American lifestyle and an era in Western history. The mountain man was compelled to change his livelihood by forces beyond his control.

## ACTIVITIES

### 1) **THINGS TO DISCUSS:**

- What was the idea behind the rendezvous and why was it created? Who was the creator of the rendezvous? How did the rendezvous help the trapper?
- Explain the role of the Indians at the rendezvous. For what did the Indians trade?
- List some common trade articles.

### 2) **MAP ACTIVITY:**

- Materials needed: Wyoming Worksheet (provided) (Key is on Page 48)

Students should plot the rendezvous locations in Wyoming on the map.

### 3) **TO THE RENDEZVOUS:**

- Materials needed: To the Rendezvous Maze Game (provided)

Students need to help the traders from St. Louis reach the annual rendezvous. This activity should be completed individually.

### 4) **ADVERTISEMENTS:**

Students might create an illustrated advertisement on poster board, encouraging others to join the trapping profession and come West.

### 5) **RENDEZVOUS REENACTMENT:**

- May be used as a concluding activity.

As a classroom, the students should recreate Ashley's rendezvous. The classroom should be transformed into the mountain wilderness, complete with a tipi. The class should attempt to create the "atmosphere" of the rendezvous within their classroom. Encourage students to come to school that day dressed as mountain men and Indian wives. Students should bring items from home with which to trade.

A date and location should be chosen. Some students may be chosen to be the trappers, others the traders and still others the Indians. Items should be traded between groups. Festivities should be created and acted out by the students. Examples might be recreational activities, a feast or an evening dance.

During the rendezvous, students should write letters to their friends or family back East describing the festivities. Letters should be written in mountain man dialect and read aloud to the class.

# UNIT FOUR

## MOUNTAIN MAN TALES (YARNS)

### **TOPICS COVERED:**

- Stories and journals of mountain men discussing their hardships and problems.

### **STUDENT GOALS:**

- List some of the dangers faced by mountain men and the ways they found to deal with them.

### **SUGGESTED OBJECTS:**

- Teachers may display all the objects the students have examined so far. Have children choose an object and explain how it was used to survive in the mountains.

## **STORIES OF SURVIVAL**

### **“The Story of Hugh Glass”**

One of Ashley's and Henry's men, Hugh Glass set out for the Yellowstone River with the Henry party. One day the old man went out to hunt some meat and stumbled upon a grizzly bear and her two cubs. Before he could even reach his gun or turn to flee, the grizzly had seized him by the throat, inflicting several severe and life-threatening wounds. Finally, the main hunting party came upon the scene and killed the grizzly with several shots as she stood over her victim. Hugh Glass was not expected to live considering the seriousness of his wounds and the mangled condition of his body. Glass defied the odds and survived that night and the next. There were no surgical aids to help repair his wounds and he was unable to move or to be moved. The delay of the trapping party, however, could jeopardize the entire group and everyone was beginning to worry, though they were determined not to leave Hugh Glass alone. Major Henry offered a pleasing solution. By way of reward, two men would remain with Glass until he passed away. These two men, after watching Glass suffer for five days, judged that he could not live much longer. Beginning to fear for their own safety, the two men decided to catch up to the main party and explain that Glass had died. As a dead man would have no need for a gun or supplies, the two gathered up all the supplies, leaving Glass defenseless in the process. This done, the pair set out in search of their employer. But Hugh Glass was not dead. A few months later, he appeared at Henry's Fort on the Yellowstone, thirsty for revenge. Only the younger member of the pair, Jim Bridger, was at the fort and, due to his age and inexperience, his life was spared. It was the other man who Glass wanted. Told that this man was now stationed at Fort Atkinson down the Missouri, Glass joined four other men who were headed in that direction. Glass barely escaped the Indians who attacked the party, killing the four other men.

Finally, nearly a year since the grizzly attack, Glass reached the garrison. But after Colonel Leavenworth pointed out the many disadvantages to killing a soldier of the United States Army, Glass conceded to forget his plot of revenge.

### **“Escape from the Blackfoot”**

In the fall of 1808, John Colter and his partner named Potts came upon a large group of Blackfoot Indians while floating a stream near Three Forks. The Indians ordered the men to shore. Potts, refusing to come in, shot an Indian from the boat and was immediately riddled with arrows. The chief ordered Colter to be stripped of his clothes and to run for his life while being pursued by a band of Indian braves. Colter ran with desperate speed and dashed for a river some six miles in the distance. Even though at one point an Indian overtook him, Colter was able to wield the spear from his grip and kill the

Indian with his own weapon. Colter finally reached the Madison river where he remained hidden under a raft of floating driftwood for several hours. The Indians could be heard yelling as they searched the area for him, a few even standing upon the raft which sheltered him. After dark, the Indians abandoned their search and Colter swam downstream and then traveled some two hundred miles to Fort Manuel.

## **ALFRED JACOB MILLER**

### ***“THE ARTIST TO THE MOUNTAIN MAN”***

Alfred Jacob Miller displayed artistic talent at a very early age. It is believed that in his youth, Miller studied under Thomas Sully before traveling to Europe to strengthen his skills as a painter. Miller returned to his hometown of Baltimore in the mid-1830s. Growing restless, the artist moved to New Orleans and soon developed the ambition to become the first artist to penetrate the heart of the Rockies.

Miller's exploits are recorded in many accounts. In 1837 Miller and William Drummond Stewart, a very influential Scottish nobleman, traveled to the Green River Valley for the 13th annual rendezvous. The artist traveled over the Oregon Trail and crossed over South Pass and the Continental Divide, recording such landmarks as Independence Rock and Devil's Gate. However, it was not the factual which fascinated this talented artist; rather, he was caught by the romance of the West which he portrayed vividly in his landscapes and human studies.

Miller is recognized as the first white artist to record the life of the mountain man, whose life was already quickly disappearing. Bernard DeVoto, one of the first to appreciate the contribution of this artist, pointed out: “It is a pack saddle or a stirrup, a bag of possibles, the curve of an Indian cradle or pommel or arrow case. . . small authentic matter recorded for our use, whose very commonplaceness makes them valuable.” His drawings and journal of the rendezvous provide the best record to date of the annual festival. Although Miller spent only one season in the West, his record of the fur trade and of the Indian way of life is more complete than even that of well-known and prolific artist George Catlin. Miller continually focused on the trapper of the West, the colorful and exotic actor set against the grand backdrop of the Rocky Mountains. His art “epitomizes that of the romantic who saw the West through rosy filters and idealized its features to create picturesque scenes.”

## **JOURNAL OF ALFRED JACOB MILLER**

Miller made some sketches of different scenes at the 1837 rendezvous. Accompanying those sketches were a number of journal entries which follow:

### **“Encampment”**

*The sketch represents an encampment of Shoshonee Indians, near Green River, Oregon. On the elevated ground, or bluff, are a group of Indians in painted robes. On the plain below they are preparing jerked meat, this is performed by cutting it up into thin slices and laying it on frame work, composed of crotched sticks supporting poles; — under these a suppressed fire is built, so as to smoke and dry it at the same time.*

*Before we started from St. Louis we became acquainted with Capt. Sublette, who was then a substantial merchant in that city. He had been one of the pioneers to the “Far West” and almost the first thing he did was to hand us a piece of this prepared meat so as to give us a foretaste of mountain life. He told us that every season he caused a bale of meat to be brought down to him which lasted 6 or 8 months.*

*The Indians and Trappers, after having prepared it properly, fold it in smoked buckskin and stow it away either for Winter consumption, or as a provision in making journeys where game is scarce.*

### **“The Trapper’s Bride”**

*The prices varying in accordance with circumstances. He (the trapper) is seated with his friend, to the left of the sketch, his hand extended to his promised wife, supported by her father and accompanied by a chief, who holds the calumet, an article indispensable in all grand ceremonies. The price of acquisition, in this case, was \$600 paid for in the legal tender of this region: Vis: Guns, \$100 each, Blankets \$40 each, Red Flannel \$20 pr. year, Alcohol \$64 pr Gal., Tobacco, Beads &c. at corresponding rates.*

*A Free Trapper (white or half-breed), being ton or upper circle, is a most desirable match, but it is conceded that he is a ruined man after such an investment, the lady running into unheard of extravagances. She wants a dress, horse, gorgeous saddle, trappings, and the deuce knows what beside. For this the poor devil trapper sells himself, body and soul, to the Fur Company for a number of years. He traps beaver, hunts the Buffalo and bear, Elk &c. The furs and robes of which the Company credit to his account.*

### **The “Devil’s Gate”**

*The traveler on his way to the South Pass of the Rocky Mountains encounters this singular scene, about 5 miles beyond Independence Rock, where the Sweet Water has forced its way through a granite ridge. Col. Fremont, who seems to have measured it, thus described it.—*

*“The length of the passage is about 300 yards, and the width 35 yards. The walls of rock are vertical, and about 400 feet in height; and the stream in the gate is almost entirely choked up by masses which have fallen from above. In the wall on the right bank is a dike of trap rock, cutting through a fine grey granite; near the point of this ridge crop out some Strata of the valley formation, consisting of a greyish sandstone and fine grey conglomerate and marl.”*

*The sketch however will convey a better idea of the scene than any written description can possibly accomplish.*

### **“Indian Hospitality”**

*The sketch represents the interior of a Lodge and the Snake Indian entertaining a free Trapper at a feast. The latter is engaged in recounting some adventure to his host, partly by his limited knowledge of the Indian Language, and by signs.*

*To the right is seated an Indian woman who watches his every movement with intense interest;—she has no doubt often heard of the extravagant generosity of these reckless fellows, and worships him accordingly.*

*We had often opportunities of attending these feasts—but an invitation to one in the valley of Green River posed us,—it was to a “Dog Feast.” Now in course of time we had made some efforts to get rid of foolish prejudices, of one kind or other,—but how about the Dog meat? “Oh we can manage that.” He then called a Trapper, who in consideration of our promising to give him a paper of vermilion\* would arrange the matter;—on the day appointed, the vermilion was forthcoming. We sat by the trapper at the feast who ate our share, seemed to enjoy it too;—and the etiquette appeared satisfactory to our hosts, in every respect.*

*\* 1 ounce.*

### **“Moonlight—Camp Scene”**

*An old trapper is up on his feet spinning a yarn wherein he is giving an account of an adventure of Markhead’s with a grizzly bear. According to his account, Markhead was afraid of nothing on or under this earth, and “was bound to shine in the biggest sort of a crowd.” The story, stripped of the trapper’s ornamentation, was to this effect.—That*

*Markhead for a wager determined to go into some wild cherry bushes where the bear was known to be, and dispatch him simply with a tomahawk. In this affair, the “B’ar” was too much for him. In approaching him through the bushes, he was not aware that Bruin was so near, and in a moment the powerful brute had his paw on our hero’s head, tearing away the entire scalp. Most wonderful of all in the course of time, the trapper entirely recovered, and when we reached the Rendezvous in Oregon, we saw him well and hearty; his head having little or no hair on it and presented a very singular appearance.*

*During the recital there was a running commentary from the Trappers. — “Wagh” “he was some” — “had old grit in him” — “could take the frissle off a darned panther’s tail.” &c.*

### **“Trapping Beaver”**

*In hunting the Beaver two or more trappers are usually in company. On reaching a creek or stream, their first attention is given to “sign.” If they discover a tree prostrate, it is carefully examined to ascertain if it is the work of Beaver, and if thrown for the purpose of damming the stream. Foot prints of the animal on the mud or sand are carefully searched for, and if fresh, they then prepare to set their traps. One of these is baited with “medicine” — hidden under water, and attached to a pole driven firmly on or near the bank. A “float-stick” is made fast to the trap, so that if the Beaver should carry it away, the stick remains on the surface of the water and points out its position.*

*With all the caution the poor trappers take, they cannot always escape the Lynx eyes of the Indians. The dreadful war whoop, with bullets and arrows about their ears, are the first intimations of danger; They are destroyed in this way from time to time, until by a mere chance their bones are found bleaching on the borders of some stream where they have hunted.*

### **“Prairie on Fire”**

*Towards the Fall the grass, which has attained the height of 3 or 4 feet, becomes parched and dry.*

*It is then very inflammable and either by accident or design takes fire. The manner of its approach is insidious enough; at first a slight haze is seen near the horizon, but the experienced eye of the Trapper or Indian immediately detects the nature of the visitor, and all hands in the camp are immediately busy in setting fire to the long grass about them; — not suffering it to make much headway, but beating it down with cloths & blankets. In this manner large spaces are cleared, horses, mules, and tents are secured in the burnt areas, which are enlarged as time permits, and escape from certain death is*

*thus averted through a very simple process.*

*The fire sweeps round with the speed of a race horse, licking up every thing that it touches with its fiery tongue,—leaving nothing in its train but a blackened heath.*

## ACTIVITIES

### 1) **THINGS TO DISCUSS:**

- List some of the dangers a mountain man might face. What kinds of tools did he take with him to meet these dangers?
- What reasons might Native Americans have had for being hostile towards mountain men?

### 2) **SURVIVAL STORIES:**

- Materials needed: Interview Worksheet (provided)

Students might pretend they are Hugh Glass or John Colter and write a story about their escape from the mountain man's point of view.

Students should be divided into groups of two, with one person to be a reporter from the local Gazette and the other to be the mountain man (Hugh Glass or John Colter). The interviewer (reporter) should develop a series of questions which will then be answered by the student who plays the mountain man. All questions and answers should focus on the escapes of the two mountain men. All questions and answers should be recorded on paper and then constructed into that day's edition of the (School Name) Gazette.

### 3) **MOUNTAIN MAN JOURNALS:**

- Materials needed: Journal Worksheet (provided)

Students should keep a journal with four entries, one for each different season—fall, winter, spring, and summer. The entries may focus on the day-to-day activities of the mountain man or on a particular hardship or reward. These journals should be written in the dialect of the period and should be read aloud to the class. Students might create an illustrated title page and bind their entries to create a realistic journal.

### 4) **MOUNTAIN MAN RESEARCH:**

- Materials needed: Biography Worksheet (provided)

Students might be asked to prepare a brief, one to two page research paper on a famous mountain man such as Jim Bridger, Jedediah Smith, Jim Beckwourth, or Kit Carson. The teacher or the student may suggest other names.

The students papers might be arranged into a booklet of famous mountain men.

### **5) A TRAPPER'S TALL TALE:**

- Materials needed: Tall Tale Worksheet (provided)

Have the students pretend that they are a mountain man and write a “tall tale” about some experience they had in the Rocky Mountains. Allow students to read their stories out loud to the class.

### **6) ARTISTS OF THE RENDEZVOUS:**

- Materials needed: Paper, Crayons, or Paints

Alfred Jacob Miller painted scenes from the 1837 rendezvous that he attended. Students should draw or paint scenes from their own perceptions of the rendezvous.

These artworks should be accompanied by a written description of the scene being illustrated. Alfred Jacob Miller’s Journal has been included in this teacher’s packet and may be read as an example.

All the artworks and descriptions should be compiled into a classroom “Rendezvous Journal” or might be displayed on a bulletin board.

# UNIT FIVE

## INDIAN WIVES OF THE MOUNTAIN MEN

### **TOPICS COVERED:**

- Reasons why mountain men and Indian women of the fur trade era married each other.
- The contributions of the Indian wives which made the lives and livelihoods of the mountain men possible.
- Children of mixed parentage.

### **STUDENT GOALS:**

- Understand the reasons for, and advantages and disadvantages of, these interracial marriages.

### **SUGGESTED OBJECTS:**

- Teachers may want to use the following Trunk objects to help explain material.

Beaver Pelt  
Glass Trade Beads  
Hawk Bells  
Trade Cloth  
Trade Mirror  
Trade Silver Pieces

## **MARRIAGE A LA FACON DU PAYS**

The story of the mountain men is incomplete without examining the Indian women who made their lives and livelihoods possible. Most depictions of fur trade life, whether in print or in paintings and sketches, make little mention if any of the Indian women so integral to its functioning. This omission is significant because full- and mixed-blood Indian women played prominent roles in the fur trade. They were wives and hence workers, companions and cultural liaisons. It could be said that the mountain man could not have succeeded in his peculiar livelihood without the assistance of Indian women and their tribes.

In contrast to the popular image of the lone mountain man, some scholars assert that the taking of Indian wives was a “common practice” among the mountain men. When mountain men took Indian wives, no minister nor priest officiated at the ceremony. Instead, marriages were performed according to the customs of the tribe into which the mountain man was marrying. A French phrase was used to describe this union, “marriage a la facon du pays.” The translation means “after the fashion of the country,” or “after the custom of the country.” Alternate names for the marriage between a mountain man and an Indian woman included “mountain marriage,” “prairie marriage,” and “Indian marriage.” One trapper referred to his Indian spouse as his “outdoor wife.”

The Indian wives performed much of the labor necessary for the mountain men to survive and thrive in the mountains. They processed the scores of animal pelts, particularly beaver, and made them ready for market. They provided and prepared food, constructed snowshoes, made clothing, and set up, maintained and moved camp. The wives also became mothers of “mixed blood” children.

Many Euro-Americans held misconceptions about the Indian wives of the mountain men. Although Indian women played a significant and productive role in the fur trade economy, they were often thought to be lazy opportunists, scheming to live a life of leisure and ease through marriage to a white man. Another misconception occurred as a result of white men observing the custom of an Indian woman’s father or brothers accepting horses and other objects in exchange for her hand in marriage. The whites mistakenly concluded that the Indian women were purchased by their husbands, and that the unions were highly degrading to the women and highly immoral. Such observers were witnessing only one of a series of customary exchanges between the bride’s and groom’s families, however.

## A “SQUAW MAN”

Why would any mountain man want to be a “squaw man,” the term sometimes given to those white men who married Indian women? To the mountain man, an Indian wife proved to be a valuable helpmate. She had been trained since childhood for the rugged outdoor life led by her people and later, briefly, by the mountain men. The basic division of labor in Indian societies dictated her tasks and prepared her for a life of hard work. One of her most important duties was processing the large quantity of peltry trapped and shot by her husband. Because it would be months before the furs would be transformed into hats and other goods in some European factory, it was mandatory for the pelts to be cleaned and cured first. Indian women cleaned the pelts by using several small specialized tools.

The list of additional chores performed by Indian wives for their mountain men husbands is long. It was Indian wives who made the camp, packed and moved it, and set it up again. They cooked the bounty of fresh meat, and searched for plants to add variety to the meat diet. They made and stored foods such as jerky and pemmican for consumption during lean winter months. They fashioned clothing from animal skins and took great pride in the quality of their handiwork. Indian wives even cleaned their husband’s guns. Often, fur trappers’ Indian wives and children accompanied them into the wilderness and worked alongside the men. The business of trapping and hunting animals for their pelts thus became a family affair.

Indian women also played important roles in soothing tribal rivalries, preventing tribal wars, and in diplomacy in general. Like a number of traders, many trappers realized that marriage to a chief’s daughter might well be good for business, in addition to basic survival. Mountain man Jim Bridger, for example, married Cora, the daughter of a Flathead chief. In short, marriage helped cement trade ties. The marriage of a fur trader and an Indian woman was not just a private affair between the couple. Instead, the mountain man married into an Indian society and immediately inherited a large kinship network. The bond thus created helped to advance trade relations with a new tribe, and placed the Indian wife in the role of cultural liaison between her husband and her kin. The mountain man’s Indian wife became a bridge between two cultures.

Aside from their obvious merits as skilled workers and diplomats, Indian women were preferred by mountain men simply because there were no other women in the region at the time. Even if white women had been present, it is unlikely that they would have been pursued as wives. They simply did not have the necessary survival skills. George Frederick Ruxton, an English soldier, traveler and writer, spent a winter in the Rocky Mountains with trappers during the fur trade era. He explained the mountain man’s

opinion of American (white) women, “American women are valued at a low figure in the mountains. They are too fine and “fofaraw.” Neither can they make moccasins or dress skins. Nor are they schooled to perfect obedience to their lords and masters...”

“Foofaraw” comes from the French word, *fanfaron*, which means “a boaster of vices or virtues he or she does not possess; a braggart.” As an adjective, the word describes something fancy or affected. “Foofaraw” in the language of the mountain man also refers to a variety of small trade articles and feminine fineries. Examples include tin cones, seashells, trade silver, brass tacks, rings, cooking utensils, clay pipes, hats, pieces of military clothing, hawk bells, ribbons, calico, wools and other trade cloth, and vermilion (a bright red pigment). “Foofaraw” is also a synonym for fanciments, trimmings, decorations for personal adornment.

## **PRESTIGE AND WEALTH THROUGH MARRIAGE**

Why would an Indian maiden want to become the bride of a white mountain man? During the fur trade era, a young Indian woman gained prestige and respect from her people by marrying a white trapper. Some scholars say that many Indian parents, as well as the maidens of a tribe, believed that a white man often made a superior husband. According to some, white men helped their Indian wives more with heavy work, chopping and hauling wood, for example, than Indian husbands of the day would have done.

In addition to status, the mountain man’s Indian wife gained wealth. The mountain man was usually rich by Indian standards, and he spent his gold disks (the Indians called them “buttons without holes”) to purchase many wonderful items for his wife. Some items were for her vanity (trade beads, earrings, metal-backed mirrors), while others made her daily tasks easier (brass kettles, scissors, needles, thread). In her de facto role as cultural liaison, the Indian wife often promoted cultural changes, especially in the use of the white man’s textiles, tools and utensils, and in new arts and crafts techniques.

Mountain men were famous for showing off their Indian wives. At rendezvous and ceremonial times, the mountain man outfitted his wife and her horse to outsplendor all other women. Trapper Joe Meek took great pride in the appearance of his Indian wife, Mountain Lamb, for example. He mounted her on a three-hundred-dollar dapple gray horse, and clothed her in a “skirt of beautiful blue broadcloth, and a bodice and leggings of scarlet cloth, of the very finest make.” Mountain Lamb wore “a scarlet silk handkerchief tied on hood fashion...and the finest embroidered moccasins on her feet.”

Not only did the Indian woman who married a trapper benefit from the union, but also all the members of her family were the fortunate beneficiaries of highly coveted European goods and trading privileges. When a mountain man married an Indian woman, he immediately inherited more aunts, uncles and cousins than he ever imagined. Scores of the wife's relatives came to visit and be presented with many gifts from the rich white man. Sometimes a mountain man and his wife moved far away to avoid her relatives. The kinship marriage conferred usually outweighed the nuisances presented by relatives anxious for foofaraw, however, and many trappers made their homes in the Indian camps.

Sometimes a mountain man took more than one Indian wife. In native societies, a man was considered blessed and most fortunate if he possessed many wives and fathered many children. Mountain man Jim Beckwourth had at least eight Crow wives in separate lodges. An overworked wife was pleased to have a new, younger wife to help with the myriad chores that faced her everyday. There was no shame in becoming the new wife of a man who already had one or more. It was considered improper for a man to take extra wives if he could not afford to, however.

## **“MIXED BLOODS”**

Dorion, an interpreter of mixed parentage that lived with the Sioux for some twenty years in the early part of the nineteenth century, said, “The white man scatters his seed like the cottonwood, blown on every careless wind.” Indeed, many of the marriages between mountain men and Indian women produced children. This phenomenon is called miscegenation, an interbreeding of races, especially whites and others.

The upbringing of the children sometimes provided an arena in which the Euro-American and Indian societies clashed. In the fur trade society, while it was acknowledged that Indian women were remarkably devoted and affectionate mothers, Euro-American fathers exercised patriarchal authority. The story of Manuel Lisa, Spaniard and principle in the Missouri Fur Company, provides an example. Lisa decided that the daughter from his marriage to Mitain, an Omaha woman, should have a formal education in St. Louis. He sent the little girl away to the city in the East. Mitain was devastated, and slashed her skin, tore her clothing, and put ashes in her hair, the prescribed rituals of her people for mourning the dead. A few years later, he attempted to send their young son away in the same manner. The intense grief displayed by Mitain aroused the anger of her people, the Omahas, who believed, like the majority of Indian peoples, that children were virtually the “property” of their mothers by matrilinear right. Only after Omaha chiefs and even government men protested did Lisa yield and let the boy remain with his mother.



# UNIT SIX

## THE MYTH OF THE MOUNTAIN MAN

### **TOPICS COVERED:**

- The ways in which the mountain men became romanticized and fictionalized into American legends.

### **STUDENT GOALS:**

- Describe the components of the mountain man legend and be able to distinguish between mythical and historical attributes of the trapper.

### **SUGGESTED OBJECTS:**

- Video Tape  
Audio Cassette

## ROMANCE AND REALISM

Living today in an industrialized society, we find it difficult to imagine wilderness life as it was in frontier America during the early nineteenth century. Indeed, it is hard to recapture now the experiences of that eventful period in the past or even to picture the land and its people more than a hundred years ago. Therefore, we must turn to the surviving accounts of those who first explored the western wilds. Perhaps none recall those bygone days more vividly than the pictorial reports of the nineteenth-century artists like Alfred Jacob Miller who, in the company of fur trappers and traders, crossed the trackless prairie and the distant Rocky Mountains. In his and other artists' works the image of the "*romance of the Mountain Man*" was established. For some people living in the twentieth century the life of the mountain man is viewed as one of simplicity, getting back to nature, getting away from the restrictions of urban life. For many the mountain man and his life are synonymous with independence and self-reliance, daring and courage, and a "don't-tread-on-me" attitude.

Some historians have argued plausibly that the American fur trade was never very important economically and moreover was never primarily a Rocky Mountain phenomenon. It has been written that too much recognition has been given to the 'incredible richness' of the Rocky Mountain beaver trapping. Dale L. Morgan stated that: "*Maybe the American West was rich only in poor man's terms.*" Morgan's comment could describe Wyoming's fur trade history. Lasting only sixteen years the mountain man era existed in Wyoming's semiarid environment that limited the beaver's habitat by the scarcity of water, aspen trees, willow trees, and brush.

In comparison with the national and international fur trade the amount of business conducted did not add very much to the gross national product, even though it was the only major economic activity of the region. At its peak the fur trade's work force of mountain men and traders did not exceed five hundred men. No more than 3,000 men were involved in all fur trade activities west of the Missouri from 1810 to 1845, and most of them earned barely a living wage. Company trappers' wages were \$400.00 a year, with free trappers' wages less, depending on their luck and initiative.

But paintings, motion pictures, books, and even public textbooks have exaggerated the importance of the mountain man. What has been overstated, with romance and color, are the ideas of freedom, independence, and self-reliance of the trapper's life. Many men stayed in the fur trade only a year or two. The work was often laborious and otherwise disagreeable—lugging six or eight five-pound traps, wading into ice-cold water, setting traps at just the right place so the captured animal would drown before it could chew off

its foot, skinning the victims in freezing temperature, or carrying the heavy wet animals back to camp. Tension must have been prevalent—constant fear of Indians, and concern about the safety and welfare of the horses, their only means of transportation. The stress of finding productive beaver ponds year after year to ensure his continued livelihood added to the demands placed upon the mountain man.

Whether the reader of history sees the life of the beaver trapper as exciting or harsh is debatable. With the final verdict concerning the romantic versus realistic interpretation of history still being argued, the art featuring the mountain man is a little bit of both.

## ACTIVITIES

### 1) **THINGS TO DISCUSS:**

- Why was the figure of the mountain man idealized? What do you think was so appealing about the mountain man to those back East?
- Discuss the concept of the mountain man as the “saddest of heroes.” What was the mountain man really searching for and what did others believe he was trying to attain?

### 2) **MOUNTAIN MAN POETRY:**

- Materials needed: Poetry Worksheet (provided)

Students might create a poem about this glorified figure. Try to capture the “true” mountain man and not the mountain man of myth.

### 3) **LEGACY OF THE MOUNTAIN MAN VIDEO:**

The following questions might be asked for discussion purposes:

- What tools did you recognize in the film? What hardships and rewards?
- Did you notice any of the “romance” associated with the mountain man?
- What characterized a good place to live for the trapper? Describe.
- Would you sacrifice the luxuries of today to lead the life of the mountain man?