

Mountain Men

Mountain men originated as a result of commerce that served fashion. During the seventeenth, eighteenth, and the first half of the nineteenth century, there was high demand for top hats made of beaver pelts among those who called themselves gentlemen. Craftsmen constructing these hats turned beaver pelts into felt using mercury, therefore unknowingly poisoning themselves and giving origin to the saying involving "a mad hatter." When beaver populations were decimated in the eastern part of the North American continent at the beginning of the nineteenth century, so-called fur rush commenced into the Rocky Mountains, where fur animals were still plentiful. Most fur trappers were enterprising young men not satisfied with farm life, who preferred to try and make a living in the outdoors. Their mortality rate was high, and their numbers were not large to begin with. During the peak of the beaver fur trade period, there were around 1,000 trappers in the Rocky Mountains and along the tributaries of the upper Missouri River. Most of these worked for the powerful American Fur Company, or smaller companies such as the Rocky Mountain and Missouri Fur Company. A few free mountain men were simultaneously trapping in northern New Mexico, and another 600 in Canada, where most were employed by the Hudson Bay Company (Janin, 2001).

Men without means could sign up with fur companies that paid wages and outfitted them in exchange for all the furs they would obtain. Such hired hands often accompanied larger expeditions and worked as boatmen, camp tenders, and common laborers. When they learned the trade, they could become contract trappers, who were provided with outfits but received no wages, and who were obligated to sell their whole catch and buy all their supplies for a set price from their company. Truly independent were only free trappers who owned their outfits, hunted

at locations of their choice, and sold their furs where they received the best price. Such trappers had to develop exceptional outdoors skills in order to survive in a world filled with hazards, thus they became vastly self-reliant and resourceful (Dolin, 2010; Laycock, 1988).

Following the habitat of the beaver, mountain men hunted along rivers and their tributaries. The steel traps they used held the beaver that stepped into them under water until the animal drowned. Unless trappers needed meat, they ate only beaver tails, which were considered a delicacy when roasted over the fire. Beaver furs were scraped, stretched out on oval frames, and dried in preparation for later transportation in large bales. In addition to beaver and various birds, mountain men hunted mainly deer, elk, pronghorn, bighorn sheep, buffalo, otter, wolf, mountain lion, and bear. Animals of prey posed a danger not only to the men but even more importantly to their horses, and grizzly bears were sometimes hunted just for the status awarded to a grizzly killer (Dolin, 2010; Laycock, 1988).

Meat of the above-mentioned animals served as the basis of the high-protein diet of mountain men. In addition to preparation by boiling, roasting, and smoking, preferably buffalo meat was in the Native American fashion cut into thin strips and dried on elevated wooden racks. From this so-called jirk mountain men sometimes made the Native American pemmican, prepared by grinding the dried meat and mixing it with fat and wild berries. Both jirk and pemmican represented high-calorie food items that were easy to transport and possible to store for years (Dolin, 2010).

Animal skins were used for clothing, bedding, and shelter. When the trappers' clothes made of cotton and wool had to be replaced, mountain men outfitted themselves in soft, brain-tanned and smoked buckskin, following the example of Native American clothing. About 80 percent of mountain men were married, and about one third had Native American wives, which took care of

the decoration of their buckskin clothing. Popular stereotypes notwithstanding, many mountain men shaved, even as they tended to have long hair, which they covered with a felt, leather, or fur hat. After their old boots wore out, mountain men tended to wear moccasins or their own or Native American make. A trapper would typically ride a horse and lead a mule that carried his supplies and furs. His personal items, fire-starting equipment, ammunition, a knife, and a handgun or two to complement his long gun, he would carry on his leather belt (Dolin, 2010; Laycock, 1988).

Trappers typically travelled into the mountains in larger groups for safety and camaraderie, and during the fall they trapped spread out in pairs. When rivers froze over, mountain men congregated in their winter quarters, and in the spring spread out to trap beaver again (Dolin, 2010). During summertime, trappers brought their accumulated pelts to trading posts, where they in turn purchased their supplies. Traders then brought the pelts to St. Louis, where they were able to sell for \$6 - \$8 a pound beaver pelts they bought from trappers for \$2 - \$5 a pound (Janin, 2001). Furs could alternatively be sold at centralized gatherings of mountain men, called rendezvous, which took place almost every year from 1825 to 1840. Here even successful trappers often spent on drinks, gambling, and entertainment the rest of their money, for which they had worked for most of the year.

When beaver populations dwindled in the Rocky Mountains, and silk hats replaced fur hats in the fashion, the livelihood of mountain men disappeared. What remained were their tales, in some of which the truth was not allowed to get into the way of a good story. Either way, the contribution of the mountain men to the exploration and utilization by White populations of territories until then known only to Native Americans is undisputable. One of the most famous mountain men is Jedediah Strong Smith (1799 – 1831), who found the South Pass, a feasible way west through the

imposing Rocky Mountains range. He was also the first White man to travel with his company to California, Oregon, and back to Rocky Mountains. The legacy of mountain men was recorded in journals and memoirs written either directly by them or by other authors. A collection of excerpts from a variety of pertinent literature featuring well-known mountain men and their adventures can be found for example in the book listed below, edited by L. Underwood.

See also: Beaver Hats; Deerskin Clothing; Popular Heroes; Traders and Raiders

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Further Reading:

Dolin, E. J. (2010). *Fur, fortune, and empire: The epic history of the fur trade in America*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.

Janin, H. (2001). *Fort Bridger, Wyoming: Trading post for Indians, mountain men, and westward migrants*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers.

Laycock, G. (1988). *The mountain men: The dramatic history and lore of the first frontiersmen*. Guilford, CT: The Lyons Press.

Underwood, L. (Ed.) (2004). *Tales of the Mountain Men: Seventeen Stories of Survival, Exploration, and Frontier Spirit*. Guilford, CT: The Lyons Press.