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“The Natives.” [Special Issue – The Mountain Men]

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Our Salute to a Fabled Era

The Museum of the Fur Trade has never had a special exhibit. It seems appropriate that the first one in over fifty years would be about the mountain men. No single chapter in fur trade history is better documented. In fact, the general public believes that the era of the beaver trapper is the only story the fur trade has to tell.

Our decision to mount this tribute to the men who became icons of American western exploration is based entirely on the foundation laid by the bicentennial celebrations of the last three years commemorating Lewis and Clark. As the homeward-bound expedition glided down the mighty Missouri in 1806, first Clark and then Lewis encountered two Americans, Forrest Hancock and Joseph Dickson, at the mouth of the Yellowstone River. The first white men the Corps of Discovery had seen in over a year, the two nimrods were preparing to tap the beaver supply of the Far West.

The party including the trappers dropped down to visit their friends, the Mandans. John Colter convinced the officers to permit him to depart the troop in company with the two men from Illinois. On August 17, 1806, the three headed back upstream, the first documented mountain marking, the beginning of a new chapter in Western history.

For thirty-five years fur gathering in the Rockies was heavily weighted to the teams of imported trappers. An entirely new supply system; the rendezvous, was created, and the participants themselves became legends who are still revered. We are proud to bring you six important essays, specially commissioned by the Museum of the Fur Trade, and edited by the incomparable team of Dr. Fred Cowans and Brenda Francis. They enhance our understanding of the era through studies of the geography, companies, individuals, native inhabitants, yearly order of work, and the historical record of this great period.

The cover, The Rendezvous Near Green River, Oregon, as well as the six other illustrations reproduced in the text, all the work of Alfred Jacob Miller, are provided through the courtesy of the Public Archives of Canada.

The fall and winter issues of the Quarterly will be combined as a catalogue of the exhibition, including photographs of the objects and text of the main labels.
men who worked as free trappers. These were men who had no allegiance when it came to selling their furs at the annual rendezvous, looking only to make the highest return on their catch of beaver skins. Camp keepers were different. As one trapper described in the 1830s, camp keepers performed all the duties “required in camp, such as cooking, dressing beaver, making leather thongs, packing, unpacking, and guarding horses, etc., and remaining constantly in camp, are ever ready to defend it from the attacks of Indians.” Although camp sizes varied, camp keepers could number between one-third and one-half of a trapping party. In fact, fur companies sometimes employed men specifically as camp keepers, while at other times the older trappers compelled the younger men to do their chores.

Trapping operations consisted of a spring hunt that typically began around March and lasted until the early part of summer, and a fall hunt that often started after the rendezvous and continued until ice filled the rivers and streams. Sometime between October and December, at chosen winter sites. In the 1820s, due to their small numbers and need for protection, most of the men wintered relatively close together, with Cache Valley in southeastern Idaho and northern Utah the most common location. By the 1830s competition and the depletion of beaver forced the mountain men into smaller camps scattered throughout the north and central Rocky Mountains. These winter quarters provided trappers a season of rest that became essential to the success of the western fur trade system. Within winter camps, the men spent their time repairing gear, tending to the horses, hunting, gambling, telling stories and sharing blankets, and tutoring, and at times venturing out in search of adventure, exercise, or simply to pay social calls.

Although winter quarters afforded the mountain men an opportunity to reunite in larger groups, it paled in comparison to the excitement and events of the annual summer rendezvous. Here, fur company canoers arrived from the East laden with equipment and trade goods, including a healthy supply of alcohol. Trappers and Indians came from all over the West to barter with the company men. Hoss race, gambling, drinking, and feats of skill were entered into with fervor. Some trappers sought out the finest cloth and beads for their Indian wives. Others spent hours upon hours filling the air with stories of heroic adventure and bravery, never letting the truth get in the way of a good tale. Many men entered the trade so aggressively that when the rendezvous ended and it was time to begin trapping they had squandered all of their earnings, with some even leaving indebted to the company!

The first rendezvous on Henry’s Fork of the Green River in today’s southwestern Wyoming, the next three rendezvous were held further west in present-day Utah’s Cache Valley and at the southern end of Bear Lake. Other sites included Pierre’s Hole on the western side of the Tetons, along Ham’s Fork in present-day southwestern Wyoming, on the Popo Agie River near today’s Lander, Wyoming, and at the confluence of the Popo Agie and Wind rivers. The most common location, however, was an easy journey north from South Pass to a centralized and convenient location: the confluence of Horse Creek and the Green River.

The last great fur-trade caravan pushed out of the rendezvous in the summer of 1840, ending the annual event that had become central to the lives of the mountain men. With the demand and price for beaver pelts unpredictable, and the supply diminishing, a living could no longer be made trapping the western rivers and streams. Except for a handful of leaders, most of the men involved in the fur trade made relatively little money. Although there were some who tried to continue trapping in the 1840s, most of the men had to look for new homes. Some, like Joe Meek, settled in the Oregon Territory and became actively involved in the development of the region. Others headed out for Santa Fe or California. Kit Carson became a guide and scout for the military eventually becoming a general, while others found employment leading wagon trains west to the Pacific. And a few, most notably Thomas Fitzpatrick, served important roles as Indian agents in the West. While the lives of western traders and trap-
manufactured goods, and alliances. Indian presents and trade goods imported from Europe or manufactured locally covered a wide spectrum. Axes, knives, fishhooks, traps, guns, and horses made transportation and acquiring food and lodging easier. Clothing choices and accessories were augmented through the addition of linen, cotton, flannel, muslin, and calico cloths, woolen trade blankets, handkerchiefs, assorted buttons and thread, scissors, needles, awls, and hats. Glass beads, amulets, ribbons, paints, and other items could also be used for decorations while Indian men prized looking glasses. Kettles made of tin, iron, brass, or copper and cast-iron pots made food preparation more efficient. Horses, gunpowder, lead, firearms, and trade mirrors aided defense of tribal territory and increased military strength. Smoking pipes and improved varieties of tobacco became important trade items. Trade goods profoundly changed indigenous societies and lifestyles and affected trading patterns, diplomacy, hunting and food gathering, and warfare.

Indians redistributed wealth in a variety of ways: through cabinet ceremonies to create the illusion of a balanced distribution of goods, to create the appearance of wealth, to propitiate supernatural forces, and in marriage. Personal items were often buried with the deceased. Astute consumers, Indians also improved the types and quality of goods traders brought by playing rivals off each other, negotiated more favorable prices, and told the traders their preferences for certain styles, or requested particular items.

Throughout the history of the North American fur trade, Indians did the majority of the hunting and trapping. It was not uncommon to find Iroquois trappers from Caughnawaga and St. Regis, Quebec, and other Canadians, trapping in Wyoming, or groups of Shawnees and Delawareans trapping as far south as the Rio Grande and Pecos rivers. Those who did not engage in trapping often used their influence as middlemen or intermediaries in the trade. Whether as company employees or as free trappers, Eastern Indians helped harvest the furs in the West, but several western tribes such as the Crow and Pawnee also became adept trappers and traders. Indians also served the fur trade as guides, interpreters, provision hunters, and boatmen.

In the decades following the return of Lewis and Clark in 1806, European and American trappers ventured west, constructing posts at strategic locations on the Columbia, Saskatchewan, Mississippi, Red River of the North, Yellowstone, Missouri, Platte, Arkansas, and Red rivers and invited Indians to trade. The Indians brought skins of wolves, foxes, otters, muskrats, and other fur-bearing mammals in addition to the principal commerce in beaver pelts, deer and elk skins and buffalo robes.

The United States Office of Indian Trade factory system (1796–1822) relied upon construction of posts where the government traders offered Indians goods at low cost in order to establish peace and friendship, to lure them away from British influences, and to protect them from the exploitation of private traders. Factors could not extend credit nor supply liquor (although they did both), and private interests lobbied to do away with the OIT factories. At the same time and later, private traders received licenses from superintendents of Indian trade, but other agents under the direction of the Office of Indian Affairs to trade in specific locations and with specific tribes within the parameters of the various trade and intercourse laws.

During the rendezvous era (1825–40), mountain men trapped and lived year-round in the mountains. This relatively brief period, therefore, was an anomaly in the fur trade.

Whether they operated out of a river trading post or trapped in the mountains, traders and trappers became incorporated into preexisting Indian trade networks. Major trading centers at the Dalles on the Columbia; the Saskatchewan and the Red River on the North; the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara villages on the upper Missouri; the Wichita and Comanche villages on the Arkansas and the Red; and at Taos and Santa Fe, the Zuhi in the Southwest; enabled the dispersal of manufactured goods, weapons, horses and mules, luxury items, and foods like corn, squash, and pemmican among agricultural and nomadic tribes everywhere. Centrally located between these major centers, the Shoshone rendezvous on tributaries of the Green River occurred each spring as Indian traders from different zones journeyed between fairs. Trappers and traders arriving in the Rockies simply added their numbers and merchandise to the mix.

All of the mountain men rendezvous occurred in Shoshone territory on the tributaries of the Bear, Green, Snake, and Wind rivers, ideal locations since the Shoshones did not trap. It also served as a place where Indians, traders, and trappers from different cultural zones could set aside their differences and play, eat, sleep, and trade together before going their separate ways. Communicating in sign language, singing, dancing, gambling, sharing information, and sexual encounters were all part of forming relationships. A diverse gathering of thousands of Indians joined several hundred mountain men during those summers at the annual rendezvous. Shoshones, Bannocks, Nez Perce, Flatheads, Crow, and Utes were all regular visitors. Tribes attended the rendezvous for a variety of reasons. Some wanted metal tools or guns for hunting and war against their enemies. Others could not resist the opportunity. But others came to acquire colorful mackinaw blankets, red flannel and calico cloth, vermilion paint, buttons and thread, steel knives, awls, glass beads, kettles and pans, tobacco, and assorted fur raw.

Not all of the Indians attending the rendezvous were interested in the speculative natural goods, entertainment, or furs. Some came as horse traders. Horses represented a vital component of tribal culture. They were necessary for traveling, moving villages, hunting, acquiring a wife, waging war, and achieving honor and status in society. Indian tribes that participated in the Rocky Mountain, Great Plains, and Southwestern fur trade usually possessed a significant number of horses and wanted more. Horse racing served as a major recreational event at the Green River rendezvous. Horses were won and lost in wagers and occasionally appropriated from inattentive owners. The vast herds numbering in the thousands often determined how long a group could camp in one location and also proved tempting for enemy tribes, such as the Blackfeet, who tried to expropriate them through raiding instead of trading.

European and American trappers quickly found out that Indian women played a vital role in fur trade economics. Intermarriage between white men and Indian women formed the kinship ties necessary for social relationships, economic prosperity, and political alliances. Sometimes tribes refused to trade until a trader took a wife and formed that kinship bond. Afterwards, traders trapped and traded within tribal territory, received trade blankets, and purchased horses by acquiring Indian wives. According to historian William Swagerty, nearly one of three mountain men was married to an Indian woman, and most of those women were Metis or came from the Shoshone, Flathead, Nez Perce, and Sioux tribes. In the southwest, women of Spanish descent, as well as Arapahos, Cheyennes, Pawnees, and Utes married trappers and traders.

This "custom of the country" forged significant social and economic alliances with trading privileges between white and indigenous societies, especially when the women came from influential families. Polygyny between Indians and traders increased as having more wives connoted a man's success and ability to provide, and a woman's status may have actually increased with their role in forming trading relationships and securing manufactured goods for her tribe. The majority of these marriages were loving and long-lasting and provided their husbands with physical and emotional intimacy. Equally important was how these women served as cul-
tural brokers and translators, and as an important labor source in maintaining hunting camps, making and mending clothing and shelter, providing and cooking food, preparing beaver pelts, and beehiving and tanning buffalo robes.

Indians could be powerful commercial allies as well as producers and consumers in the trade. American trappers worked at expanding United States interests by courting various Indian nations and offering trade in exchange for peace and friendship. Despite increased social interaction with Euro-Americans, the fur trade allowed tribes to essentially maintain their economic, political, and social systems, and to retain their land. In many ways the relationships were bi-cultural, symbiotic, and reciprocal. Traders and trappers forged good relationships with most of the tribes of the northern and central Plains and Rockies. Yet this era of contact and trade wrought changes in political structures, gender roles, material culture, and subsistence strategies. Closer links to America’s economy and society did eventually rend the social, cultural, and economic fabric of western tribes. With contact came inevitable change.

The fur trade occasionally brought misunderstanding, conflict, theft, and death. Fur traders and trappers competed for Indian friendship and alliances. Some tribes utilized friendship and accommodation as a survival strategy while others implemented resistance and warfare for the same purpose. Most resentful whites trespassing through tribal territory, using up valuable resources, and strengthening traditional rivals and enemies.

Ultimately, the tribes that already had access to European goods, such as the Blackfeet, Arikaras, and Lakotas, resisted, while those less privileged welcomed the prospects of new trading partners and military allies. American relations with the Shoshones, Flatheads, Nez Perce, and Crows alienated and angered their traditional enemies like the Blackfeet, Arikaras, and Arapahos. In the northern and central Rockies, an armed and powerful Blackfeet Confederacy composed of the Blackfoot, Blood, Piegan, and Aishin ( Gros Ventre) tribes proved a most formidable foe. This British-backed confederacy drove Americans from the upper Missouri and Yellowstone rivers during the War of 1812 and prevented incursions into their territory ranging from the Saskatchewan to the Yellowstone rivers until the 1830s. The Arikaras, in particular, proved a most troublesome foe since they regularly traveled through western Wyoming to visit their Arapaho cousins to the southeast. Confederacy members attacked fur traders in places such as the Three Forks of the Missouri (Montana), Bear Lake (Utha/Idaho), Yellowstone Lake (Wyoming), and Pierre’s Hole (Idaho) during the period 1810-40.

Like the Blackfeet on the upper Missouri, the Arikaras and Lakotas proved to be powerful middlemen on the Missouri and took advantage of their strategic location to demand tribute for passage, exacting a toll from traders as a measure of friendship or to set an example for others. In 1823, for instance, Arikaras attacked and killed more than a dozen trappers before driving them downstream. Colonel Henry Leavenworth led a punitive expedition against the Arikaras to reopen river traffic but failed. This debacle, combined with Blackfeet hostilities, forced Americans such as William Ashley to use overland caravans instead of river travel to access the furs in the mountains. Meanwhile, on the Saskatchewan, Plains Cree and Assiniboines served as middlemen while on the lower Missouri, the Osages dominated the region. The Apaches, Comanches, and Utes could be powerful allies or dangerous foes on the southern Plains while the Cheyennes, Wichitas, and Pueblos were also important trading partners.

Before 1840 beaver was king. But increased competition between companies, depletion of the beaver, and the use of substitute material for hat making, caused the price of beaver to remain unstable, marking the end of the rendezvous era. Nevertheless, the fur trade carried on, especially on the Great Plains where Indians provided antelope, deer, and elk skins and, especially, tanned buffalo robes, to traders at Bent’s Fort, Fort Laramie, Fort Pierre, and Fort Union. Buffalo robes that had previously been too bulky for transporting by pack train could more be easily transported by steamboat down the Missouri River. At the same time that Plains Indians resumed their role as the primary suppliers of fur in North America, the post-rendezvous era became a difficult time for western tribes, a period marked by disease, depopulation, and dispossession. After Mexican Independence in 1821, the Santa Fe Trail connected western Missouri to the Mexican settlements at Taos and Santa Fe. The Old Spanish Trail eventually connected those settlements with California. In the 1830s, the Trader’s Trail connected Fort Pierre and Fort Laramie, linking the commerce of the Platte with the trade of the Missouri. During the rendezvous era, suppliers, trappers, traders, and Indians traveled along the route referred to by some historians as the “Great Fur Trade Road,” later the Oregon Trail. The next twenty years brought the westward migration of half a million Americans over the overland trails, and with the completion of the trans-continenal railroad in 1869, only a few years elapsed before the buffalo were slaughtered, Indians were confined to reservations, and the fur trade drew to a close.

The Literature
Doug M. Erickson

The standard bibliography on Western Expansion and Manifest Destiny is still Wagner & Camp’s The Plains & the Rockies: A Critical Bibliography . . . 1800-1865. With Robert Becker’s additions in the fourth printing (1982) this text remains the basic bibliographic resource for study of American overland exploration. Other major historians, librarians, and book dealers have devoted their careers to western bibliographic scholarship. The following is an attempt to list some of the highlights of this rich field.

To understand any aspect of history, one must begin with the source material. First-person accounts, oral traditions, and other written and verbal recordings of any activity are the means by which we can gather insight into the events. For the American fur trade, we have trappers’ journals both in their own hand and as told to others, newspaper accounts, fur company ledgers, account books and business records, and government reports. American Indian accounts of these activities have in part been handed down in the oral traditions of the respective families and