

Richard C. Brasher
Nov. 5, 1981

THE MOUNTAIN MEN

In the spring of 1806 when they were returning from their historic exploration of the Louisiana Purchase, Lewis and Clark met two men traveling up the Missouri to trade with the Indians. Although they had been gone for over two years and were only two or three days out of St. Louis, one of the private soldiers asked to be discharged so that he could join them as their guide. The two captains were agreeable, so John Colter was given his honorable discharge from the United States Army. He went back to the mountains where he became one of the first and most famous of the Mountain Men. His exploits were famous even among his peers who daily faced dangers which today can hardly be imagined.

In 1806 the gates were just beginning to open, through which a flood of trappers, traders, explorers, missionaries, and settlers was to flow. We may admire the pioneers for their courage, the missionaries for their zeal, but we can only marvel at the Mountain Men who truly opened the West, and whose brief, brilliant history is the stuff of legend.

The Mountain Men flourished from about 1806 to 1845. They were at their height from 1830 to 1838. Prior to 1806, French Canadian trappers and traders had been on the Missouri as far as the Mandan villages in what is now North Dakota. The British Northwest Company had crossed the Canadian Rockies to the mouth of the Columbia River, providing the basis of the British claim to Oregon. The Hudson's Bay Company had established trading posts in the Rockies in

what is now Montana. A few Americans were beginning to travel up the Missouri. After the return of Lewis and Clark, American traffic on the river became a flood, and in the space of twenty years a whole generation had made a life for itself totally unlike anything in American history, before or since.

These invaders of the wilderness called themselves mountain men. They ranged the continent from the Missouri to the Pacific and from Canada to Mexico. They visited Santa Fe, discovered the passes over the Sierras, crossed the deserts of the Southwest and entered California despite the efforts of the Mexicans to keep them out. But their favorite haunts were the mountains of Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho.

One reason they flourished was economic. This period marked the zenith at the American Fur Trade. It was found that the underhair of beaver fur had unique properties which made it most desirable for felting. Every fashionable European gentleman or well-dressed resident of our Eastern seaboard had to own a beaver hat. This fashion began around the turn of the Nineteenth Century. Very shortly, all the streams of the Midwest were trapped out and the search for beaver was pushed to the West. It was known that French Canadians were bringing furs from the Far West.

With the return of Lewis and Clark, a great deal of factual information was quickly disseminated. Clark stayed in St. Louis and quickly became its most prominent citizen. He was called the Red-Haired Chief and he was visited frequently by delegations of Indians seeking his advice or just paying their respects. (It is almost unbelievable what reputations and influence these two men had with the Indians.) Hundreds of young men heard first hand from Clark about the beaver and Indians of the Rockies.

Where did the fledgling mountain men come from? Many, perhaps most, came from Kentucky. They were often the sons of the first settlers drawn West by the lure of the continent. They were young, usually in their twenties and often in their teens.

The beaver trade created American's first large scale business enterprise, the American Fur Company, founded by John Jacob Astor. It stimulated the development of the steamboat and Conestoga wagon. The necessity of moving large amounts of trade goods and furs helped to bring about organization and efficiency which later greatly facilitated the movement of the settlers over the Oregon Trail.

The American Fur Company was known as "the Company" or "the Trust." It was chiefly engaged in trading up the Missouri with the Indians for the furs which they had either trapped or traded or stolen from other tribes farther west. The Company also sent ships regularly to the Columbia to pick up the furs of the Pacific Coast.

The Company soon had competitors. The Hudson's Bay Company which had taken over the Northwest Company established more posts, particularly in Oregon and in the Canadian Rockies to divert the fur trade their way. Their most serious competition came from a St. Louis entrepreneur named William H. Ashley who began in 1822 to outfit independent trappers and send them into the mountains to live with the Indians, or to live alone, making year round hunts and sending their catches to him. An ad in the Missouri Republican read: "To enterprising young men the subscriber wishes to engage one hundred men to ascend the Missouri River to its source, there to be employed for one, two or three years. For particulars enquire of Major Andrew Henry, near the lead mines in the County of Washington..." A few weeks later more than a hundred trappers and "campers", "many of whom," as a local

paper noted, "had relinquished the most respectable employments and circles of society," reported to Henry.

Ashley also recruited a party (in the words of one member) from "the grog shops and other sinks of degredation," adding, "A description I cannot give but Falstafs Batallion was genteel in comparison." The truth about the types who signed on as trappers was certainly somewhere in between the description of Henry's men and those recruited by Ashley. What is most striking about the young men who became trappers besides their extraordinarily varied backgrounds--French, Spanish, Scottish, English, German, Southern, New England, half-breed Indian, a few black--was their relatively high degree of literacy and their lust for adventure. Though some doubtless hoped to make their fortunes, the great majority were drawn by the lure of the wild."

Soon these independent mountain men supplanted the Indians and Company employees as producers of furs. This was a most unpleasant shock both to the Company and to the Indians, particularly the Blackfeet, who lost control of the fur supply. This was the beginning of the permanent state of warfare between the Blackfeet and the Americans.

Ashley sold out to a partnership called the Rocky Mountain Fur Company which included among its principals, Jim Bridger, Kit Carson, and Tom Fitzpatrick. The Rocky Mountain Fur Company became popularly known as "the Opposition."

The Opposition first tried to use the Missouri water route, but they could not compete with the Company's steamboats and fixed posts. So they found a land route up the valley of the Platte River which became the first leg of the Oregon Trail. More importantly, they instituted the rendezvous system. They arranged to bring

supplies and trade goods to a pre-arranged spot in the Rockies where their trappers and the independent mountain men and Indians could bring their furs.

The first rendezvous was held at Pierre's Hole in present day Idaho in 1831 and was so successful that the Opposition almost cornered the market for that year. The next year the Opposition again got most of the furs and the Company decided that it, too, should be represented at the next rendezvous. Accordingly, in the spring of 1833 two rival mule trains set out up the Platte route, each seeking to be the first at rendezvous which had been set for the Green River in Idaho on July the Fourth. The Opposition won the race and had bought most of the furs before the Company train arrived three days later.

The fur trade was laissez-faire competition at its worst. Prices on trade goods brought from the East which had been marked up 100% at St. Louis were raised 1000% at rendezvous. There were, of course, tremendous risks and costs involved in transporting the goods, but it is plain that the fur companies were interested in making the very last penny of profit from their dealings with the mountain men and the Indians.

These trade goods were vital to the mountain men and to the Indians. There were basic necessities: powder and lead, traps, horses, mules, tobacco, and liquor. Liquor, which was straight alcohol was bought in St. Louis at ten to fifteen cents a gallon and was sold at rendezvous at from a dollar to four dollars a pint after having been cut to twenty-five proof or less. Other necessities were shirts, breeches, coats, and blankets. Although the mountain men are generally pictured in fringed buckskins, these were definitely not his preferred dress. Buckskins were stiff, cold, inclined to shrink when

wet, and were usually smelly. Woolen shirts and pants were highly sought but were usually worn out by the time the next rendezvous came around.

Trade goods included personal tools such as knives, hatchets, flint and steel. Small luxuries such as coffee, tea, and sugar went for \$1.50 to \$4.00 a pound.

Special trade goods were brought for the Indians: Mirrors, beads, feathers, bright blankets as well as weapons. But alcohol was far and away the most important trade item. Without it, it was almost impossible to deal with the Indians. With it, trade depended upon the ability of the trader to dole it out judiciously or to lavish it in a general debauch. Both the Company and the Opposition tried to monopolize the trade in alcohol and to deny it to the other.

Each beaver pelt, called a "plew", sold for about \$6.00, so it is easy to see how much beaver a mountain man or an Indian must have in order to buy even the smallest amount of his necessities.

Rendezvous generally lasted four or five weeks and involved hundreds or even more than a thousand mountain men, Indians, traders, teamsters, and "bourgeois" or managers for the fur companies. The first business generally taken care of by the mountain men was certain intimate transactions with members of the opposite sex, in which Indian women gladly participated. Most of the mountain men had lived alone or with one or two companions since the last rendezvous, and they were ready for sex, talk, fighting, and general companionship; the consumption of alcohol was enormous. "The mountain men were a tough race, as many selective breeds of Americans have had to be; their courage, skill, and mastery of the conditions of their chosen life were absolute or they would not have been here. Nor would they have

been here if they had not responded to the loveliness of the country and found in their way of life something precious beyond safety, gain, comfort, and family life. Besides the specific attributes of that way of life and its country, it is fair to point out an extremity, perhaps the maximum, of American individualism and gusto. Moreover, solitude had given them a surpassing gift of friendship and simple survival proved the sharpness of their wits. There were few books and few trappers were given to reading what there were: talk was everything. In this hour of function there was the talk of friends and equals. 'Mind the time we took Pawnee topknots away to the Platte?' Louy Simonds asks Long Hatcher. And Hatcher says, 'Wagh! ef we didn't, an' give an ogwh-ogwh longside of thar darned screechin', I'm a niggur. This child doesn't let an Injun count a coup on his cavyard always. They come mighty nigh rubbin' me out tother side of Spanish Peaks--woke up in the mornin' jist afore day, the devils yellin' like mad. I grabs my knife, keels one (turns him keel upward), an' made for timber, with four of thar cussed arrows in my meatbag. The 'Paches took my beaver--five pack of the prettiest in the mountains--an' two mules, but my traps was hid in the creek. Sez I, hyar's a gone coon if they keep my gun, so I follers thar trail an' at night crawls into camp, an' socks my big knife up to the Green River, first dig. I takes tother Injun by the har and makes meat of him too. Maybe thar wasn't coups counted an' a big dance on hand (even) ef I was alone. I got old bullthrower (his rifle), made medicine over him, an' no darned niggur (Indian) kin draw bead with him since.' "

When rendezvous broke up in the early fall of 1833 after five weeks of trading, drinking, whoring, fighting, and renewing old

acquaintances, the Company sent a party of men led by a man named Vanderburgh, to follow the Opposition brigade led by Jim Bridger and Tom Fitzpatrick, hoping that they would be led into good beaver country. At first Bridger and his party tried to outmarch them and so give them the slip. They were moving north into present day Montana, heading for the three forks of the Missouri near Missoula. A simpler plan occurred to Bridger and Fitzpatrick. They decoyed the Company party into Blackfoot country, where the Blackfeet obligingly massacred them. They stripped the flesh from Vanderburgh's bones and threw them in the river.

The Blackfeet put their mark on Jim Bridger, too, at this time. His party was too large for the Indians to attack, so they sent a brave forward with a medicine pipe signifying a wish to parley. Bridger rode out to meet him with his rifle cocked and lying across his saddle horn. Some movement aroused Bridger's alarm and he raised his rifle. The brave grabbed the barrel and pointed it upward just as Bridger fired. The Indian then wrenched the rifle from Bridger and clubbed him over the head. At the same time, the other Indians let loose a flurry of arrows, two of which struck Bridger. His companions were able to remove one of the arrows but had to cut the shaft of the other and leave the head in Bridger's shoulder.

Eventually, the wealth of the American Fur Company wore out the Opposition, and the partners sold out to the Company. The Company, far from lamenting its dead servants, made Bridger and Fitzpatrick leaders of its own field brigades.

While it is obvious that the fur trade helped to create the mountain men, it is equally clear that that was not the whole story. Perhaps the chief reason was the desire and the opportunity to live free of all restraints except those of nature and the code

of the mountain men. They were the highest example of rugged Americans; Individualists that chafed at boundaries and sought to test the limits of the continent and themselves.

These men learned from the Indians; most of them liked the Indians as individuals. Many of them took Indian wives. But in a very short time, they exceeded the Indians in every skill. They were better hunters, trappers, and fighters; they even lived in the wilderness more comfortably and suffered less from privations and hunger. The reasons were cultural. Although they may not have seemed so, the mountain men were civilized, rational men. They were individualists who understood cooperation and teamwork. The Indian was a man of the Neolithic Age. His civilization was primitive and he was less capable of the generalizations and abstractions which the mountain men could make instinctively.

Take the matter of fighting. All Indian tribes warred with each other to some degree. There were weak alliances between closely related tribes, but mostly they considered anyone not of their tribe as an actual or potential enemy. Throughout the entire period of the mountain men, the Indians vastly outnumbered them; yet they won relatively few fights with them, the Vanderburgh Massacre notwithstanding.

The Indians fought only when the odds were overwhelmingly on their side. A single trapper, caught unaware, might have his scalp lifted by a war party, but a large group of mountain men was almost completely safe. Even two or three men could hold off ten or twelve Indians, and there are many instances where single men holed up in good defensive terrain did too.

Tom Fitzpatrick, travelling alone to reach rendezvous, had the misfortune to run into an entire tribe of migrating Gros Ventres.

Fitzpatrick abandoned his pack horse and rode his own horse to its death to put some distance between himself and the Indians. He hid up in some rocks on a hillside with his rifles and pistols ready. The Indians surrounded him and sang death songs and made medicine in preparation for the attack. They did not attack because they knew that more than one of them would likely be killed before they could kill Fitzpatrick. Night came and Fitzpatrick crept away. In the dark, he ran into the camp of the Indians. He drove off their horses and in the confusion escaped again. He made it to a river which he tried to cross on a raft of saplings. The current tore his raft apart, and he lost his weapons, food, and supplies. He reached the other side, took his bearings, and made a beeline on foot for the rendezvous. He lived on berries and roots, getting constantly weaker. His mocassins wore out and he traveled barefoot. His clothing was torn to pieces, and he travelled less and less each day; but he kept on until a day's journey from rendezvous, naked and starving, he met a group of mountain men. His experiences were duplicated by John Coulter and others.

The Indians objected to losing men in battle. Fitzpatrick lived because he accepted the risk of dying. The Indian idea of a successful fight was to kill one or two of the enemy without losing any of their own braves. Even if a brave did not kill an enemy, he could count "coup" by having touched him.

The mountain men did not view fighting in this way. If it was necessary to fight, they did so whatever the odds. They were prepared to die in a losing fight if they could take some of the Indians with them. The Indians knew that two men hiding behind the bodies of their slain mules with a pair of long rifles and a brace of

pistols each would kill from two to six Indians even if they themselves were finally killed. The Indians simply did not think this kind of exchange was acceptable.

The mountain men could also abstractly plan and execute violence upon the Indians. While the Indians were capable of the cruelest savagery, their violence was done in a kind of frenzy. The Indian was not capable of coldblooded calculation.

The Indian tribes differed greatly among themselves. The Mandans were sedentary, relatively civilized Indians friendly to the Americans. The Sioux were the Prussians of the West--bold, demanding, rigid in their thinking, quick to terrorize the timid, but capable of being intimidated themselves as Lewis and Clark did at their first meeting. The Sioux and the Pawnees were traditional enemies, and their prairie wars involved some of the finest light calvary tactics. Most of the unrest among the Indians and many of the Indian wars may be ascribed to the Sioux as their displacement from the banks of the Mississippi put pressure on the other tribes.

The most populous tribes of the Rockies were the Crows and Blackfeet. The Crows lived east of the continental divide in present day Wyoming and Montana. They were notable artisans, and their feather war bonnets and buckskins were eagerly sought articles of trade by other Indian tribes. The long feather bonnets we usually associate with the Sioux came in trade from the Crows.

The Blackfeet were the fiercest Indians of the West. There were three tribes of them: Piegans, Bloods, and Blackfeet proper. They had allies, a closely related tribe called the Minnetarees. To the mountain men, the Minnetarees were Gros Ventres, "Big Bellies", so called because they were insatiable beggars who could never be filled up.

All Indian tribes lived in mortal fear of the Blackfeet except the Crows, who gave them all they could handle. The Blackfeet were the Crows' traditional enemies, and the Crows delighted in raiding the Blackfeet territory, which was in northwestern Montana. The Crows were not particularly friendly to the Americans but they were not inclined to be always hostile.

The hand of the Blackfeet was always raised against everyone. They never recognized a truce. Their "hearts were always bad" and they had special hatred for Americans. The Blackfeet swore eternal enmity against the mountain men and did everything possible to steal their furs and to drive them from the mountains. They traded exclusively with the Hudson's Bay Company, with whom they got along very well--for Blackfeet.

The Americans preferred the Flatheads, Nez Perce, and Delawares over all other Indians; and they reciprocated the liking. Until Chief Joseph's War in the latter part of the 19th Century, there is no record of the Nez Perce and Flatheads ever fighting the Americans. The Delaware were a tragic case. They were the Ishmaels of the West. Originally, they had lived in Delaware, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. In the 18th Century, they lost a war to the Iriquois, who inflicted the most terrible punishment upon them that an Indian could imagine. They were forbidden to call themselves a tribe and were driven off of their territory over the Alleghenies into Ohio. They lived for a time among the Shawnees and gradually drifted West. By the 1830's the small remnant had adopted the Plains culture and were living at the foot of the Rockies. These Indians associated themselves with the Americans and in a sense because mountain men and ceased to be Indians. Many of them became U.S. Army scouts and

served with Fremont, and other Cavalry officers.

In a sense, the Flatheads were the undoing of the mountain men. In 1833, a Christianized Wyandotte Indian named William Walker wrote a letter to a friend which was published in the Christian Advocate, a Methodist periodical. Walker wrote of meeting a delegation of Flatheads in St. Louis who had journeyed there on foot to seek someone to teach them how to worship the Great Spirit. Walker described in detail the flattened foreheads of the Indians which made their heads to slope upward. This was caused by the barbarous practice of binding their infants' heads. The Christian Advocate exhorted its readers to "let the Church awake from its slumbers and go forth in her strength to the salvation of these wandering sons of our native forests...to release immortal spirits from the chaos of error and superstition."

The letter created a sensation. Methodists, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians vied in sending out the first missionaries. A Methodist bishop swore that "we shall not cease until we have planted the Standard of Christianity high in the summit of the Stony Mountains."

The only trouble in all of this was that Walker's letter was almost entirely pure fabrication. Walker did not meet any Flatheads. Some had been in St. Louis a few months before; they had come down the Missouri as guests of the American Fur Company to see William Clark. It was true that they sought the Great Spirit medicine but only to make themselves invincible against the Blackfeet. Clark tried to explain all of this to the missionaries, but they were unable and unwilling to understand him.

The heads of the Flatheads were not really flat or pointed but were perfectly normal. They were called "Tete Platte" by the

French because the sign for the tribe in the universal language of the plains was made by pressing the fingers of both hands down flat on top of the head.

The missionaries came, first up the Platte, then to the rendezvous, and finally to Oregon. In order to encourage settlement they wrote glowing letters to people back home about the Oregon Territory. Marcus and Narcissa Whitman among the first missionaries attended the rendezvous of 1838 where Whitman, a physician, removed the Blackfoot arrowhead from Jim Bridger's shoulder.

The propaganda of the missionaries had its desired effect. A trickle of settlers began to flow up the Oregon Trail. The Neolithic culture of the Indians contained no elements which the missionaries could use to teach Christianity, so they decided first to civilize them. The first step was to turn them into farmers instead of hunters.

At about the same time the beaver trade was dealt a blow from which it never recovered. A method of making good felt from cheap and plentiful sheep's wool was developed. The market no longer wanted beaver. In 1838, the last rendezvous was held because it was no longer profitable for the American Fur Company to go to the mountains. Indeed, by this time, John Jacob Astor had largely divested himself of his fur company stock and was investing his profits in New York City real estate.

In 1837 one of the great tragedies of the West occurred. Smallpox was brought up the Missouri to the Mandan Villages. The Mandans were almost completely wiped out. From there, the disease spread to the Sioux, the Pawnees, and most of the other tribes. The Blackfeet were especially hard hit, to the vast delight of the mountain men. The Crows alone of all the Plains Indians escaped serious trouble.

They were out on their summer hunt when the epidemic began. Hearing reports of the sickness, they refused to have any contact with other tribes. This prudent behaviour reinforced their reputation for intelligence.

What happened to the mountain men after 1838? Many of them were assimilated into Indian tribes. Others like Jim Bridger settled down. Bridger built a fort which became an important rest stop and resupply point on the Oregon Trail. Kit Carson and Tom Fitzpatrick became scouts for the U.S. Army. Carson's name became a household word, thanks to John C. Fremont. A large number became guides, "trail bosses", to the Oregon wagon trains. Some went to California during the Gold Rush. Many continued to live lives of solitary independence in the beautiful Rocky Mountain valleys.

In any event, in the space of two short decades, the mountain men had been born, flourished, and had disappeared. But they had explored the West, blazed the Oregon Trail, opened vast areas to the civilizing effects of missionaries and farmers, called into being the country's largest commercial enterprise, and had made convincing the American dream of Manifest Destiny.

Richard O. Brinker
Alpenaum Society
Love Oak

November 5, 1981