

Fur Traders and Trappers of the Old West

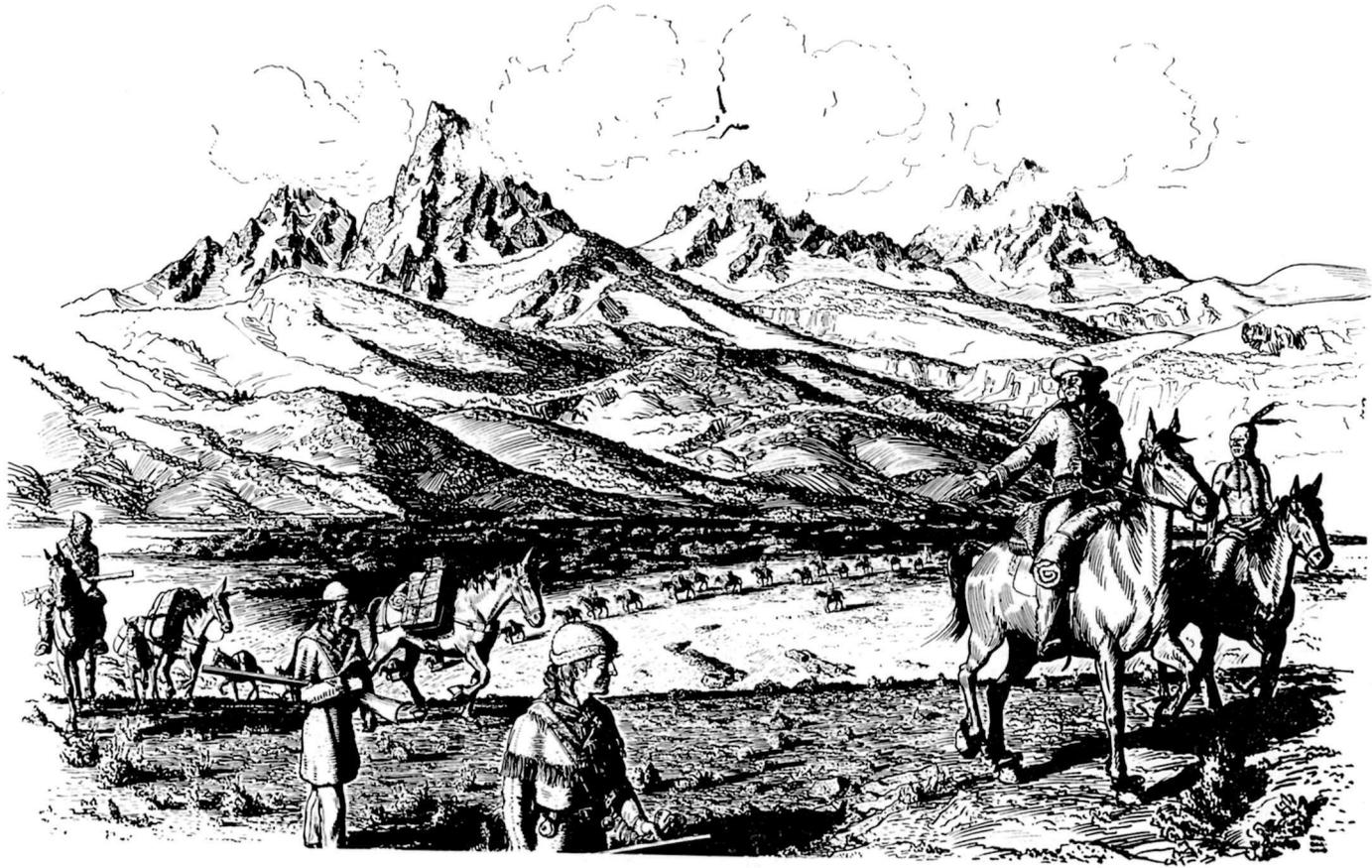
By MERRILL J. MATTES

Custodian, Scotts Bluff National Monument



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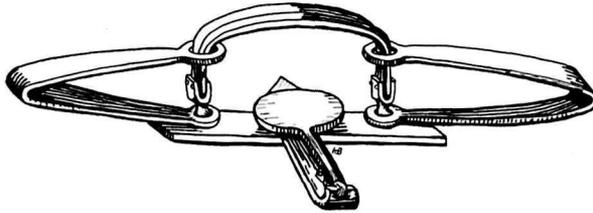


Fur traders in Jackson Hole.

Fur Traders and Trappers of the Old West

By MERRILL J. MATTES

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Long before the emigrants' first white-topped wagon trains appeared portentously upon the Great Plains horizon, the West was an open book to the trappers and fur-traders. They were a fearless and rugged breed of men who explored every stream and valley, blazed every trail, and defied savages, grizzly bears, and the innumerable terrors of the wilderness in their relentless quest for animal wealth. The story of their valiant deeds, of the heroic living which must have been their daily fare, has filtered thinly down to us after a hundred years, precariously preserved in the journals of those comparatively few of their number

who were not illiterate, or by the rare traveler who happened among them. Yet, while they appear but faintly to us, enveloped in a romantic haze, we can discern something of the primitive economy, as well as the stalwart philosophy, of these rough frontiersmen who composed the real, if unwitting, spearhead of America's inexorable march to the Pacific Ocean.

The western fur trade embraces the period 1807 to 1843, or from the sequel of the Lewis and Clark expedition to the first great migration to Oregon.¹ St. Louis was the headquarters of the industry, but its ramifications extended throughout the en-

NOTE: The following areas which played an important role in the history of the western fur trade, either as hunting grounds of the western fur trapper, business centers of the fur industry, trading and military posts in fur trade territory, or significant landmarks along the trappers' trails, are administered by the National Park Service of the United States Department of the Interior:

Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming, Montana and Idaho
Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming
Jackson Hole National Monument, Wyoming
Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado
Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, St. Louis, Missouri
Fort Laramie National Monument, Wyoming
Scotts Bluff National Monument, Nebraska



Rendezvous

tire trans-Mississippi West. The first great wave of enterprise swept up the Missouri River to its headwaters, but in time the wealthy central Rocky Mountain region became the most hotly contested trapping grounds. Here, in the upper reaches of the Snake, the Yellowstone and the Green Rivers, were those fabulous valleys, such as Jackson Hole and Pierre's Hole, which became the true home of the historic trapper or "mountain man."

Beaver pelts, worth about six dollars each, were the primary object of the western trapper's search, although there was some traffic also in raccoon, otter, mink, fox, deer, bear and buffalo. Before the introduction of silk, in 1840, the mark of social distinction among fine gentlemen was a large plug hat fabricated from the rich fur of the beaver, and these quaint amphibious animals were therefore at a premium. Thus, male vanity inspired the lawless adventurer's

thirst for peltries and profits and the resulting explorations, the heroic exploits, the bitter struggle of factions, even the wars between nations, which characterize our frontier history.

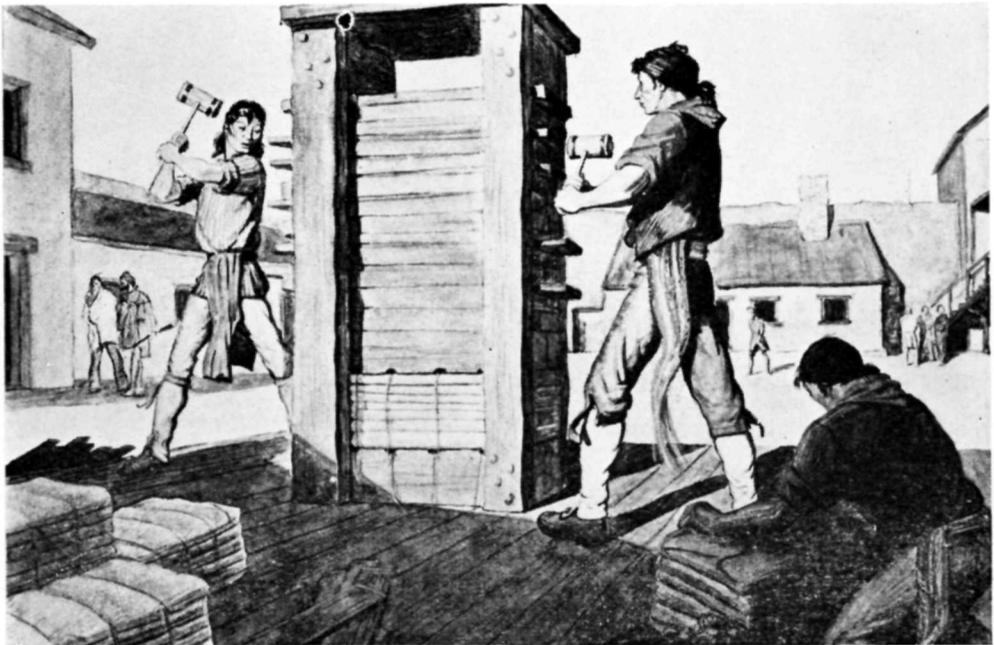
In the Far West the American Fur Company and its subsidiaries, controlled by John Jacob Astor, by 1830 had a virtual monopoly of the trade, but earlier there were other vigorous enterprises, such as the "Rocky Mountain," the Missouri, and the Columbia fur companies, which provided fierce and unrelenting competition. Such competition would end only by the virtual annihilation of one or the other of the rival concerns, or the merger of both. In addition, numerous small "wildcat" outfits were continually springing up to bedevil the established interests. And all of these conflicting American concerns were in turn arrayed against the powerful British Hudson's Bay Company which, operating

from Canadian and Columbia River posts, openly invaded the wilderness claimed or technically owned by the United States.

The trading companies might obtain their furs by bartering with the "free trappers," or by hiring their own trappers on a salary basis, or by trading with the Indians. Whatever method was employed the manner of its execution was ruthless, for the lure of great wealth was irresistible, and there was virtually no law west of the settlements. No claims or rights were recognized, except those which force alone could uphold. Although many of the traders were men respected in their home communities, and conscious of a moral code, many others were little better than desperadoes who had little compunction about robbing a compatriot of

his season's cargo, or murdering him in the process. Trappers who were bound to one outfit by previous legal agreement seldom hesitated to sever this allegiance if another appeared to be more profitable. The Indian's love for gaudy trinkets and his passion for liquor were ideally calculated to make of the fur trade a vicious cycle of fraud, treachery and bloodshed, for the traders not only leaned on the Indian's ignorance of values to enhance his margin of profit, but sometimes persuaded him to reject or make war on other traders, and plied him with smuggled alcohol, to complete his demoralization:

"In retailing the poisonous stuff (a pure article never found its way to the Indian) the degree of deception and cheating could



Baling beaver hides with a wedge press.

not have been carried further. A baneful and noxious substance to begin with, it was retailed with the most systematic fraud, often amounting to a sheer exchange of nothing for the goods of the Indian. It was the policy of the shrewd trader first to

at least this in their favor that they spared the unhappy and deluded savage from a portion of the liquor which he was supposed to be getting."²

Not all traders were vicious characters, but all traders were in business to make



American beaver.

get his victim so intoxicated that he could no longer drive a good bargain. The Indian becoming more and more greedy for liquor, would yield all he possessed for an additional cup or two. The voracious trader, not satisfied with selling his alcohol at a profit of many thousand per cent, would now begin to cheat in quantity. As he filled the little cup which was the standard of measure, he would thrust in his big thumb and diminish its capacity by one-third. Sometimes he would substitute another cup with the bottom thickened by running tallow until it was a third full. He would also dilute the liquor until, as the Indian's senses became more and more befogged, he could treat him to water pure and simple. In all this outrageous imposition, by which the Indian was robbed of his goods, it must be confessed that the tricks of the trader had

money and, if his rivals stooped to evil deeds in order to undermine his influence, the "high-minded" trader usually managed to overcome his scruples and adopt similar tactics. This was simply good business. It is plain that in this wild scramble there would be many casualties. Through shrewd management a few fortunes were made, but it was a losing game for the rank and file. Most were lucky if all they lost was their original investment, for a substantial number were swallowed up in the wilderness, never to be heard from again; perchance the victims of Indian arrows, rattler's fangs, bear's claws, or the passions of their own lawless companions.

From St. Louis the traders regularly conducted expeditions into the interior, sometimes for a distance of two thousand miles. The freight consisted of equipment and sup-

plies for the trappers, and trade goods for the Indians. A typical inventory would include gunpowder, lead molds, blankets, colored cloth, rifles, trade muskets, axes, traps, knives, rings, beads, bridles, spurs, ribbons, cooking utensils, flints, looking-glasses, tacks, bracelets, tobacco, salt and rum. On the return trip the principal cargo—if the expedition were a success—consisted of beaver pelts, buffalo robes, and other products of the hunt.

Methods of transportation were adapted to the topography of the land and the resources of the trader. River craft were mainly relied upon in the valley of the Missouri—large keelboats, variously propelled upstream by poles, oars, sails or by 20 to 40 men pulling alongshore; flat-bot-

tom mackinaws for downstream navigation, depending on the current; and the romantic and picturesque steamboat. The bullboat was a favorite craft on shallow streams like the Platte. It was made of green or undried buffalo hides, stretched over a frame of willows, birch, or other flexible wood, and assumed the shape of a huge basket. In spite of its light draft, which enabled it to float up to two tons of cargo, the bullboat was vulnerable to snags and sandbars. The fur-trapper's canoe used on smaller streams was a "dug-out," fashioned from the trunk of a cottonwood, which capsized with irritating frequency.

Except in the Missouri River country, overland expeditions were the rule. In the



A trading post in the wilderness.



Fort Laramie in 1837 (Courtesy, Mrs. Clyde Porter, Kansas City, Mo.)

earlier years pack trains were used exclusively, but later these were augmented by wagons as the trails became more firmly established. The first wagons to reach the mountains were those of the Smith-Jackson-Sublette fur-trading expedition of 1830, which exploited the rich Jackson Hole country. These went by way of the Platte route, past Scotts Bluff, along a trail later called the Oregon Trail. Mules were the favorite beasts of burden, for they were well adapted to rough country, and could carry enormous loads; though it must be assumed that, true to their instincts, they would never lose an opportunity to assert their mulishness. And the verbal lashings administered to these beasts by the impatient trappers were masterpieces of colorful invective. Horses, rather than mules, were used on individual forays, or by groups whose missions required speed and comfort rather than durability. The typical trapper had two horses, one to accommodate himself and one to carry all his worldly goods. Not only because of their survival value, but because they were the outward symbol of his dignity, he counted his noble steeds among his choicest possessions and would sooner part with his favorite wife than with his meanest horse.

The fur trade was facilitated by a loose system of forts or trading posts strategically located in Indian country, usually at stream junctions; but these served as well the purpose of protection against the Indians. The forts were usually in the shape of a rectangle, with wooden palisades and two diagonally placed bastions or blockhouses. These posts reflected every degree of prosperity and pretension, from the small ramshackle forts of the "free traders" to the

rather elaborate establishments of the American Fur Company, such as Fort Union and Fort Pierre on the upper Missouri. The dominant post along the great central route to the mountains was Fort William, established in 1834 at the junction of the Platte and the Laramie. This was made of logs, but it was subsequently replaced by an adobe structure christened Fort John which, in 1849, became the United States Army post of Fort Laramie.³

One important departure from the fixity of the trading post system was the annual "rendezvous," an institution peculiar to the Rocky Mountain region, which was inaugurated by Gen. William H. Ashley in 1825. For a period of 15 years the trappers and Indians foregathered by previous arrangement in some mountain valley. Here they met the trader's caravan from the settlements. The Indian was rapidly stripped of his valuables in exchange for baubles of little worth, while the white trapper exchanged his hard-won furs for the equipment for another year's hunt, plus cash or credit which was rapidly dissipated in an orgy of gambling, feasting, and drunkenness. The Indians were likewise given to these vices. After a few days or weeks of this bedlam the Indians returned to their tribes, the trappers returned to their accustomed haunts, and the traders returned to the settlements, their caravans laden with valuable furs.

In the literature of the fur trade there is no term more common than "cache." It frequently became necessary for a party to abandon its furs or other property temporarily, to be retrieved later. This was "cached" or hidden, usually in a deep pit, every trace of which must be concealed

from the noses of wolves and coyotes, and the sharp eyes of their rivals or their Indian enemies. There were other terms of special interest. A common unit of trade was a "plus" or one first-class beaver skin. A

of a "bourgeois," while a field expedition would be supervised by a "partisan" or "captain." A cut below these was the "clerk," a sort of lieutenant or wheelhorse, who handled most of the bothersome details



Loading mackinaws on the upper Missouri.

standard "pack" of furs contained 10 buffalo robes, 14 bear, 80 beaver, or 600 muskrat skins.

With respect to the personnel of the fur trade, at the apex of the hierarchy were the owners and operators of the business, as a rule safely ensconced in St. Louis who, with a minimum of physical effort and danger, managed to reap all the profits. Operations at a trading post were in charge

of the business. In the lower brackets of the fraternity were the company trappers or "engages," and the "free trappers" who were technically unaffiliated but who were, in the last analysis, dependent upon the company traders for their reward. Finally, there were the "voyageurs" and "pork-eaters," who performed the common labor of the fur trade. The upper strata of the traders and trappers often were of Scotch, Irish, or pioneer Vir-

ginia and Kentucky stock. Many of the trappers and most of the low hired hands were French Canadian, Mexicans, or mixed breeds.

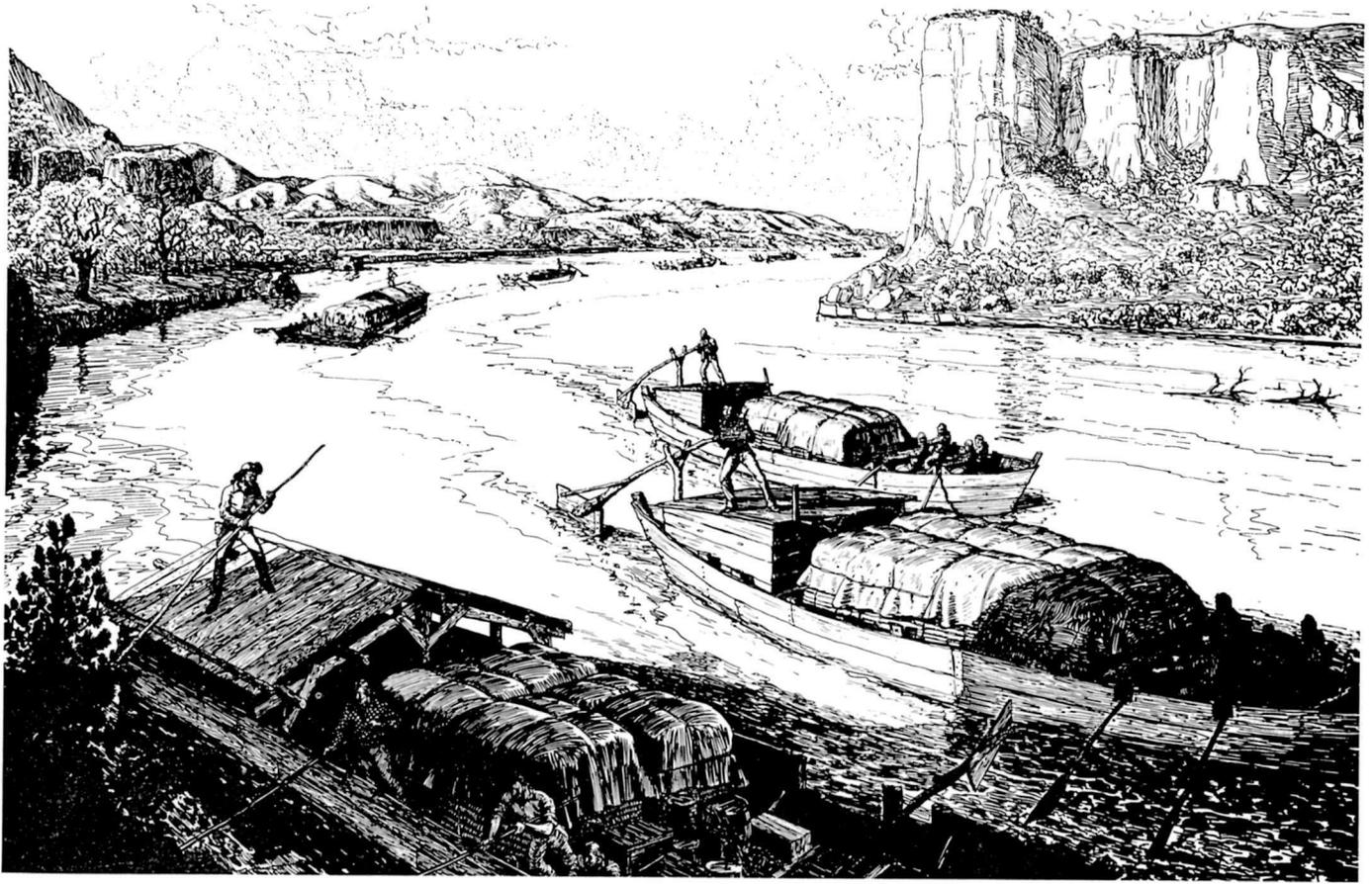
The most picturesque character in this motley assemblage was the free trapper, whose common habitat was the Upper Green River, the Yellowstone Plateau, Jackson Hole and other prime trapping centers of the Rocky Mountains. He labored mightily throughout most of the year to ensure for himself a meager profit, then would squander his last penny, even plunge recklessly into debt, in order to gratify some trifling whim or vanity, or outdo a friend in generosity. He was commonly taciturn and gloomy, yet on occasion he could become boisterous and convivial, indulge in a gargantuan salty humor, or vie with his fellows in bragging of his beaver catch or his latest Blackfoot scalp. He was sometimes cruel in his indifference to scenes of violence and death, yet this trait was a necessary accompaniment to the paramount and merciless demands of self-preservation.

The appearance of the trapper was in conformity with his singular character. His frame was gaunt and sinewy from his constant strenuous exertions, his face dark and swarthy from exposure to all the seasons, his eyes hawklike and glittering. His hair dangled to his shoulders, usually coarse and unkempt; but if a dusky forest maiden perchance became the object of his affections these dank tresses might be carefully combed out, plaited neatly and tied up in multi-colored ribbons. From necessity as well as romantic inclination, he closely imitated the wild attire of the Indians, from whom, indeed, he was frequently indistinguishable. His clothes were mainly of buckskin, frayed at the seams, which he fashioned himself

during his enforced winter idleness. The hunting-shirt, which sometimes fell to his knees, might be of leather, coarse blue cotton, or ruffled calico of bright dyes. Below were leggings or pantaloons, reaching a pair of moccasins. Headgear consisted of a low-crowned hat of felt, a coonskin cap, or a bandanna handkerchief adjusted like a turban. All of this picturesque raiment usually was profusely ornamented with gay embroidery, beadwork, porcupine quills, hawk's bells, and feathers. From his shoulder was slung his powder horn, bullet mold, and a pouch for lead balls, together with flint and steel for firemaking. A belt or sash at the waist might hold a pipe, butcher-knife, hatchet, pistols, whetstone and mending materials. Add to this a cluster of traps and culinary utensils, a carotte of tobacco, a blanket of scarlet or a buffalo robe, a flintlock gun studded with brass tacks, and a spirited horse, streaked with vermilion and caparisoned with eagle plumes—there you have the picture of a "mountain man," ready for all kinds of trouble, a free spirit, veritable lord of the wilderness.

Though he occasionally warred upon, married, or otherwise consorted with the aborigines, and made marathon exploring treks in quest of virgin streams, and played ungentlemanly tricks upon his rivals, and otherwise indulged in pleasurable feats and escapades, the principal business of the trapper was to trap. Except in midwinter, when there was nought to do but sulk in his rawhide tepee, the trapper was mainly engaged in pitting his wits against the wily beaver.

This intelligent soft-furred animal, which caused more historical rumpus than any other North American native, except the Indian, averages 30 to 40 pounds in



Transporting furs down the Missouri River to St. Louis.

weight, has webbed hind feet for swimming, chisel-like teeth for felling trees, and a flat, scaly tail which serves as a rudder and water-slapping danger signal. The beaver colony consists of a narrow dam built of sticks, brush, mud and small stones. Behind this refuge are the lodges, little islands made of similar material, sometimes eight to ten feet across at the base. Entrance is effected by means of underwater tunnels, while the main living chamber is above water level, and here the happy family subsists on bark and twigs, safe from all their enemies—except man.

Although signs of the beavers' presence, such as dams, canals and freshly felled aspen or cottonwood, may be readily observed, yet the trapper must be crafty in setting his traps as the animals are not easily caught. The trap is set under water in the vicinity of the dams and lodges, sometimes in the beaver runways connecting shore with deep water, sometimes in the spillways which the trapper deliberately creates by a break in the dam.

"The trapper's aim is to have the beaver drown itself as quickly as possible when caught; and that it shall not reach a resting place above the water where it can gnaw its foot off and go free. To this end several devices are employed, the large dry float-stick being perhaps commonest; this is so lodged that the beaver cannot well get ashore or to shallow water. A better, but more elaborate practice, requiring more skill and patience, is to slip the trap chain ring on a smooth pole, the end of which is thrust aslant into deep water, and the other end left free, or weighted to a high bank.

"To anchor a trap just right, in each special location of the stream, is one of the

rare arts of the trapper; but a still rarer art is to keep down foreign scents, such as odors from his own moccasins or hands, and bait a trap set at random, in a stream where there is beaver sign. A most pungent and potent bait, or "medicine" as the trappers call it, comes from the beaver's own body. The long pod-like sex (scent) glands are removed carefully and carried along with the trapper. A stick is dipped into the beaver castor and planted over or near the hidden trap; the inquisitive beaver is attracted by the odor, and betrayed to its doom."⁴

The old trappers took great pains to remove the hide properly. It was stripped off after a slit had been made down the belly and along the inner part of each leg. The green hides were taken into a temporary camp and there placed on willow hoops to be stretched and cured before packing. When the hides were dry they were made into compact bundles by means of a crude press. At the trading post or rendezvous the furs were counted, purchased, and rebaled into larger packs by more efficient screws or wedge presses. The beaver was then on its way to becoming a hat to adorn the head of some Eastern or European gentleman, who was doubtless blissfully ignorant of the rampant skullduggery, the sweat and bloodshed, which his hat represented.

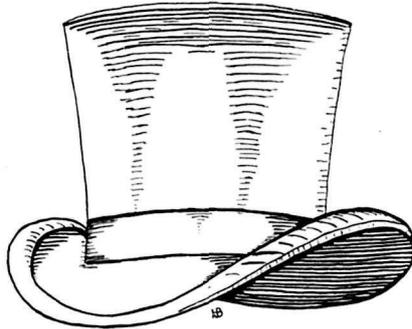
The Rocky Mountain traders and trappers were a unique and heroic breed of men. Outstanding among these were Jim Bridger, Kit Carson and Thomas Fitzpatrick, an immortal trio of discoverers and Indian fighters who lived to become pilots of the covered wagon migrations; John Colter, Robert Stuart, Donald McKenzie

and Jedediah Smith, among the foremost explorers of Western America; and William Sublette and Robert Campbell, founders of Fort Laramie. The fur traders are well remembered in the geography of the West. Scotts Bluff on the Oregon Trail, a memorial to the tragedy of Hiram Scott;⁵ the giant Bonneville Dam, a tribute to the romantic Captain B. L. E. Bonneville; Jackson Hole, the beautiful mountain valley beloved by the mysterious David E. Jackson; the Tetons, Yellowstone, Big Horn, Platte, Cache la Poudre, Astoria, Ogden—the names of these and dozens of other mountain ranges, rivers and cities are associated with the rugged fur traders, the true trailblazers of the Old West.

Although they have left their imprint on the map of the United States, the wild mountain men are forever gone, with all their harshness, their whimsies and their crude primitive ways. Gone also are most of the dense primitive forests and lush

meadows, the great herds of elk, antelope and buffalo, withered and blasted by the advancing tide of civilization. However, a number of the surviving primitive areas are included in certain of the national parks and national monuments. In Jackson Hole National Monument, Grand Teton National Park, Yellowstone National Park, and Rocky Mountain National Park, all of these formerly happy hunting grounds of the fur trapper, the American people can still find a deep appreciation of Nature, her moods and her unfathomable depths of spirit; and can harken to the call to live ruggedly, to discard flabbiness and stuffiness for the lean, hard body, to keep the senses keen, alert, observant, and the brain flexible and geared to action.

At least in these great areas, preserved for public benefit and enjoyment, the primitive natural surroundings that appealed to the sturdy spirit of the fur trapper should remain forever.



NOTE: The original of the illustration on page 2 is to be found in the Jenny Lake museum at Grand Teton National Park. The original of the illustration on page 8 is in the collection of A. J. Miller drawings owned by Mrs. Clyde Porter, Kansas City, Missouri. Other illustrations are reproduced from exhibits in the museum at Scotts Bluff National Monument.

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2. Chittenden, *op. cit.*, p. 24.
3. Fort Laramie was abandoned by the Government in 1890, but in 1938 the State of Wyoming turned this historic site back to the United States. The present Fort Laramie National Monument, under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service, includes the site of old Fort John.
4. Alter, *op. cit.*, p. 42.
5. Scotts Bluff, a famous Oregon Trail landmark in Western Nebraska, was proclaimed a national monument in 1919. Hiram Scott, en route to St. Louis with a fur cargo in 1828, fell ill and was abandoned by his subordinates to die near the foot of this bluff.

