



THE MUSEUM GAZETTE

The Mountainmen of the American West

“TO Enterprising Young Men. THE subscriber wishes to engage ONE HUNDRED MEN, to ascend the river Missouri 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, (who will ascend with, and command the party) or to the subscriber at St. Louis.” Wm. H. Ashley

With the publication of this advertisement in the St. Louis newspapers on February 13, 1822, a whole new era of American westward expansion was begun. Those who answered Ashley’s call became the first of the legendary mountainmen. Over the succeeding two decades, these persistent trappers opened much of the American West to the rest of the world.

Although significant, Ashley’s trading venture was not the first in the West. For over 200 years, Spanish, French, and British traders had been operating along the Missouri River and the Columbia River region of the Pacific Northwest. After the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, Americans became active in the lucrative business of trading with the western Indians. They sought furs, particularly beaver, whose underfur made the finest felt hats in the world. American Indians wanted knives, guns, colorful wool blankets, and decorative glass beads in exchange.

St. Louis was founded as a fur trading post in 1764 by French entrepreneurs. By 1809, the city had become the hub of the western trade and the headquarters for the Missouri Fur Company, the

American Fur Company, and the St. Louis Fur Company.

About 100 men answered Ashley’s advertisement in the spring of 1822. Andrew Henry, Ashley’s partner, led the men to the Rocky Mountains where they built a fort for the winter. The following spring, the men started out in groups of three or four to set their traps.

Most trapping was done in the fall or spring. During the summer, the beaver’s fur was thin and not worth trapping. Winter was too cold for both the beaver and the trapper. Each trapper carried six traps that weighed five pounds each. Once a likely stream or pond was found, the trapper would “make his set.” He waded into the stream and set a trap along the bank in about four inches of water. The five-foot trap chain was anchored with a dead branch so an end would be directly over the trap. Castoreum, a secretion obtained from previously trapped beaver, was poured on the twig as bait. When the curious beaver smelled the stick with castoreum, it placed its feet on the stream bed, snapping the hidden trap below the water. As soon as it was caught, the beaver automatically dived for the safety of deep water, dragging the heavy trap down with it. When the beaver wished to come up for air, the trap held it down, eventually drowning it. The trap and beaver remained anchored to the shore by the five-foot length of chain. Traps were checked at least once a day, more often if it was a good spot. The beaver pelts were removed from the animal, stretched, dried and bundled.

This was how the mountainman made his living. They often worked alone, or in small groups, and became accustomed, and in some cases preferred, fending for themselves without the benefits and constraints of civilization. According to Rufus Sage in his journal *Rocky Mountain Life*, a mountaineer was “his own manufacturer, tailor, shoemaker and butcher; and, fully accoutered and supplied with ammunition in a good game country, he can always feed and cloth himself.”

Such a solitary existence could be dangerous for the mountainmen. Hazards abounded and only one in four actually survived their time in the mountains. If he survived Ephraim (the trapper’s name for the grizzly bear) and unfriendly Indians, there were always the very real possibilities of starving or freezing to death.

The highlight of the trapper’s year was the rendezvous. It began as a way for William Ashley to get supplies to his men after a system of forts was found to be impractical. Ashley bought goods in St. Louis and sent them out along the Platte River Road (later part of the Oregon Trail) to pre-designated sites in the Rockies, where trappers from throughout the mountains converged to exchange their year’s catch of furs for the provisions necessary to stay another year in the mountains. Often the prices on the St. Louis goods were inflated 200 to 1000 percent by the time they reached the mountains.

Although intended as a business meeting, the rendezvous soon became the social event of the year for the mountainmen, “the trappers holiday.” Trappers and Indians came together to trade, drink, fight, and exchange information. The trappers bought gunpowder, lead, blankets, tobacco, knives, traps and beads from the St. Louis merchants. If they wanted to “wet their dry” they might also get a kettle of trade whiskey, a concoction of watered-down alcohol, hot peppers, molasses, tobacco and gunpowder. They would meet both friends and competitors in shooting contests, wrestling matches, horse races and games of chance. They told stories of their adventures during the previous year, often with a great deal of embellishment. In fact, it was considered an honor if a man could out-lie his

companions.

The rendezvous lasted as long as the supplies held out, then each group moved on. The Indians headed back for their home territories, the trappers began the fall hunt, and the traders returned to St. Louis with their rich cargo of furs.

Despite several very successful years, the fur trade was in trouble by the late 1830s. Fashions changed, and silk hats were preferred over beaver felt. The price of beaver fell just as they became harder to find in the Rockies. By 1840 the beaver was practically extinct, its fur worthless, and the mountainmen began to look for other work. Those that did not return to the settlements scouted for the army or for the increasing number of settlers heading for the Oregon territory.

With the end of the fur trade, the mountainman faded from the frontier. Although their time in the west was short, their impact was great. In their relentless search for untapped sources of beaver, they succeeded in opening the mountains for many who followed. Their knowledge of the Rocky Mountain West helped the wave of explorers and settlers who followed them to map and settle it. In addition, the economic impact of the fur trade on the West, particularly on St. Louis, was tremendous. But perhaps the most enduring legacy of the mountainmen was the image they created. They were free and independent, like the land they lived in, and their exploits were the stuff of legend.

