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THE WORKING MAN'S RENDEZVOUS

by

Tameron Gentry Raines Williams

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTERS OF ARTS

in

History

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2022

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ABSTRACT

The Working Man's Rendezvous

by

Tameron Gentry Raines Williams, Masters of Arts

Utah State University, 2022

Major Professor: Dr. Colleen O'Neill
Department: History

In 1822, William Henry Ashley entered into the American fur business with a goal to consolidate the work of fur trapping within his company diverging from the manner of business used in the North American trade since its inception in the seventeenth century. In doing so, he brought west the mountain men who would remain trapping and trading furs for nearly twenty years. Even before these men had left the trade, their stories were captured and reproduced for the public imagination—first in dime novels and later in historical work. Given time, the mountain men archetype barely resembled the lives most trappers led.

This thesis, through the understanding of past historiographical stereotypes and their development, seeks to introduce a new perspective on the mountain man as a working man through three distinct studies. First the thesis explores the conditions of trappers' work, which saw men trapping in arduous conditions for meager wages they then spent on supplies for the next season at the annual rendezvous. Next, it develops the relationships shared between American trappers and the Indigenous peoples of the Rocky Mountains and the many myths that surround their contributions. Finally, this work examines the lives of Black fur trappers whose

positions and history have long lacked clarity. Each chapter seeks to break down the myths surrounding the Rocky Mountain fur trade while focusing on the labor of the tradesmen who called the mountains home for nearly two decades.

(148 Pages)

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

The Working Man's Rendezvous

Tameron Gentry Raines Williams

The mountain men—fur traders of the Rocky Mountain trade between 1822-1840—are prominent in the history of the American West. Their adventures and exploits have been told and retold as their legend grew as did the myth surrounding their lives. This thesis seeks to dismantle that myth through focused study on the conditions of fur trapping work, the interactions between mountain men and Indigenous tribes of the region, and the role of lesser-known Black fur trappers.

DEDICATION

To my grandfather—Stanley Anthony Fawcett—who inspired a love of the West and its history.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank the members of my committee for their time and patience. To my advisor, Dr. Colleen O'Neill, whose guidance saw this thesis grow from a scattered outline and muddled draft pages into a completed work. To John Barton and his abundant passion for the fur trade which gave this project its first spark and saw it through to the end. To Dr. Seth Archer, who gave guidance and encouragement on research and writing throughout the project, and Dr. Keri Holt who offered a broader perspective and insight as the thesis came together. I would like to further extend a thank you to Dennis Northcott, Associate Archivist at the Missouri Historical Society, for his help in accessing and copying hundreds of pages of various journals, letters, and other records that formed the bulk of my primary research.

I must give special thanks to my wonderful partner, Natalie Athalye, whose endless reassurance, and support helped me finish this thesis. Her patience allowed me the time I needed to research and write through difficult times. I also thank my mother, S. Brenna Fawcett, who gave countless hours to read through my writing and offer her advice to improve it. I also must thank my dear friend Preston LeSage, who gave me his time and his encouragement at every opportunity. Finally, I must thank my grandparents, Stanley and Francine Fawcett, for nurturing my curiosity and inspiring a love of learning that will last a lifetime. Thank you all.

Tameron Gentry Raines Williams

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INTRODUCTION

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 the subscriber, at St. Louis.

Wm. H. Ashley¹

On February 13th, 1822, William Henry Ashley sent out a call for hire. It offered no specific details on the task or pay, nor the conditions of which respondents might face up the river. Nonetheless, a workforce quickly came together with men of all sorts and with all kinds of reasons. In Ashley's proposal, they saw opportunity. Granted license to trade with Indigenous bands, the men ascended the Missouri.² There, amidst the mountains, lay a promise of wealth and adventure. Although they numbered as many as one hundred and eighty, together, they were "Ashley's Hundred."³ In legend, they are the mountain men, a group said to be unlike any other assembled in the history of the United States.

The rendezvous was the mountain man's fairground, and the mountains a place of great adventure. The lives of mountain men seemed to be punctuated by revelry in the face of daunting conditions. Yet, the mountain man's life was a difficult one. Most men who ventured to the mountains never found their fortune. These individuals often remain nameless, even in firsthand accounts of the era, while the scholarship has often revisited the stories of the titans of the

¹ William Henry Ashley, "To Enterprising Young Men," *Missouri Gazette & Public Advertiser*, February 13, 1822.

² Dale Morgan, *The West of William H. Ashley*, (Denver, CO: Old West Publishing Co, 1964), 2.

³ Morgan, *The West of William H. Ashley*, 6.

industry. In this old and fabled era, there are stories yet to tell. Stories of laborers in the early nineteenth century fur trade abound and have been overlooked for too long. This thesis does not intend to offer a history of the trade in its entirety. Those works already exist, written and rewritten a few times over. Instead, the study that follows offers a supplementary view of the trade and the men who kept it functioning.

Clad in buckskin, rifles in hand, the mountain men became a cornerstone in the history of the American West. When first outlining the fur trade business, historian Hiram Chittenden characterized its workers as such:

It was the roving trader and the solitary trapper who first sought out these inhospitable wilds, traced the streams to their sources, scaled the mountain passes, and explored a boundless expanse of territory where the foot of the white man had never trodden before. The Far West became a field of romantic adventure and developed a class of men who loved the wandering career of the native inhabitant rather than the toilsome lot of the industrious colonist.⁴

This popular image described the mountain man as a unique character among the pantheon of the West's greatest figures. A heroic embodiment of American ideals of individualism, self-reliance, and romantic freedom, the early trapper charted the West for all those who followed in his footsteps.⁵ Legend depicts his life as being free from toilsome work, allowing him to explore his extraordinary environment of high mountain peaks and river valleys populated by the object of their fortune—the beaver.

With the first pelts traded to Jacques Cartier in 1534, the large semiaquatic rodent, made popular for its excellent felting qualities, became used in hat making. In the more than two centuries that followed, the desire for fur drove European traders to adopt a simple trading

⁴ Hiram Martin Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West, vol. 1*, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), xxviii.

⁵ S. Matthew Despain, "The Mountain Man in American History and Culture," (University of Oklahoma, 2000), vi.

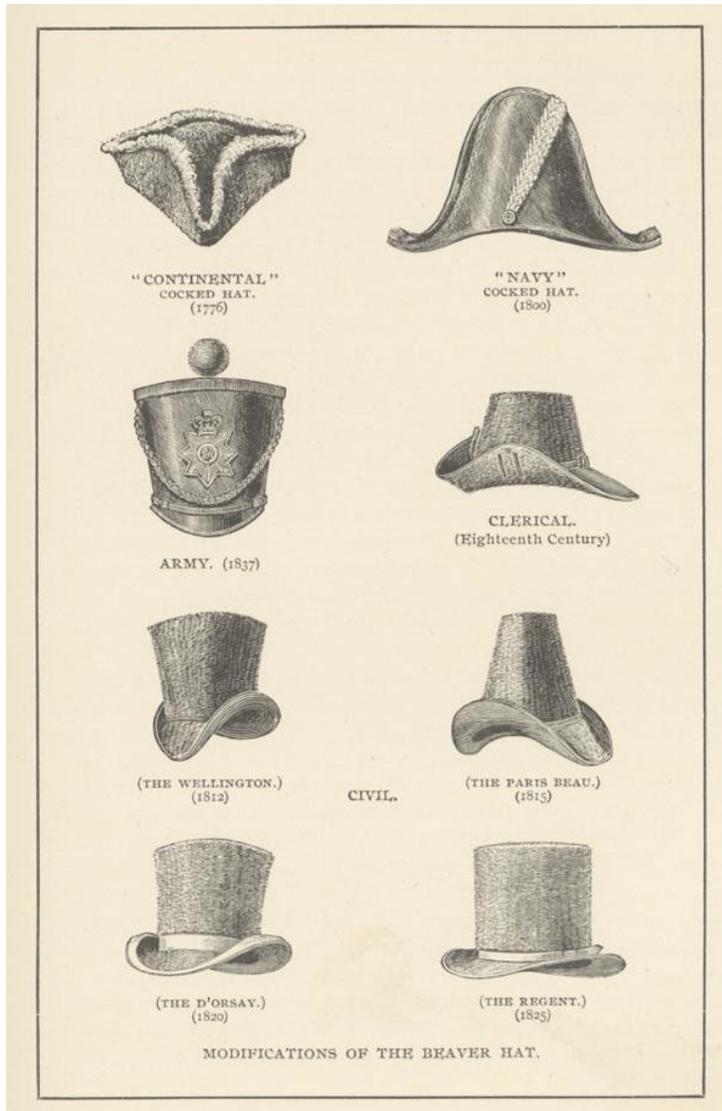


Figure 1. "Modifications of the Beaver hat, illustration of eight different styles of beaver hats," *Castorologia, Or, The History and Traditions of the Canadian Beaver*, Horace T. Martin, Montréal, W. Drysdale; Londres, E. Stanford, 1892.

system, including trading posts, in their trading. In the process, they established broad trading networks across North America.⁶ William Ashley explicitly rejected this system of trade.

In spite of early setbacks, in 1824 the company found the object of their desire—a plethora of beaver along the Green River valley. When the Spring hunt concluded, two of

system. Indigenous hunters trapped the beaver, prepared the hide, and transported it to centralized trading posts along the major rivers where they exchanged pelts for trade goods. European trade goods ranging from cookware and arms, to beads and other fineries, travelled along the rivers to the posts. By similar means, furs returned upriver to make their way to Europe. This ubiquitous trading system, pioneered and used by the French at their forts in New France, was coined the "French system." Fur companies from the Hudson Bay Company to the

Missouri Fur Company used this

⁶ Ann M. Carlos and Frank D. Lewis, *Commerce by a Frozen Sea: Native Americans and the European Fur Trade*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 5-7. Harold Adams Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada: an introduction to Canadian Economic History*, (United Kingdom: University of Toronto Press, 1999), chapter 2.

Ashley's men, James Clyman and Thomas Fitzpatrick, returned the furs to St. Louis. His fortune found, Ashley conceived a plan. He arranged a caravan to bring to his men anything they might need to resupply. As a result, they could remain in the mountains hunting nearly year-round. When the caravan arrived, the men met at the rendezvous to exchange furs for pay. Most companies paid the trappers using credit or directly in supplies. With the completion of their seasons' work, the rendezvous offered the men the one moment in the year they might pause to celebrate a successful year's hunt. Thus, the Rocky Mountain trading system was born.⁷ The rendezvous changed much in the operation of the business of fur trading.⁸ It eliminated the need for trading posts and river highways and allowed the companies' employees to remain in the mountains, at work, year-round, which in theory, eliminated the need for Indigenous trade partners. Within his trading company, Ashley had centralized the institution of fur trading for the first time in two centuries.

The Rocky Mountain fur trading system brought hundreds of men into the West during the years between 1825-40. While a few found jobs as horse wranglers or camp keepers, most men were trappers. These men fell into three distinct categories of work. First were the company men. The overwhelming majority of all mountain men were those outfitted by the company. The company owned all of these men's possessions, including his gun and his traps. In this arrangement, he incurred a debt to the company which he paid at the end of the hunting season with furs. Any excess profit was his pay, and any remaining debt kept him in the mountains working. Next, were the contract workers, called *engagés*. The company supplied and salaried

⁷ Fred R. Gowans, *Rocky Mountain Rendezvous: A History of the Fur Trade Rendezvous, 1825-1840*, (Layton, UT: Gibbs Smith, 1976), 12-13.

⁸ The yearly rendezvous, the centerpiece of the Rocky Mountain trade, is detailed at length in Gowans, *Rocky Mountain Rendezvous*; and David Wishart, *The Fur Trade of the American West, 1807-1840*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), chapters 4 and 5.

these contract employees. All the furs they procured belonged to the company. However, the *engagés* owned their equipment and incurred fewer risks in bad hunting years. The third category of worker, the free trapper, has come to shape perception of the trade on the whole in the historical documentation of the period. This trapper owed no allegiance to any company. Any furs he trapped were his to sell to whom he pleased. The free trappers could work alone, but more often, they formed smaller brigades of other free trappers. Although it rarely occurred, a company man no longer indebted to the company could become a free trapper. Even so, free trappers, like the company men, often traded pelts with the same companies who supplied them for their hunting season. Despite the appearance of entrepreneurial freedom, the free trapper completely relied on these companies to pay them their credit at the end of the hunting season.⁹

Generations of fur trade scholars have held the mountain man in high esteem, especially the free trapper. Even as the "new western history" movement took to task other western characters, the "roving trader" received no correction.¹⁰ Still influenced by the early theories of western history that reduced the region to a frontier line pushed west by pioneers, the history of the rendezvous era has hardly wavered from its narrative of men who came into the trade and made a name for themselves.¹¹ This narrative has exacerbated stereotypes of the mountain man's

⁹ Wishart, *The Fur Trade of the American West*, 125; and Greg Goldman, *The Mountain Men*, (US: The History Channel, 1999), 15:25-16:05

¹⁰ This is not to say that no study exists that explores the mountain man's image. Scholars have, at times, explored the mountain man's character, although those analyses have themselves played a role in the mountain man's extensive myth. See, for instance, William H. Goetzmann, "The Mountain Man as Jacksonian Man," *American Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (1963); or Harvey Lewis Carter and Marcia Carpenter Spencer, "Stereotypes of the Mountain Man," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (1975), two studies discussed in more detail later. For broader studies of the historical development of the mountain man's mythos, see Despain, "The Mountain Man in American History and Culture."

¹¹ The frontier thesis or Turner thesis is Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 argument for a development of American culture shaped by the pushing of the boundary of the West. Challenges of Turner's thesis have existed by those seeing his thesis as overly mythic and exclusionary towards Native peoples. Nonetheless, the frontier as a concept remains alive in the annals of public consciousness and scholarship, albeit with more nuance, allowing new perspectives. Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," (Madison: WI State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1894.)

legend, including the proliferation of the free trapper as a representative for all trappers. The effect is a history that neglects the contributions of the fur traders working majority. The Rocky Mountain trade had disrupted established trade networks in centralizing the fur trading systems within the company. As Indigenous trade partners navigated a new landscape of shifting power, the mountain men did much the same. Many a man's fur trapping career was determined by his ability to adapt to the Indigenous world. Whether through the use of intermediaries, many of whom were African American trappers who spoke the language, or through adoption of friendly trade policies for allied nations, their success depended on their ability to establish good relationships with Indigenous peoples. Regardless, the sidelining and wiping out of the cultural memory of these individuals in the study of the trade has proliferated. The stories of legends dominate in their place.

Thousands worked their lives away in service of the trade's demand for pelts. Men from all walks of life joined those who were already living in the West seeking the fortunes possible in the fur trade. Of these men, few have found a place in historical memory. Their names—William H. Ashley, Kit Carson, Jedediah Smith, Jim Bridger, Robert Campbell, Hugh Glass—are etched into history among the intrepid mountain men who opened the West and “discovered” its splendor from the river valleys to snowy mountain heights.¹² Their story is a collective representation of the mountain men's lived experience. Although difficult, they ultimately achieved entrepreneurial success. Seldom have historians questioned the mountain man's actions or purpose in the trade. Therein, similar to other western opportunists, fur traders failed left and right. Death and financial ruin lurked underneath the promises of wealth.

¹² The role of the mountain men as “discoverers” is inexorably linked to their role as the first Americans to go west and remain. Their knowledge, built through good relationships with Indigenous bands first, and years of experience second, is discussed in further detail later.

Confronting stereotypes developed as early as the 1830's, the first chapter explores the mythos of the fur tradesmen through four distinct periods of historiography. Developing the mountain man as a symbol, the chapter seeks to introduce the man, not as a hero but as a working man in an emerging capitalist system beyond his control. The second chapter tells the stories of African American men in the trade, specifically examining the lives of Edward Rose, Moses Harris, and James Beckwourth. Through these men, we might better understand the unique labor roles of Black trappers who exemplify the variety of work that mountain men engaged in the developing West. Finally, the third chapter confronts the one-dimensional portrayal of the Native world in the Rocky Mountain era of the trade. Fur trade company journals offer a glimpse into violent interactions and the daily contributions of Indigenous trade partners. The omission of Indigenous people's influence is a short coming in the works of past scholarship in a place where tribes set the terms of engagement in the West.

Together, these studies put forward a new perspective of the Rocky Mountain fur trade period in which laborers toiled away in the service of business behemoths. Telling their story is part of something far bigger—a greater recontextualization of a business empire long examined, but never fully recognized for the individuals and the intricacies involved in accomplishing its success. This work is a first step toward exploring the legend of the mountain men, how they lived and worked in a changing West, and the legacy their work left behind. It is an attempt to understand the legacy of a simple newspaper advertisement that changed the course of history.

CHAPTER ONE

“Past Scenes of Adventure and Exploit”: The West and the Mountain Men¹³

Most fur trappers have been lost to time—their names, faces, and journeys left out of the historical record on account of illiteracy, early death, and lost records. Even so, the fur trade of the west is hardly known for forgetting. Instead, the Rocky Mountain fur trade has made legends of ordinary men. The story is often much the same whether in the East or the West. Seeking economic opportunity, a man would risk life and limb to journey out into the ‘unknown’ and provide for the fur company as a trader. Along the way, this man took part in something far greater than furs. He, wittingly or not, pushed forward the boundaries of empire. For many years, the fur trader acted as the go between for his nation and the Native peoples who did the hunting and made the fur trade possible. All the while, he did the work of a colonialist charting the land, staking claims, and making alliances with his trading partners. These early inroads established the roots European empires grew from in North America. In the years that followed, the rivers carried goods and people through to the interior of North America building communities around fur trade outposts. From these communities, the building of empires transpired, changing the character of the lands in the West. Fur was the driving force behind this growth.¹⁴

The fur trader of the East relied entirely on Native American trappers and the constant flow of trade goods into Native communities. In the early 1820s, a new venture changed the methods of doing things in the trade. Responding to their call for hire, Henry and Ashley’s fur company attracted all sorts. Much like the French trade, these men were unexceptional except for

¹³ Washington Irving, *Adventures of Captain Bonneville*, (New Rochelle, NY: The Knickerbocker Press, 1895), 18.

¹⁴ For further reading on the relationship between the fur trade and the growth of empires see Eric Jay Dolin, *Fur, Fortune, and Empire: The Epic History of the Fur Trade in America*, (NY and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010); or Anne F. Hyde, *Empires, Nations, and Families: A History of the North American West, 1800-1860*, (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 2012).

their willingness to risk their life for pay. Inside the fur trading company, a motley band of misfits and vagabonds took shape setting out to take part in the West's first recorded boom economy. The fur trade offered a promise of wealth and adventure no man could find in the East, but it came with risks. Not every man returned home. Some seemed to lack any place to call home in the first place.¹⁵ They provided the company fur through trapping throughout the year pushing the boundaries of the United States all the while. In return for their adventures, some became permanent fixtures in the history of the West, living on in its history as well as its folklore.

That legend of the far-west, a seemingly endless frontier of expedition and expansion, has been the domain of the mythic man. He was a capable Anglo-American hero, entrepreneurial at heart, he ventured into the great unknown to become an ally of the hostile Indian tribes whom he would surpass—choosing the solitary West over civilized society for the remainder of his days.¹⁶ Unpacking this mythos is essential to understanding the image that has romanticized the difficult work the trapper engaged in for minimal wages. The reality of the actual mountain man was far from the heroic icon the culture created in its legends. The fantasy has enraptured many who find in the mountain man an ideal American hero, typifying the qualities of individualism, manliness,

¹⁵ Inherent in the fur traders work was the necessity to be willing to leave your life behind for one in the Rocky Mountains. American fur trappers such as James Clyman moved from place to place taking up whatever work came his way long before Ashley's call for hire came along. Others like Jim Bridger were orphaned and lacked the roots of family to keep them in Missouri. Thomas Fitzpatrick had long ago left home for work on the rivers, with Ashley's call for hire coming at an opportune moment to travel further still. The fur trader as a vagabond is reflected in the backgrounds of these men, and many more individuals discussed in the chapters to follow.

¹⁶ This depiction of the mountain man is drawn from historiographical texts and popular media. Timothy Flint, *The Shoshonee Valley: A Romance*, (Cincinnati: E.H. Flint, 1830); Irving, *Captain Bonneville*; Hiram Martin Chittenden's, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West, vol. 1*; Bernard DeVoto, *Across the Wide Missouri*, (Cambridge, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1947); Don Berry's, *A Majority of Scoundrels*, (Sausalito, CA: Comstock Editions, 1961); Robert Cleland's, *This Reckless Breed of Men*, (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950); William H. Goetzmann's, "Mountain Man as Jacksonian Man"; and Eric J. Dolin's, *Fur, Fortune, and Empire*, chapters 11-12. These sources, among others, will all be discussed in further detail throughout this chapter.

resourcefulness, enterprise—and especially, freedom of spirit.¹⁷ The first of the great western heroes, the mountain man, had cast a great shadow over his own history. Although, he did not do it alone. The popular hero of late-1800s dime store novelists, the fur trapper had long been caught up in a nationalist zeitgeist surrounding expansion and the independence, opportunity, and enterprise that came with it.¹⁸ First introduced in Timothy Flint’s 1830 novel, *The Shoshonee Valley: A Romance*, as “strange, fearless, and adamantine men”, the mountain man was a self-made man, wise beyond his years, more accomplished than any adversary he came to face.¹⁹ Of his character Flint writes:

Renouncing society, casting off fear, and all the common impulses and affections of our nature—seeing nothing but mountains, trees, rocks, and game, and finding in their own ingenuity, their knife, gun and traps, all the Divinity, of which their stern nature and condition taught them the necessity, either for subsistence or protection, they became almost as inaccessible to passions and wants, and as sufficient to themselves, as the trees, or the rocks with which they were conversant; they came among the Shoshonee more adroit, and more capable of endurance.²⁰

The mountain man, still laboring in the mountains at this time, was already being adopted into the cultural lexicon.

No single author might have stronger claim to the popularization of the mountain man hero than Washington Irving. Famous for his short stories, and commissioned by John Jacob Astor of the American Fur Company, Irving accepted the opportunity to write about the fur trade. The resulting work was *Astoria*.²¹ Published in 1836, it was ostensibly a history of Astor’s efforts in Oregon. Working on this effort sparked Irving’s interest in this “region of romance.” This work was quickly followed by *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville*—another history on

¹⁷ Despain, “The Mountain Man in American History and Culture,” vi.

¹⁸ Despain, “The Mountain Man in American History and Culture,” 6-10.

¹⁹ Flint, *Shoshonee Valley*, 20. For further elaborations on this see Despain, 6-8.

²⁰ Flint, *Shoshonee Valley*, 20.

²¹ Washington Irving, *Astoria*, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma, 1964), xix-xxiii.

western expansion and the trade.²² Irving's sensibilities infused the trappers and the region itself with an inherent romanticism. In *Captain Bonneville*, Irving writes of his mountain man hero: "We find [him], accordingly, hardy, lithe, vigorous, and active; extravagant in word, in thought, and deed; heedless of hard ship; daring of danger; prodigal of the present, and thoughtless of the future."²³ The Irving mountain man was an adventurer through and through. Accustomed to "the wild freedom of savage life," he was always "look[ing] forward to a renewal of past scenes of adventure and exploit." Bonneville's role in this grand display was that of a "worthy captain" setting out into "the boundless West" for a taste of excitement and riches of his own.²⁴ He was a model of the pioneer spirit that was pushing America westward.

Irving was not alone in his adulation of the trade and its men. It was a time of expansion, and the mountain men were well suited to adaptation as symbols of Manifest Destiny. In the pages of dime novels, the mountain man appears to say, "westward ho!" *The Fighting Trapper, or, Kit Carson to the Rescue* introduces the mountain men thusly: "The only whites who trod this region were the daring trappers and hunters ... an eccentric and fearless spirit might be found who braved the perils of the wilderness alone, and journeyed hundreds of miles with his peltries and, with no companion but his horse and faithful rifle." He portrayed the West of the mountain man as "one romantic ocean of verdure and roses, and the air was heavy with the perfumes of millions of wild flowers that bloomed and lived in the genial sunshine. For mile after mile the ground was covered with the thick velvet of green, in which the most varied animal life grew in myriads."²⁵ Kit Carson, in this landscape, becomes a charming gentleman hero. His "natural

²² Irving, *Adventures of Captain Bonneville*, 18.

²³ Irving, *Adventures of Captain Bonneville*, 11-12.

²⁴ Irving, *Adventures of Captain Bonneville*, 18-19.

²⁵ J.F.C. Adams, *The Fighting Trapper; or, Kit Carson to the Rescue*, (NY: The New York Dime Library, 1901), 1-2.

gallantry” as unquestionable as his skill. Carson assumes the role of “Indian fighter,” “with a knife in either hand, leaping in every direction with an agility that was astonishing, and unequalled by the others.” Carson slays his enemies to, as the title suggests, save the day before bidding adieu.²⁶ Western folklore built his image. Through celebration, his name became synonymous with the West. Kit Carson’s legend begins with his labor in the mountains, but it quickly grows beyond him.²⁷

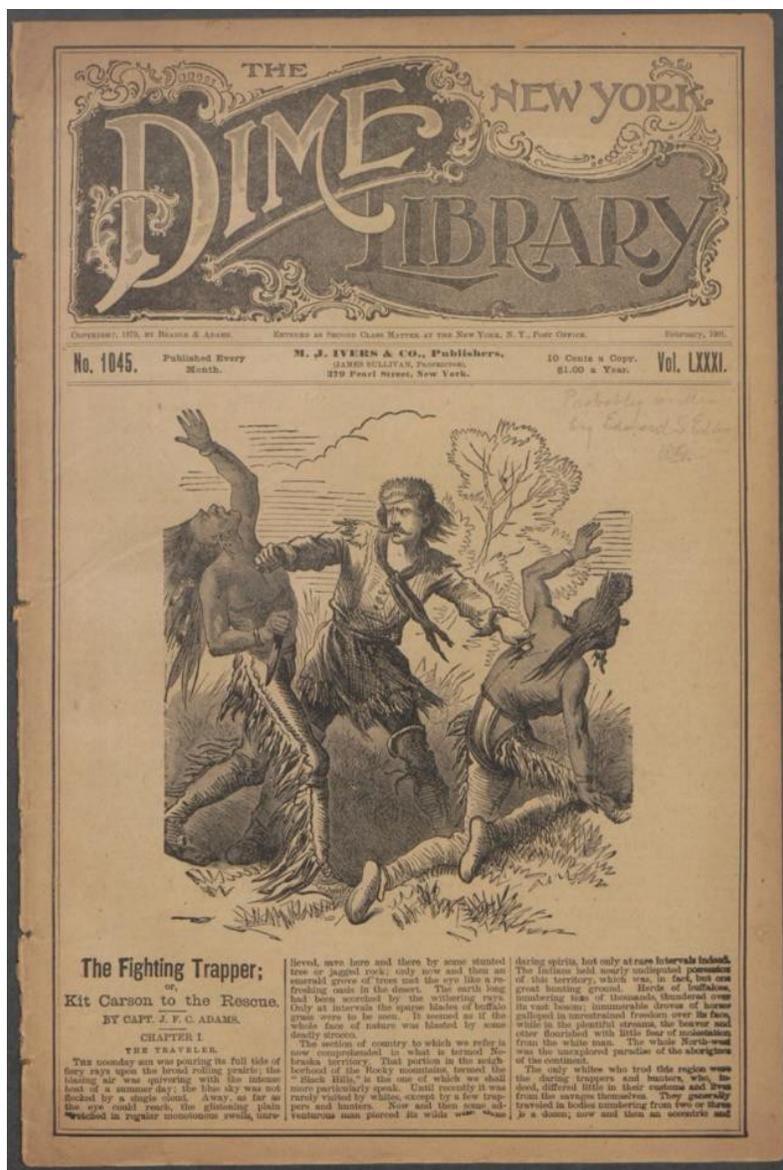


Figure 2. Front Cover of “The fighting trapper, or, Kit Carson to the rescue.” Courtesy of the Johanssen Collection. Rare Books and Special Collections, Northern Illinois University.

These first histories of the Rocky Mountain trade had a lasting appeal. They glorified the first “white” men to set out West in a time where expansion was a national aim. In their wake they revealed the adaptability of the mountain man to be the hero of America’s great westward

²⁶ Adams, *The Fighting Trapper; or, Kit Carson to the Rescue*, 26-28.

²⁷ Carson’s stories are shared through John C. Fremont’s writings which typify the Irving mountain man with strength, wit, and masculine charm. The writings of Fremont were key in growing the profile of Kit Carson as a legend of the West. For his depictions of Carson see, John Charles Frémont, *The Daring Adventures of Kit Carson and Frémont*, (New York, NY: Hurst and Co., 1885).

push. As the years passed by, the trade gone away with them, the mountain men's place in the literature became that of a romantic hero. His skill undeniable, his character exceptional, he made a compelling protagonist for the early stories of the West. By the 1900s, popularized for an audience longing for symbols, the idealistic stories of the frontier entirely swallowed up the reality of the mountain man. Nonetheless, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the mountain man had a new appeal as a symbol of a bygone era in American history.

The Hero of the Old West

In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner posited the Western frontier had met its end. With the frontier conquered, he went to work memorializing it. Turner positioned the mountain man as an advocate of the American civilization. The fur trade legends, namely Kit Carson, were the tie between the earliest days of exploration west and Turner's own belief at the exceptional nature of America's relationship with the frontier.²⁸ Together, this formalized the bond between American values and the mountain man. A myth, the frontier thesis is an alluring notion of American exceptionalism which gave American identity form. The thesis enraptured historians who aimed to build on romantic ideals of their national identity and shared past. Turnerian thought on the West became the standard as historians set out to tell the story of the American trade.

First published in 1902, Hiram Chittenden's two-volume epic *The American Fur Trade of the Far West* set the standard for fur trade history in the twentieth century. Following in the wake of Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, Chittenden sought to write a definitive history of the trade. Chittenden frames the fur trade as American progress pushing westward with the fur

²⁸ Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," 7-20.

trades' "colorful characters" at its core. This undertaking was a daunting task considering the scattered or derelict nature of the trade's documents that Chittenden spent years piecing together to form an established narrative.²⁹ That narrative spans from 1807 to 1843, offering an introduction to the business, its impacts on the region, and the men who drove the trade whom he refers to as the "trapping fraternity." Chittenden identified no one "distinct type" of man who entered this fraternity. Instead, he proposed various subgroups who made up the trade: the Bourgeois and Partisan, the hunter and trapper, camp keepers, free trappers, the voyager, the American hunter, artisans, and the *manguers de lard*.³⁰ The partisan, for instance, was the leader of the rendezvous period. His role was as the head of the expedition. He commanded the business and was a skilled mountaineer in his own right. He knew the geography and Indigenous parties of the regions where his men hunted.³¹ Meanwhile, the (company) trappers were skilled expedition members who "adapted" to whatever duty befell them. They trapped the "obscure and inaccessible" using knowledge of the region to avoid "danger."³² Further still, the free trappers, a "sort of partisan," were known as trappers of "higher repute." They were able to sustain themselves and even a small brigade of their own using their knowledge of the land to secure pelts for sale to the highest bidder which funded their vices.³³

Despite differences in their work, Chittenden brings about a cohesive alliance between these groups to accomplish the difficult tasks of the trade. While distinct in title, wages, and

²⁹ Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol. 1, xiii-xiv.

³⁰ *Manguers de lard* translated as "pork eaters." Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol. 1, 53.

³¹ Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol. 1, 53-55

³² Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol. 1, 55-56. As is common in the early, mid, and late fur trade history, the dangers of Indigenous populations are prevalent. These groups, especially in early works like Chittenden's are discussed in blanket terms with little regard to culture, tribal affiliation, or sovereignty. This is a sticking point in the historiography, long overdue for correction, a point we will revisit later on.

³³ Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol. 1, 56-57. The free trapper was distinguished in his day by the lack of a specific contract with any one company. He was a freelancer able to sell his pelts to the highest bidder.

individual responsibility, they were universally skilled trappers who used a knowledge of the land to succeed in a difficult business. Thus, Chittenden introduces the singular mountain man archetype. Through years in the mountains, “the habit of seclusion, seemed to grow upon the individual and he came to love the life in spite of its solitude, its hardships, and its privations.” As for a trapper’s loyalty to the company, longstanding as the economic anchor of the trade, it is the free trapper who is recognized for his vanity, extravagance, proclivity for liquor and gambling, and above all, his “ruffian spirit.” As unflattering as this portrait may be, it plays a significant role in conveying the uncivil image of the mountain man. Delineating between the company man and the free trapper, Chittenden considers the company trapper a “versatile genius” able to adapt quickly to meet the need of the company. However, he lacks the agency and reputation of the free trapper.³⁴ His labor “arduous and dangerous,” his wages “very small” in consideration, his character was alternatively defined by his ability to get along with extraordinarily little subsistence.³⁵ Meanwhile, the free trapper, who earned more on his pelts, is a man who squandered his profits “at the first rendezvous or post which they reached.” The free trapper, although a minority in the trade, became the cultural iconic image of the mountain man, as “the most interesting and enviable class in the mountains.” Despite the free trappers’ vices, he embodied the independence of the trade “bound to no company, free to go where [he] pleased.”³⁶ The fur laborer, a versatile worker quick to adapt to dangerous circumstances, was either a man to be commended for surviving on extraordinarily little or critiqued for his ability to properly supply himself. Chittenden finds “romance” in the mountain men’s lives, despite very dark conditions when “placed along-side of the laboring man’s condition of [1902].” Chittenden’s

³⁴ Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol. 1, 55-56.

³⁵ Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol. 1, 61-62.

³⁶ Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol. 1, 55-57.

mountain man is a heroic figure for his subsistence, for his adaptability, and for his toil.

“Oblivious” of the wealth that lay beneath his feet in land and natural resources, he labored for hopes of wealth in fur.³⁷

Within these volumes, Chittenden established the foundation from which all future Rocky Mountain fur trade studies, including this one, arise. It was within his defined constraints that his immediate successors worked, developing on the biographical and narrative structures found in Chittenden’s work. What had once been the domain of pulp fiction had become fertile ground for historians to do good work. Nonetheless, their work was not without its faults. In development of the mountain men, historians worked within the romantic archetypes set by Chittenden’s trapping fraternity rather than the dark conditions of their toil. With each biography, historians wrote about their typically titular hero with adulation. Leroy Hafen’s 1931 biography of Thomas Fitzpatrick, *Broken Hand*, remembers him as “the man of the hour,” so deeply involved in the trade and the West at large that no other man was more representative of his time.³⁸ This kind of talk is not uncommon as most biographers are dedicated to their man. Therefore, in remembering these men, most seek out the qualities that set their subject apart: Jim Bridger became “Mister Rocky Mountains,” a man of innate direction, courage, and discoverer of the Great Salt Lake.³⁹ Hugh Glass, one of the “great western characters,” had a story to tell that lasted through the ages. His resolve alone kept him in fur trade legend.⁴⁰ Kit Carson’s history was “the story of the West.”⁴¹ Kit Carson’s eventual status as a free trapper was a testament to his “skill and

³⁷ Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol. 1, 63

³⁸ Leroy R. Hafen, *Broken Hand*, (Lincoln, NE and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1973), 1-2, 171.

³⁹ J. Cecil Alter, *Jim Bridger*, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma, 1962), viii. 51, 69.

⁴⁰ John Myers Myers, *Saga of Hugh Glass*, (Lincoln, NE and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), 4-5, 173-185.

⁴¹ M. Morgan Estergreen, *Kit Carson*, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), vii. Kit Carson is without doubt one of the largest legends of the West, let alone the fur trade. His history has been written and rewritten a few

knowledge” in the trade after just a few short years working within it.⁴² Despite well-executed histories, these men are rarely multifaceted. Instead, they are each a perfect encapsulation of their time. Some of the most successful names of their age were molded to embody the archetype as a whole, becoming the heroes of their time no matter who they were in reality.⁴³

While Chittenden certainly shifted the narrative of the mountain man away from the romantic and into the real, the man maintained a sense of fiction. Some of this was by design as authors adopted the factual histories of the early twentieth century into their own romantic images of the Old West. The star of Bernard DeVoto’s 1947 Pulitzer Prize winning *Across the Wide Missouri*, thought 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 [there].”⁴⁴ DeVoto’s book, a history of the trade at its peak and decline from 1830-38, captures a specific kind of drama at the core of the trade. Written as drama, DeVoto provides his reader with a “dramatis personae” before throwing the reader into a history in progress.⁴⁵ DeVoto’s mountain men are cast as “scoundrels” happy to drink their worries away at the rendezvous before returning to the mountains to risk life and limb for low wages. At the rendezvous, “they drank together, they sang, they laughed, they whooped;

times over. His legend built early in his life and maintained by devotees to the Western symbol, Kit is the one man to have seen more honest portrayal in recent historical work with Thelma S. Guild’s *Kit Carson: A Pattern for Heroes* in particular offering a breakdown of western mythos. Similarly, for a more recent study examining authors’ relationships with history and their subjects see Susan Lee Johnson’s *Writing Kit Carson*. Thelma S. Guild, *Kit Carson: A Pattern for Heroes*, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1984); and Susan Lee Johnson, *Writing Kit Carson: Fallen Heroes in a Changing West*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

⁴² Estergreen, *Kit Carson*, 49.

⁴³ There are countless other fur trade biographies published between 1902 and 1962 which echo these same trends. Where some, such as Stanley Vestal’s *Jim Bridger Mountain Man* ebb further into folklore becoming fictional rather than factual, others maintain a rigid history hitting the same beats as those that have proceeded them. Stanley Vestal, *Jim Bridger Mountain Man*, (New York City, NY: William Morrow & Company, 1946). As J. Cecil Alter states in Bridger’s biography, “any western roundup without Hugh Glass and the bear would be like a zoo without an elephant.” Alter, *Jim Bridger*, 43. These stories are distinct but tied together by a greater web of folklore and fact.

⁴⁴ DeVoto, *Across the Wide Missouri*, 44.

⁴⁵ DeVoto, *Across the Wide Missouri*, xxv.

they tried to outbrag and outlie each other in stories of their adventures and achievements.” Here DeVoto also centers the free trapper as the “cock of the walk”, the men of “highest crest” among the mountain men for they commanded the higher wages and further skill.⁴⁶ In these two points, DeVoto’s mountain man furthers myths of the free trappers prominence, and the mountain men’s rewards from his labor in whiskey, Indigenous women, adventure, and a rare chance at wealth.⁴⁷ As a piece of popular history for mass market consumption, *Across the Wide Missouri* succeeds by bolstering the romantic image firmly established in 19th century pulp fiction.

In 1961, expanding on the popular history of the mountain men, Don Berry published the unambiguously titled *A Majority of Scoundrels*. Aimed at a mass market audience, this history focuses on the men who made the trade. Trapping, Berry emphasizes, “called—and calls—for considerable skill and knowledge.” Successful trappers were those who made their money and were able to continue trapping year after year.⁴⁸ The fur trapper’s ability determined his status among his peers. The free trapper was the pinnacle of status for he was reliant entirely on his own ability. Again, as Chittenden frames him, the free trapper was closely tied to vice, maintaining a reliance on alcohol, women, and entertainment.⁴⁹ Loyal to the company, the mountain man is, in particular, distinguished from the same men who ran the business. Whereas Andrew Henry—Ashley’s business partner and friend—was the early mountain man, “experienced and knowledgeable” in the ways of the mountains; William Henry Ashley, the employer, was a businessman who was well-spoken with slight frame who is instead defined by

⁴⁶ DeVoto, *Across the Wide Missouri*, 97.

⁴⁷ This portrait is derived from DeVoto, *Across the Wide Missouri*, 97-108. Although DeVoto’s history is far closer to popular history in tone, he gets most of his details right, although with little footnoting to follow in the cases where he does not. His history is broad, suffering from many of the prejudices of DeVoto’s time. Regardless, as to his characterizations, they are consistent with other scholars.

⁴⁸ Berry, *A Majority of Scoundrels*, 21.

⁴⁹ Berry, *A Majority of Scoundrels*, 13–18.

his “excellent name, fine political connections and, above all [being] a person of credit.”⁵⁰ To be a mountain man in the mid-1900’s came with benefits. He was a hero of his time—daring, bold, and experienced without equal measure. It also came with caveats as he was a man removed from society who had his share of vices to make it through the years. This portrayal echoes the general sentiment of the early to mid-1900’s historiographical texts to drive the study of the fur trade with the desire to present the first mountaineers as invincible figures in the West.

Robert Cleland, likewise, draws the mountain man as a hero with few counterparts. In his 1950 book, *This Reckless Breed of Men*, they are center stage to a “bold drama of exploration and expansion.” For Cleland, the mountain man “affected the destiny of a nation; he changed the future of a continent; he bequeathed to later generations of Americans a tradition of heroic exploration comparable to the seaman of Elizabeth or the conquistadors of Spain.” As the grand heroes of empire, the mountain men involved themselves in great danger in service to the fur company and country. Then, without ceremony or successor, they disappeared from the scene.⁵¹ It was the higher status free trappers and the capable executives of the companies who carried on the trade and defined its character.⁵² While Cleland briefly challenges Chittenden’s geographic assumptions of the trade’s operation, there is little other challenge to Chittenden’s mountain man archetype. Even as the scoundrel, the mountain man is elevated to a revered place in history. The Rocky Mountain fur trade cemented the history as one of great tradesmen making great discoveries that opened the West.

⁵⁰ Berry, *A Majority of Scoundrels*, 7.

⁵¹ Cleland, *This Reckless Breed of Men*, 5-7

⁵² Cleland, *This Reckless Breed of Men*, 16-18.

The Plain Republican Citizen of The Jacksonian Era

By the 1960s, historian William H. Goetzmann argued that no other figure has been less understood than the mountain man despite being one of the most studied icons in American history. Where those earlier authors had written about the mountain man as a “literary and romantic,” if often quaint, hero of the past, Goetzman found the mountain man not dissimilar from the common man of his time. He was a “plain republican citizen of the Jacksonian era.” Although, they were not without a distinctive appearance of “greasy buckskins, coonskin cap and Indian finery,” and an odor he dramatized as the “the habitual failure to bathe between one yearly rendezvous and the next.”⁵³ In his characterization, Goetzmann draws the mountain man as entrepreneurial at heart, chasing the money wherever it was to be made—even if that meant leaving the fur trade behind. In this, Goetzmann underscores the “alternative callings” of the fur trader and the habit of the lucky or wise fur traders of making their fortune and stepping aside into managerial roles.⁵⁴

While apt in his critiques of past arguments, it is difficult to say whether Goetzmann’s reassessment has resolved the larger questions about mountain men’s identities. In addressing what he saw as shortcomings of the mountain man’s character, Goetzmann dismisses the man’s labor. To Goetzmann, if the history did not approach the man as a hero, he was instead stripped of agency made to be “docile and obedient slave of the company” and its surely heroic leadership.⁵⁵ The Jacksonian mountain man’s entrepreneurial nature spurned the mountain man’s working-class nature. Goetzmann’s mountain man was an elaboration of the free trappers whose success, elevated and self-driven, determined his future. In alternative callings, Goetzmann does

⁵³ Goetzmann, “The Mountain Man as Jacksonian Man,” 402-405.

⁵⁴ Goetzmann, “The Mountain Man as Jacksonian Man,” 406-410.

⁵⁵ Goetzmann, “The Mountain Man as Jacksonian Man,” 404.

not find the wages of the company inadequate. Rather, he finds that the mountain man was “hardly the simple-minded primitive that mythology had made him out to be.” The Jacksonian mountain man was an objectivist mountain man who drove himself forward with his own desires of wealth and happiness. With the trapper defined as an entrepreneur, it left the company trapper who was primarily an employee out in the cold. In this, Goetzmann’s mountain man does not wholly reject the characterization of the free trapper from past historiography. Rather, it disposes of his vices and instead elevates him as an economically savvy man of enterprise.⁵⁶

Goetzmann’s economic analysis broadened the history of the fur trade, but it too fed the myths. The mountain man, already a figure of American mythology, now was also a symbol of bold entrepreneurial intent during the height of the Cold War in which capitalism dominated as a central tenet of U.S. policy and culture. If anything, the addition of economic motive simply added a notch in the mountain men’s already impressive belt. Although apt, Goetzmann’s reading focuses entirely on economic motives of the individual while also deriding the company’s influence over mountain men while they were in the trade. Where Goetzman found an obedient servant of the company pacified by the yearly rendezvous, he left behind a revised Jacksonian man in need of further scholarship.

Standing out among that scholarship is Fred R. Gowans’ seminal 1975 work on the rendezvous, *Rocky Mountain Rendezvous*. For Gowans, the mountain men’s stories at rendezvous are best told by the mountain men themselves. That is to say, his work consists of impeccably sourced accounts of the men at the rendezvous. While this allows for a great deal of revelry to shine through without further exaggeration, it also allows for a renewed focus on the

⁵⁶ Goetzmann, “The Mountain Man as Jacksonian Man,” 410-415.

business of the trade as Gowans makes note of supplies, costs, and profits throughout. Lending to the economic contexts offered by Goetzmann, Gowans places the rendezvous at the core of the trade economically and socially. The rendezvous' inevitable impact, nonetheless, was "only to be remembered and to be glorified by writers and historians" as more than the yearly exchange of "furry banknotes for supplies."⁵⁷ Nonetheless, given the subject matter, Gowans' work acts less as a new standard of the mountain man's ethos and more of a statement on the rendezvous as events that went beyond whiskey and games. While the festivities are present, Gowans instead dwells on the specifics of rendezvous location, prices, supplies brought, and furs carried out. His analysis is concerned not with the character of the man but the character of the rendezvous itself. As for the character of the men who were there, Doug Erikson addresses such in the book's preface thusly: "he represents the dream that people can seek out their destiny through hard work, a little luck, and an abundance of natural resources. We nostalgically look to him to find what many of us seek in our increasingly frenzied world: scenic beauty, individualism, adventure, and freedom."⁵⁸ The mountain man as a symbol is much more powerful than he ever was as a man.

The mood had shifted, with the door now open to revisions of his character allowing authors to remember the mountain man in ways which admitted that he was a man of folklore as much as fact. Author Win Blevins notes in his preliminary publication, published in 1973, that skepticism on the mountain man has grown, if only because people were "learning to be skeptical about the myth of the West."⁵⁹ That myth is being debunked, with some justice."⁶⁰ In Blevins' own efforts to debunk the myth, he seeks to offer a humanistic approach to the

⁵⁷ Gowans, *Rocky Mountain Rendezvous*, 198.

⁵⁸ Gowans, *Rocky Mountain Rendezvous*, 11.

⁵⁹ Goetzmann, "The Mountain Man as Jacksonian Man," 404.

⁶⁰ Winfred Blevins, *Give Your Heart to the Hawks*, (Los Angeles, CA: Nash Publishing, 1973), 4.

mountain men. Blevins offers the reader an opportunity to see clearly discussed historical narratives through the eyes of the mountain men. In recounting the story of Hugh Glass' mauling by a bear as narrative, Blevins infuses his subjects with thoughts of home, of worry and fear, of greed and loss. In the process, he infuses the long-standing mountain man's tradition of storytelling into his narrative.⁶¹

Prescient in his thinking, Goetzmann's effort to deconstruct the mountain man came shortly before the "new western history" movement emerged in full. Nevertheless, by the mid-1960s major publications in Rocky Mountain fur trade studies had begun their decline. Alson J. Smith, in the preface to his 1965 work *Men Against the Mountains*, shares the sentiment that "it is not likely that the future will bring any great extension of our knowledge of the fur trade"; but put simply that as 1965 began, the next era of fur trade studies would choose instead to look closer at that which had already been said.⁶² In the scholarship to follow, Goetzmann's dismissal of heroism and decadence has been accepted, if not universally so.⁶³ Further scholarship could still epitomize the romantic stereotypes, but overwhelmingly, historians chose to explore the significant expeditions, systems of trade, and stories of individual men. Broader studies, such as Robert Utley's 1997 monograph *A Life Wild and Perilous*, which seeks to address the role the mountain men played in the opening of the West, closed this era of study as one that sought to

⁶¹ Blevins, *Give Your Heart to the Hawks*, 29-49. Blevins' account of Glass' survival, like all other chapters of *Give Your Heart to the Hawks*, is fictionalized, giving his subjects dialogue, thought, and actions unverifiable.

⁶² Alson J. Smith, *Men Against the Mountains: Jedediah Smith and the South West Expedition of 1826-1829*, (New York City, NY: The John Day Company, 1965), 10-11.

⁶³ Resistance to the Goetzmann model came most notably from Historians Harvey Lewis Carter and Marcia Carpenter Spencer who dismissed his perspective as illegitimate. Instead, they placed the mountain man in the context of Homeric epics, his heroism tied uniquely to his personal combat skill and wayfaring. In what became a public spat between these historians, Goetzmann defended his model and Carter refused to concede to the growing revisions on the mountain man's character. What Carter and Spencer get right is that in defending the mountain man's stereotypes as a part of heroic folklore they place the mountain man's importance not in what he had done, but what he was thought to be. The folkloric mountain man was much more valuable as a character of study than the historical one. Carter and Spencer, "Stereotypes of the Mountain Man," 17-32.

close gaps in the historiography in specific niches. Regardless of subject matter, they hew closer to Goetzmann's revision on the mountain man's character. Although still revered for his skill, no longer was the mountain man solely exalted for his heroism or condemned for his boisterous conduct at the rendezvous.⁶⁴ Within this new west, the mountain man persisted as a cultural and historical touchstone, even as scholarship on the icon declined.

A Historiographical Legacy

After a century of study, new publications in the American fur trade, and the mountain man, have waned tremendously.⁶⁵ The latest study on the trade, Eric Jay Dolin's *Fur, Fortune, and Empire*, published in 2011 covers the entirety of the North American trade. With such a broad economic focus, this work like so many before it, ends up examining the great men of the times. Fitting within the Jacksonian definitions, Dolin describes his mountain man as an "exceedingly self-reliant and resourceful" type who depended almost entirely on "[his] own initiative."⁶⁶ These attributes, long associated with the free trapper, reinforce the Jacksonian stereotype but do little to expound on the character of the mountain man. Fifty years on from

⁶⁴ This characterization for the era of studies is drawn from Gowans, *Rocky Mountain Rendezvous*, Blevins, *Give Your Heart to the Hawks*, Smith, *Men Against the Mountains*, David J. Weber, *The Taos Trappers: The Fur Trade of the Far Southwest, 1540-1846*, (Norman, OK and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), Wishart, *The Fur Trade of the American West, 1807-1840*, Robert M. Utley, *A Life Wild and Perilous*, (NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1997). Although this selection does not make up the entirety of fur trade work published between 1963 and 1999 it does offer a representative sample of the content from this time period. While some works, such as the 1965 essay collections *Mountain Men & Fur Traders of the Far West* and *Trappers of the Far West*, both edited by Leroy R. Hafen and with later editions featuring an introduction by Harvey L. Carter, continued to offer some heroic celebration most had moved on from older stereotypes. See LeRoy R. Hafen, ed., *Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West*, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982); and LeRoy R. Hafen, ed., *Trappers of the Far West*, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983).

⁶⁵ Although this is not to suggest that the mountain men have disappeared entirely from the pages of historical literature. They can be seen in the pages of Will Bagley, *So Rugged and Mountainous: Blazing the Trails to Oregon and California, 1812-1848*, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010); Anne Hyde's *Empires, Nation, and Families*; and Lloyd Keith and John C. Jackson, *The Fur Trade Gamble: North West Company on the Pacific Slope, 1800-1820*, (Pullman, WA: Washington State University Press, 2016); among other works. Nonetheless, the mountain man entering the twenty first century occupies a minimal role in western scholarship.

⁶⁶ Dolin, *Fur, Fortune, and Empire*, 227.

Goetzmann's revision, little had changed. For generations, self-reliance and economic independence are two assigned traits that the trapper built his reputation upon. Held close by the American identity, they were characteristics that catapulted him to public fame—an extension of the American desire to venerate great men, to make heroes of the extraordinary American, and to celebrate their accomplishments.⁶⁷ Yet, these traits have long played a role in obscuring understanding of the lives mountain men led to earn a wage.

Once suggested as a descendant of “the sons of leatherstocking,” a literary ‘child’ of Natty Bumppo, by historian Henry Nash Smith in his 1950 work *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, the mountain man's place in popular culture has been complicated by mythos.⁶⁸ As historian S. Mathew Despain suggests in his dissertation, “The Mountain Man in American History and Culture,” the character of the mountain man emerged first in the 1830's as a literary figure due to his suitability “for the democratic and expansionist ideals” of his authors. The resulting character, built to serve American identity and culture, was one distinct from Natty Bumppo and other western heroes. In the West, there was a wilderness where the American populace could “forage national identity and self-esteem.” The mountain man was in the right place at the right time to serve as the embodiment of these ideals. His image was used in the popular culture as a symbol. This depiction was not to resemble his actual presence in the mountains, but to serve a national aim. The mountain man was “individual, alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, who conquered whatever stood in his path by his own unique and inherent resources.”⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Dixon Wecter, *Hero in America*, (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1941), 476-482.

⁶⁸ Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 81-89.

⁶⁹ Despain, “The Mountain Man in American History and Culture,” 1-4

The mountain man has always been placed within the confines of a stereotype, whether it be in his role as the romantic individualist, wild man of freedom, or Jacksonian capitalist, Historians fostered popular images in service to the attention those same stereotypes garnered. The mountain man was flattened for mass market appeal in coffee table books on the West, serial publications, documentary films, and museum displays.⁷⁰ Whether in adoration for his role in expanding the reach of the American empire or for the popularity of his image translating itself well into publicity and sales, Despain makes the case that the development of the mountain man character has been tailored for his audience as a marketable man. Nonetheless, audiences, whether in desiring escapism or doing a bit of light reading, accepted the myth wholeheartedly.⁷¹ He was of a different time surely, a bygone era before all the hustle and bustle of economy and settlement. His history made little distinction otherwise.

Within popular culture, in which the mountain man has been an archetypal western protagonist, he features most famously in mass media productions.⁷² *Across the Wide Missouri*, which takes its name from DeVoto's work, sees little genuine history making the transition to the screen. Instead, Clark Gable assumes the role of Flint Mitchell, a generic western hero working in the fur trade. His identity as a mountain man fits the mold of a capable, morally righteous figure. The mountain man, a dullard in the social intricacies of love and society, was brilliant in the ways of the mountains. His mission simple, out for revenge against the deeply stereotypical

⁷⁰ Despain, "The Mountain Man in American History and Culture," 70-79

⁷¹ Despain, "The Mountain Man in American History and Culture," 125-134

⁷² In television, the mountain man has featured a few times although rarely as the central protagonist, outside of *Grizzly Adams*, of course. Most recently shows like *Into the West* offer fictional representations of Jedediah Smith as a trail guide for the series leads. In video gaming, the *Red Dead Redemption* series set in the late 1800's allows players to engage in fur trapping and selling of pelts with some "mountain men" appearing as stereotypical reclusive older men who have rejected society. See Richard Friedenber, *The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams*, (US: Sunn Classic Pictures, 1974); Charles E. Sellier Jr., *The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams*, (US: NBC, 1977-1978); Stephen Spielberg, *Into the West*, (US: TNT, 2005); Rockstar San Diego, *Red Dead Redemption*, (Rockstar Games, PlayStation 3/Xbox 360, 2010); and Rockstar Studios, *Red Dead Redemption II*, (Rockstar Games, PlayStation 4/Xbox One, 2018).

villain, Blackfoot war chief Ironshirt.⁷³ Like its source material, it is an imperfect representation of the time for which it is based. In a way, the movie is an apt metaphor for the ways the stories of the fur trade have echoed around for so long as to have lost meaning over time.

Though never a Hollywood star in the same way the cowboy was, the mountain man remained a figure in popular culture with *The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams* and *Jeremiah Johnson* acting as broadly popular late representations of the mountain man. Both productions of the 1970s, they feature the proto-typical mountain man gone away from society. Although removed from the Rocky Mountain fur trade itself, each protagonist acts as an honorable, brave, and ultimately kind figure whose fundamental abilities to survive in the harsh conditions of the mountains sets him apart.⁷⁴ More recently, *The Revenant* brought the mountain man to life depicting the journey of Hugh Glass in a largely fictionalized account of his fight for survival after being mauled by a grizzly bear. Unlike some past mountain man narratives, fictional or otherwise, this film features in more prominence the relationships traders built with Indigenous peoples beyond marriage. It further develops the mountain man as a complex hero and villain, showing the bleak circumstances most men faced as well as the corruption of the fictionalized John Fitzgerald in his own quest for survival and profit.⁷⁵ These productions offer developing

⁷³ Another film of this era, *The Big Sky*, deals with similar motifs in its heroes, setting, and depictions of Indigenous peoples. Although, it is more even handed with its depictions offering more friendly encounters between trapper and Indigenous individuals while also offering some rivalry between rival fur companies. Howard Hawks, *The Big Sky*, (US: RKO Radio Pictures, 1952).

⁷⁴ Other characterization of the mountain man can be seen in *Blazing Saddles* where the character of Gabby Johnson is depicted as an old vagrant who speaks only in “frontier gibberish,” as well as *The Simpsons* in which the town of Springfield is named for Jedediah Springfield a charlatan trapper who was killed by a bear after ‘discovering’ the land where the town was built. These characterizations reduce the mountain man to his myths most basic elements to serve the comedic nature of the source properties. See Mel Brooks, *Blazing Saddles*, (US: Warner Bros., 1974); and Mike B. Anderson, “Lisa the Iconoclast,” *The Simpsons*, season 7, episode 16 (Fox, 1996).

⁷⁵ As discussed previously, Hugh Glass’ story retold a number of times but never with as many inaccuracies as *The Revenant* brings. The changes made between of Hugh Glass’ life and his fateful encounter in the film’s narrative are numerous, mainly his half-Pawnee son Hawk (and deceased wife) for which the movie centers Glass’ connection to the West and his quest for revenge with are fictitious. Beyond this, the movie’s grand climax which sees Fitzgerald

nuances on the long-established standard, especially as they move away from the standard tale of the Anglo-American versus the dastardly Indian war chief seen in *Across the Wide Missouri* among many other westerns of the 1950s and beyond.

Some Folks Say "He's Up There Still"

In the closing scene of *Jeremiah Johnson*, the titular character, exhausted by his war on the Crow Nation, sees Crow chief Paints-His-Shirt-Red raise his hand in a sign of peace. Johnson pauses and returns the gesture. Finding peace, he returns to his life of solitude as the soundtrack cues a ballad singing "And some folks say, 'He's up there still.'"⁷⁶ It is a quaint ending, embracing the quintessential elements of the mountain man's mythos and contributing still to his folklore—placing him forever in the mountains. Much like the mountain men of the rendezvous era, Johnson became a fable. His ultimate fate, as the ballad sang, was the same as that of the mountain men who preceded him—to remain in the mountains forever part of them and their story.

For two hundred years, scholars have developed and revised upon the past notions of the mountain man. Nonetheless, some legends are enduring. The old mountain man as the hunter in the woods who has been gone away from civilization longer than he was ever truly a part of it will continue to persist. Mythology, by its very nature, does not bend to the will of historians. It ebbs and flows around the cultures that grew it—as fiction as much as fact. However, as historians have celebrated the strength of the mountain man, it seems clear that these monolithic men are a fable in western mythology. As William Goetzmann said all those years ago, no man

kill Andrew Henry and then succumb to an Arikara war party is entirely fictional. Although both actions play into key established behaviors of the mountain man with Indigenous familial ties as well as brutal violence involving, among others, Indigenous peoples. Alejandro G. Iñárritu, *The Revenant*, (US: 20th Century Fox, 2015).

⁷⁶Sydney Pollack, *Jeremiah Johnson*, (US: Warner Bros., 1972).

appears more studied and still less understood than the mountain man. His character was used to underscore values of a young nation in need of a symbol. Each generation of fur trade scholar has added to his archetype. Once the one-dimensional dime novel hero whose gallantry was only emphasized by his role as an “Indian fighter” and killer, he became an intrepid explorer, entrepreneurial success story, wilderness expert, and a cultural icon in popular media. As we return to an examination of the Rocky Mountain fur trade, understanding the mountain man’s literary and scholarly past is just the beginning. After all these years, it is once again time to ask ourselves who the mountain man was in his history.

CHAPTER TWO

“It is No Place for Us Now, if Ever it Was”: The Mountain Men⁷⁷

As the nations of Europe arrived to conquer a “new” world, they found wealth in land, in gold, and of course furs. The beaver hat, a necessary accessory for those in high society drove demand and elevated the beaver pelt as a principal object for those seeking riches in North America.⁷⁸ Over two centuries, countless French and later English traders devoted themselves to establish the French system of trade and build empires that would outlive them. Their work built the giants of industry like the Hudson’s Bay Company and brought in incalculable wealth as beaver pelts were worked into hats and other fineries.⁷⁹ When the Americans first engaged in the trade, their desires were not unlike those empires that had preceded them. The American traders built forts and sought to expand their nation through fur embracing the trade as it had functioned for centuries. Nonetheless, there was money to be made and every system, no matter how established, can be reinvented given the chance. With William Henry Ashley’s rendezvous, the next generation of fur trade worker had set out to make it big in the steadfast business of fur.

The Rocky Mountain fur trading system’s promise was in its workers, the mountain men, who trapped their own furs to trade at a yearly gathering of contemporaries. Their story, an outgrowth of two centuries of tradesmen who worked their lives away in the service of European desires of wealth and fashion. The mountain men, as their history has relayed, were a celebrated testament to the self-reliant gumption that would come to be defined as a uniquely American spirit. Yet, that success story is only that of a select few. So, what of the others? Well, they were

⁷⁷ Frances Fuller Victor, *The River of the West vol 1*, (Missoula, MT: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 1983), vol. 1, 264.

⁷⁸ Dolin, *Fur, Fortune, & Empire*, 13.

For further reading on the relationship between the fur trade and the growth of empires see Eric Jay Dolin’s *Fur, Fortune, and Empire: The Epic History of the Fur Trade in America* or Anne F. Hyde’s *Empires, Nations, and Families*, or Stephen Bown’s *The Company: The Rise and Fall of the Hudson’s Bay Empire*, (Toronto, ON: Canada, 2020).

the mountain men too. Each a worker, toiling away in the rivers in service of the first documented boom economy of the West. If they failed, it is enough to say that at least they had tried. Their lives bent to the will of the companies and the competition that would eventually drive the beaver populations to near extinction. Nonetheless, in their work lies the true mountain man, a working man who opened the West.

From the Trading Post to the Rendezvous

The roots of the North American fur trade trace back to as early as 1534 when Jacques Cartier began trading goods with Native Americans for any items they might have. This included the abundance of fur pelts that they could readily supply. Cartier could not have foreseen the impact of fur trading, specifically the beaver pelt. He noted in his journals that the Natives had nothing worth more than “five sous” to offer.⁸⁰ With the benefit of hindsight, it is apparent that Cartier’s estimation of Native pelts aged poorly as the trade of these pelts became the economic juggernaut of the North American economy by the mid-1600s and drove European exploration and expansion throughout the region.

At its peak, through the 1700s, the North American fur trade worked in the manner of the French system. Simply put, French-Canadian traders, the *coureur des bois*, acted as middlemen bringing trade goods to Natives in exchange for pelts.⁸¹ These pelts were then shipped down river where skilled craftsmen, such as hat makers, made them into fine clothing and other accoutrements. Native Americans’ prowess as trappers made them an obvious ally for European businessmen who were seeking to fill a steady demand back home. For the European upper

⁸⁰ Sou was a colloquialism for one twentieth of a French franc. Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada*, 11.

⁸¹ Translated as “runner of the woods,” these individuals were the working class of this system. Acting as intermediaries these men did not trap as the mountain men did.

classes, no finery existed that rivaled the beaver hat. Indigenous peoples were, by all accounts, the backbone of this system. Their knowledge and expertise combined made them skilled hunters, suppliers, and traders. The trade goods they exchanged for their pelts enhanced their lifestyle. Central to the colonization and transformation of the continent, it is this system of trade which has come to dominate broader fur trade scholarship.⁸²

The French fur trade system's dominance over the years was a testament to its reliability. For every pelt they could acquire, Indigenous hunters secured needed trade goods for their communities. Over the years working within this cycle, Native societies became dependent on the niceties provided for them by the Europeans. Historian Arthur J. Ray defined it as a shift in power. While Indigenous peoples held power as the providers of fur, in practice, they needed these trade goods to supply their livelihoods.⁸³ Historian Calvin Martin suggests that the material wealth at stake in the trade wore away at the relationship between Native Americans and the animals they hunted. Martin observed, "Once this peculiar relationship became corrupted, [...] nothing remained to impede the overkilling of game for the purposes of the trade."⁸⁴ In this

⁸² To this end, historians have devoted a number of monographs to the study of Indigenous participation in the early fur trade systems—particularly with focus on labor and the impact this had on communities. These works often see Native culture and identity transitioned into nominal pieces of the argument with economic impact prioritized. For Ray, the effort to balance economy and human impact is challenging. His seminal work, *Indians in the Fur Trade*, primarily focused on the Native economies of the Assiniboine and Western Cree. Consistently, Ray described cultural change and examined the "adaptive responses" of Natives to the fur trade. In the end, Ray draws a direct correlating line between Native dependence on trade goods to their eventual struggle under government supervision. The ideas of "adaptive responses" fall away, and Native identity is defined in this work as weakness in the face of economic struggle. The focus on the mechanics of the trade leaves Native laborers as necessary cogs in the much larger machine. Arthur J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade: Their Roles as Trappers, Hunters, and Middlemen in the Lands Southwest of Hudson's Bay, 1660-1870*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), xxxiii, 228. For other readings on the French fur trading system see Wishart, *The Fur Trade of the American West*, chapters 2 & 3; Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada*; and Carlos and Lewis, *Commerce by a Frozen Sea*.

⁸³ Ray specifically cites the journal of a tradesman, Daniel Harmon, who wrote that the Cree and Ojibwa bands he was in contact with had "so long accustomed to use European goods, that it would be with difficulty that they could now obtain a livelihood without them." Something he later demonstrates when First Nations peoples are forced onto the reservations unable to let go of the past life of hunting prowess. *Ibid.*, 156; 219.

⁸⁴ Calvin Martin, *Keepers of the Game: Indian-Animal Relationships and the Fur Trade* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978), 113.

perspective, Native people suffered economically and spiritually from the trade relationship with Europeans. Yet, for whatever it is worth, Indigenous hunters maintained control of the flow of fur to the European companies. Indigenous hunters knew the value of their furs and were ready and able to withhold furs in order to get the best price.⁸⁵

As the system grew more efficient through optimized trading routes and the fur factories, it was the continued work of Native hunters to secure the pelts. That is not to suggest that Europeans were entirely removed from the trade. Instead, as historian Sylvia Van Kirk put forth, “in the fur trade, white and Indian met on the most equitable footing that has ever characterized the meeting of "civilized" and "primitive" people. The fur trader did not seek to conquer the Indian, to take his land or to change his basic way of life or beliefs.”⁸⁶ European laborers, many of whom came up from the lower classes, came to rely on Indigenous communities for their own survival—personal and professional. Some, in time, began to practice marriage *à la façon du pays*. These marriages were multifaceted, but inevitably were tied closely to the needs of fur trade society. Indigenous communities’ kinship networks could benefit from closer integration between the networks that brought them goods.⁸⁷ In turn, the Europeans took care to immerse

⁸⁵ Whether one agrees with Ray or Martin’s arguments about the victimization of Indigenous communities, these are at the very least clear perspectives of Native communities impacted by the fur trade. From the earliest efforts to write the western fur trade’s history, historians have failed to offer perspectives on Native American impacts, economically or otherwise. In shaping a history around the mythic mountain man, historians excised the voices of Native Americans.

⁸⁶ Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society in Western Canada, 1670-1870*, (Winnipeg, MB: Watson & Dwyer, 1999), 9.

⁸⁷ Indigenous communities’ integration with outside traders brought them essential goods they could not obtain otherwise, nonetheless these trade routes undermined their independence in the long-term. For an in-depth study see Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade*.

themselves in the kinship networks of the tribes which they worked with for secure trade.⁸⁸ All told, these men acquiesced to Indigenous ways of trading for the benefit of both peoples.

As Native Americans continued to play an independent role in the eastern trade through the eighteenth century, there was a shift in the market—the Americans. American interest in fur trade had been developing before the revolution, but it was only with the nation's establishment that the Americans truly shook up the trade. In 1789, then president, George Washington held grievances about the behaviors of British traders and felt their trading with Indigenous groups was a “destructive influence” that might yet be corrected with regulation of the fur markets. Nonetheless, the British who held stronger relationships with the tribes of the Old Northwest territory effectively cut out the Americans. The thirteen colonies depletion of furs pushed American hunters west across the continent.⁸⁹ American entry into the trade had been slow at first, but the 1803 Louisiana Purchase opened the West with John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company and Manuel Lisa's Missouri Fur Company—a joint venture with Jean Pierre Choteau and William Clark—heading into the mountains to establish their trading posts. Even in these early days of the American trade, competition was fierce. This rivalry was not simply between the American Fur Company and the Missouri Fur Company, but with the well-established French and British companies, such as Hudson's Bay, as well.⁹⁰ Regardless, nothing could prepare the companies for the War of 1812.

⁸⁸ The term “à la façon du pays” translates to “according to the custom of the country.” These marriages left a legacy of mixed-race Metis children in North America. In generations to follow, as the trade continued to dominate the North American economy, these children were swept up in the meeting of “civilized” and “primitive” worlds. Many took up trapping or entered into marriages to further solidify European and Indigenous kinship ties. Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 10-11, 15, 28-29.

⁸⁹ Dolin, *Fur, Fortune, and Empire*, 129-130.

⁹⁰ Dolin, *Fur, Fortune, and Empire*, 178-188, 194-195.

The war disrupted the entire industry. If not simply because the fur trade itself was one of many reasons the war erupted in the first place, then because the networks of trade and the Old Northwest territory itself had gotten caught in the crossfire. The war did innumerable damages to the efforts of fur trade companies, but there was a bright side. At the wars end, the United States government passed new restrictions on foreign traders, barring any foreign fur trader from working in the nation unless an American company employed them. In this, the American Fur Company was able to secure total control over the Old Northwest Territory. Yet, the story was slightly different for the traders of St. Louis. Lacking Astor's resources, the St. Louis traders struggled to bounce back. With the Missouri Fur Company faltering and resources still limited in the wake of the war, there was an opening for a new idea to change the industry.⁹¹

The American traders had, for as long as they had been in the trade, continued the practice of the trading post. In that system, Native trappers kept power within their respective trading networks. Even so, William Henry Ashley saw opportunity to change the system. Ashley's plan, initially, did not entirely threaten the Indigenous trapper's power. He had filed for permits to trade with the tribes on the Missouri River shortly before his first expedition in 1822.⁹² Despite later suggestions to the contrary, it is clear Ashley had planned to work with Indigenous trading partners.⁹³ That said, after hiring over a hundred trappers to work for him, it

⁹¹ Dolin, *Fur, Fortune, and Empire*, 212-215, 221-222.

⁹² Morgan, *The West of William H. Ashley*, 2.

⁹³ In this, a central issue with Rocky Mountain fur trade historiography reveals itself—the disregard of Indigenous trade partners. In Hiram Chittenden's foundational volumes, when Native Americans are discussed, it is always on the periphery of the mountain men. The mountain man, as the champion of American values, brought the “Indian his first lessons in the life that he was yet to lead.” As Chittenden puts forth, through intermingling with Indigenous bands, the mountain man was the most knowledgeable in how to negotiate with this “almost untameable race.” In effect, this gave the mountain man, over “any Indian agent or army officer,” possession over the people and their land—elevating their character as the front line of American civilization. At least, that is, when Indigenous people are present in the narrative. Hiram Martin Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol. 1, xxix.



Figure 3. *Rendezvous*, Alfred Jacob Miller, 1858-1860. Courtesy of the Walters Art Museum.

also is evident that Ashley never planned to fully rely on the old systems. For instance, Ashley had promised the Arikara a trading post on his first expedition upriver in 1822. It was a promise he failed to live up to.⁹⁴ In 1824, after early failures on the rivers, Ashley pivoted to overland routes into the West. Splitting up his men into brigades, he directed each to explore, hunt, and exchange supplies as needed. Ashley's men trapped with remarkable success on the upper Snake River giving way to instruction that they remain in the mountains.⁹⁵ Their work had given Ashley the chance to change the system.

Instructed to regroup on the upper Green River on or before July 10th of 1825 for the collection of their furs, Ashley returned to St. Louis. There he arranged the first of sixteen supply trains. His objective was clear, under his management the mountain men trapped nearly year-

⁹⁴ The fallout of this promise was the disastrous Arikara War will be discussed in chapter three. Roger L. Nichols, "Backdrop for Disaster: Causes of the Arikara War of 1823," *South Dakota History* 14, no. 2 (June 27, 1984), 108.

⁹⁵ David J. Wishart, *The Fur Trade of the American West*, 121-124.

round collecting fur for payment in July of each year. In Ashley's new system, the fur trade could operate entirely within the company. The company provided its workers all their supplies and the workers supplied the company each and every pelt they trapped. As historian Fred R. Gowans suggested, the Rocky Mountain trade system eliminated the necessity of the trading post, and Ashley's Hundred were "not dependent upon the Indian trade" any longer.⁹⁶ The rendezvous shifted the means of business for fur trade entrepreneurs. All the while, British and other American companies exploited both the rendezvous and the trading post deepening divides between the companies as well as their respective Indigenous allies. What followed were sixteen competitive years in the fur markets of the West where every trapper, trader, and intermediary endeavored to get ahead.

The Working Man

On May 27th, 1831, Jedediah Strong Smith, American frontiersman, and fur trader, met his end. Travelling along the Santa Fe Trail with fellow trapper Thomas Fitzpatrick and company, Smith had left the group in search of water, never to return. Smith was no greenhorn. After his disappearance and hopeful they might reunite with Smith in Santa Fe, his traveling companions pressed on. Upon their arrival, Smith was not there. Rather, they met a group of Comanchero's in possession of his personal affects. It was here that they learned of the ambushing and killing of Smith by the Commanche for the things he carried.⁹⁷ He had simply found himself in the wrong place at the wrong time. Smith's death, in and of itself, is no particular shock. That was the way things went for many involved in the fur trade. His

⁹⁶ Gowans, like most scholars of his time, leaves much unsaid. Whether by design or simply an echo of the way the trade had always been seen, the relationships between company laborers and their Indigenous peers are left to the imagination. Gowans, *Rocky Mountain Rendezvous*, 13.

⁹⁷ Dale L. Morgan, *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West*, (Lincoln NE, and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), 330.

acknowledgement as an important mountain man allows us to know the story, but it is the same story as many other fur trappers who we do not know of intimately. Even so, with Smith dead, the trade had lost a model mountain man—an explorer, leader, entrepreneur, and a survivor of the West’s great dangers.

Smith’s proper education, experience in business, and his work on a freighter at the age of thirteen prepared him for his life in the West. His desire for exploration and good timing brought him to respond to Ashley’s ad in the *Missouri Gazette*.⁹⁸ From there, he became a key ally of Ashley. Smith replaced Andrew Henry as Ashley’s partner before joining with David E. Jackson and William Sublette to buy Ashley out entirely.⁹⁹ Smith positioned himself well to be where the money changed hands. Described contemporaneously as a particularly intelligent man in a world where “intelligence has never been commonplace,” Smith was a courageous, friendly, and skilled mountain man.¹⁰⁰ His own interest in exploration took him to California and back developing routes of travel used to this day.

Historian Dale Morgan considered Smith as “the hero, the trail breaker, the public personality” of the Rocky Mountain fur trade.¹⁰¹ He was a man who forged through the “undiscovered” country to have his paths emblazoned in museums and on the pages of historical texts for all time.¹⁰² Smith is no enigma. His time in the West was instrumental in the larger movement of American’s westward development. Like so many of his colleagues in the trade,

⁹⁸ Joseph Schafer, *Dictionary of American Biography Smith, Jedidiah Strong*. Dumas Malone ed., (New York: NY, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1935,) 290–91 & Morgan, *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West*, 26.

⁹⁹ William H. Ashley, Jedediah S. Smith, David E. Jackson, and William L. Sublette. Articles of Agreement, July 18, 1826.

¹⁰⁰ Morgan, *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West*, 313.

¹⁰¹ Morgan, *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West*, 309

¹⁰² The title of “discoverer” has been widely used to notate the mountain man’s successes. This is regardless of the realities that most “discoveries” used the information of Indigenous trade partners who called the West home. The role of Native Americans in the fur trade itself erased in myth will be discussed later on.

fame hardly came from fur alone. In the *Illinois Magazine's* 1832 eulogy of Smith, it expressed that with Smith dead, “no man was better able” to convey information of the American Indian tribes nor to know the value of the inherent lands he explored. His passing was to be regarded as a “public calamity,” for America might never know of the plans Smith might have devised for bringing “civilization” westward if only he had lived.¹⁰³

His life, cut short by chance, does seem to fit historian William H. Goetzmann’s model of a driven capitalist with a diversity of knowledge and skills that allowed him to find real success in the trade—and what kind of legacy that success left behind. Except, Smith was an exception to the rule. His success was far from standard having been in the right place at the right time to have made it as a trapper. Out of many, few “made it” like the Rocky Mountain fur trades’ bourgeoisie had.¹⁰⁴ Real success was an illusion that came with all of the West’s greatest boom economies. In years to come, whether it be the Gold Rush, the railroad, land rushes, homesteading, or the economic boom of the great wars, few of those who ventured west found the riches they were looking for.

The question of demographics in the trade has long been a matter of debate and speculation among historians of the period. In his study of the trade, William H. Goetzmann accounts for 446 individuals, a figure he argues is representative of about “45 percent of the total [men] engaged in this pursuit,” roughly 991 men. For unclear reasons, Goetzmann omits the American Fur Company workers, suggesting that they were either overwhelmingly river traders

¹⁰³ Jedediah Strong Smith. *Illinois Magazine* eulogy.

¹⁰⁴ Company holders especially made great fortunes, in whole or in part, from the trading of fur. John Jacob Astor’s fur company helped him become one of the richest men in American history. William Ashley turned 100,000 in debt into an early retirement from the trade’s grim lifestyle. Other examples include Robert Campbell whose business interest began in the fur trade and ascended him to millionaire. See William R. Nester, *From Mountain Man to Millionaire: The “Bold and Dashing Life” of Robert Campbell*, (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1999).

or killed during their years in the mountains rendering them irrelevant to his sample without supporting evidence. The resulting survey, based on Goetzmann's study of general western histories, fur trade histories, and the broad scope of journals, government reports, and periodicals of the time, is an educated, if narrow, guess.¹⁰⁵ Historians Harvey Lewis Carter and Maria C. Spencer offered a rival estimate of trappers at closer to 3,000 workers. Carter cited fur trade historian and personal friend, LeRoy R. Hafen as the source for his data. Although, when called upon for a specific number, one of these two are often cited. Despite this, neither figure is the definitive answer for the total number of workers in the trade.¹⁰⁶

While derived from experience studying the rendezvous era, these figures make arbitrary judgements on the definition of who should be included as a mountain man, as a worker, during this time. Furthermore, neither figure considers Indigenous workers who participated in the Rocky Mountain fur trade in the thousands. Whether one plays it safe or not in their own estimates, the total number of men for which we have specific individual knowledge of is but a fraction of the total men working in the trade. For instance, while we know a great deal about Jedediah Smith's work in the trade, we know remarkably little about the men who worked for Smith—whether it be their names and wages or even the specific number of workers who served under Smith's command at any given point during his tenure at the head of Smith, Jackson, and Sublette. Extrapolating out from there, it is plain to see that we know remarkably little about the overwhelming majority of workers in the fur trade. Historian S. Matthew Despain suggests that while the mountain men were, of course, important to the trade as its central labor force, they were less important than the furs they collected. As to their number, Despain surmises plainly, "it

¹⁰⁵ Goetzmann, "The Mountain Man as Jacksonian Man," 408-409

¹⁰⁶ Despain, "The Mountain Man in American History and Culture," 66-67.

was hardly crucial or feasible for anyone to keep track of the mountain men.”¹⁰⁷ Whether they served as trappers, camp keepers, horse wranglers, supply train escorts, or in another capacity the specific identification and detail of an individual’s work did not merit a place in the company record books. All that mattered was the counting of the pelts.

While Goetzmann is correct in his assertions of alternative callings, indicating most mountain men worked other positions besides trapping, he draws the conclusion they did so in service of “getting ahead.”¹⁰⁸ It is a flawed judgement. In a business as competitive as the Rocky Mountain trade was, it makes sense that if a mountain man was not making it in the fur trade alone, where the hunting seasons were short and the years quite long, he had to make do in some other way. It was a gig economy in which men had to compete fiercely for a paycheck that was unpredictable. For company trappers, standardized pay existed with men earning up to five hundred dollars for their years’ labor.¹⁰⁹ If they got paid their due, or often less than the standard, they were lucky. By 1832, the Rocky Mountain Fur Company had incurred sizeable debts in owed payments to trappers and for supplies brought West. The company, by then, owed trappers \$10,318 in back pay, with a further \$36,432 owed in other expenses. From 1831-32, after selling all their furs trapped, the company was still in debt, and the trappers dealt with the brunt of it. William Sublette, at this point the main supplier of Rocky Mountain Fur, was primed to distribute any money made so that his credits were paid first.¹¹⁰ What share of the 1831-32 furs’ recoupment eventually made their way to trappers is unclear other than Sublette made note to

¹⁰⁷ Despain, “The Mountain Man in American History and Culture,” 66-68

¹⁰⁸ Goetzmann, “The Mountain Man as Jacksonian Man,” 410

¹⁰⁹ Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol. 1, 8.

¹¹⁰ Berry, *A Majority of Scoundrels*, 295-302. Berry argues that this distribution scheme, purposefully set to benefit managerial duties, inevitably caused the ill equipping of fur trappers for the harsh environment doomed to starve, be ambushed, or die from frostbite each time “Bill Sublette’s clerk put his quill in ink. Every time he scratched down that “interest at 8 percent to date”.”

distribute pay at the 1833 rendezvous.¹¹¹ In exchange for lower wages than their free trapping counterparts, the company men were supplied with essential goods that remained the company's possessions and offered protection in the form of company brigades. These brigades gave mountain men numbers and insulated them from some of the greater dangers of the Rocky Mountains. Nonetheless, most company trappers were earning meager wages for the dangers involved with their duties. Company trappers earned no more than \$300 or \$400 annually depending on each man's contract.¹¹² They did not earn additional compensation for a good year's hunt, nor could they sell furs to a higher bidder.

There were clear limits set on the company trapper, but the alternative positions as a camp keeper or free trapper had drawbacks as well. There was typically one camp keeper per two trappers and they were required to stay in camp to take care of the brigade's needs. Like most company men, camp keepers received guaranteed wages of about \$200 per year.¹¹³ Their duties, while less perilous, were no more glamorous than the company trapper. The camp keepers "performed all 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."¹¹⁴ In practice, men might trek from one river drainage to another from early-Spring to late-Autumn with their equipment and horses to set up camp and, hunt for food, before keeping guard into the early morning getting extraordinarily little sleep in the process. The camps of the mountain men were carefully selected for optimal

¹¹¹ "Note to pay men in the Rockies," Sublette Papers, B1f5. July 25, 1832.

¹¹² Equivalent to about \$9,000 to \$13,000 yearly wages today. Wall text, *Types of Mountain Men*, Museum of the Mountain Man, Pinedale, WY.

¹¹³ Equivalent to about \$5,000 to \$5,600 yearly wages today. Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol. I, 7, 56.

¹¹⁴ W. A. Ferris, *Life in The Rocky Mountains: A Diary of Wanderings on the sources of the Rivers Missouri, Columbia, and Colorado from February 1830, to November 1835*, (United States: Old West Publishing Company, 1940), 328.

hunting. For safety from the threats of the West, camp keepers and company trappers alike would keep guard at night for roving animal or raiding party. When the trappers returned to camp, it was the camp keepers who went about skinning, stretching, and tanning hides for packing. When rations were low, hunting parties went out to supply their brigade. If they could not, sometimes the difficult decision to put down one of the trappers' horses was made to keep the men fed. Camps were the home of much of the mountain man's socialization, not just with his peers but with allied tribes who met and shared goods. In rain or snow, trappers might spend the day at camp with the camp keepers sharing stories or just to rest on a quiet day before again returning to their work.¹¹⁵ The life of a camp keeper was a busy one, requiring persistent effort to keep the brigade operating efficiently all the while relegated to the sidelines in a history that would go on to celebrate the trappers whom they supported.

So, what if the aspirational young hunter decided he wanted to strike out on his own? For free trappers, their pay could extend far beyond the wages the company promised. Nonetheless, that paycheck was entirely determinant on how many pelts they were able to secure and cache during the hunt. In a good year, this could result in a hefty profit. In a bad year with extreme market fluctuations, they could walk away worse than they came. As trapper W.A. Ferris wrote, free trappers "are never unhappy when they have plenty to eat." Yet, in that there is the reality that there are of course times when they do not have plenty to eat. By leaving the company, free trappers lost the brigades. They were isolated. While not always alone, they certainly found themselves without a broad network of other trappers to count on in a jam.

This portrait of the mountain men's camp life is drawn from the narratives of W.A. Ferris and Zenas Leonard as well as Hiram Chittenden's descriptions in *The American Fur Trade of the Far West, vol. 1* and Dale Morgan's work *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West*. See Ferris, *Life in the Rocky Mountains*; Zenas Leonard, *Narrative of the Adventures of Zenas Leonard*, Milo Milton Quaipe ed., (Lincoln, NE and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1978); Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West, vol. 1*, chapter 7; and Morgan, *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West*.

Despite their capabilities, contemporaries like Ferris saw the free trapper as a man of limited ambition, “their wants are few, and seldom extend beyond the possession of a few horses, traps, and a rifle, and some other little ‘fixens;’ the attainment of these simple desires, generally constituting the height of a hunter's ambition.” While Ferris commended the seldom few who invested their funds wisely on land purchases, he disregarded the vast majority of the free trappers for their “purchase of grog and tobacco, and the practice of gaming.”¹¹⁶ It is a judgement that would be echoed by later historians, as the free trappers engagement in vice became a key facet of the mountain man’s wild character. That said, the free trapper’s engagement in vice itself tells a story of a group of men whose lives were uncertain and who sought out short term desires rather than bet on one day retiring.

The difficulty of the mountain men’s work cannot be understated. The very process of maneuvering a keelboat upstream is described in arduous terms in which the man’s pole could slip, sink in the mud, or catch in the river causing him to go overboard—a dangerous position to be in difficult rivers.¹¹⁷ In the first expeditions of Ashley’s men, they dragged their boats through the mud, through the willows and wildlife, in efforts to forge a path west that would be abandoned by the Spring of 1824. Nonetheless, the process of travelling the rivers alone does not get at the heart of the arduous nature of fur trapping. Fur trappers worked through early-Spring into late-Autumn as the pelts of the beaver began to thicken for winter making them all the more valuable. With men trapping as late as the “middle of November, working up into [his] armpits in the rivers setting [his] traps and then coming out of those rivers in soaking buckskin when the

¹¹⁶ W. A. Ferris, *Life in The Rocky Mountains*, 328-329.

¹¹⁷ Berry, *A Majority of Scoundrels*, 11-12.



Figure 4. *Setting Traps for Beaver*, Alfred Jacob Miller, c. 1858-1860. Courtesy of the Joslyn Art Museum

temperature was below freezing.”¹¹⁸ A trapping reprieve came during the bitter winters as beaver hibernated, although that is not to say the winters were easy. Robert Campbell noted the winters of 1833 as being eighteen below zero at sunset and sunrise.

To compensate for the frigid weather, he employed his men to chop firewood in the bitter cold.¹¹⁹ This relationship between the leaders and their subordinate brigade is indicative of those who history fondly remembered and those who disappeared from the history altogether. It was the clerks of the companies—like Campbell—who enjoyed the “same social rank as the bourgeois” and served to oversee the pelts brought in by the working men and trade goods used to build relationships with the Indigenous populations.¹²⁰

The relationships that mountain men shared with Indigenous peoples were never as universally hostile as earlier histories have suggested, although they were not universally pleasant either. This meant that on top of harsh terrain, harsh working conditions, and deadly wildlife a wandering trapper may find himself in the ranges of nations to which he was not well

¹¹⁸ Brian Capener, *Legacy of the Mountain Man*, (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1980), 11:46-11:58.

¹¹⁹ Robert Campbell, “Private Journal of Robert Campbell” typescript, 1833, Box 1, A0226, Robert Campbell Family Papers, 1825-1879, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, 50.

¹²⁰ Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol. 1, 55.

acquainted, or worse yet, negatively associated.¹²¹ In fact, many company men believed that rival companies were influencing Indigenous bands to side against them, setting them up as targets for raiding. Bitter rivalries between the traders developed as they competed over the weakening demand for beaver pelts. For example, trapper Robert Campbell reported that Crow bands had robbed Thomas Fitzpatrick at the “instigation” of the American Fur Company. When the Crow realized who they had stolen from, they returned all stolen goods as an act of goodwill.¹²² This cycle of raiding showed little sign of slowing through the years. By 1832, when George Catlin, a painter and author, met with an unknown free trapper at Fort Union, the violence had taken its toll. The trapper recounted that he had made seven expeditions west as a trapper and five of those times he had seen his horses, equipment, and furs stolen from him by the Blackfoot. Considering his luck to have made it away with his life, he was burnt out and ready to throw in the towel on the fur trade.¹²³ Given the number of trappers killed in this time, let alone the number who were robbed time after time, it is not doubted that the threat of violence sent many a man out of the industry all together.¹²⁴ At least, they had made it out with their lives. Many did not.

It cannot be emphasized enough that what happened to Jedediah Smith was a normal occurrence in the business of conducting the trade. Nonetheless, in recording the fur trade, scholars have, with valid reason, struggled to capture the stories of the dead. Historian Fred Gowans remarked on the dangers of the job, “killed by the bars or the griz, killed by Indians, or

¹²¹ A point we will return to later, the relationship between the trapper and Indigenous groups has long been a sticking point in the historiography. Much like the mountain man, Indigenous tribes have been flattened into two dimensional characters in the trades history in need of further study.

¹²² Campbell, “Private Journal of Robert Campbell” typescript, 53.

¹²³ George Catlin, “Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs and Condition of the North American Indians,” I, 74.

¹²⁴ Eric Jay Dolin argues that after the Arikara War during Ashley’s initial river expedition in 1823 which killed twelve, just as many men left the company in fear. Dolin, *Fur, Fortune, and Empire*, 225. While it is difficult to say for certain given the sparsity of records, it is probable that more men followed in the years to come.

just killed by mother nature. When a rendezvous broke loose in July of every year and the mountain man did not show up, [he was] considered dead until [he] did show up.”¹²⁵ If trappers managed to survive, they could also be wounded or maimed in the service of the trade.

Accidental shootings or the accidental ignition of stored powder caused many men injury.¹²⁶

Thomas Fitzpatrick was known as “Broken Hand” for an injury caused by a firearm which crippled his left hand. Milton Sublette, brother of William, lost his leg due to an injury caused in battle during his time in the mountains and required the use of a cork leg until the infection that had taken his leg took his life.¹²⁷

After a hard year’s labor, the mountain men “sometimes half-starved on a diet of roots, rosebuds, boiled moccasins and mountain berries” found reward at the rendezvous.¹²⁸ It was a festive event that was, in theory, a resting period before the next hard year. Yet, there were years when Indigenous *raiding* parties disrupted the rendezvous or when supply wagons failed to arrive on time.¹²⁹ Nevertheless, the celebration of the rendezvous as a true form of the early West’s mirth is renown. After all, it was a celebration where mountain men regaled one another with stories, played games, and drank. It is all true, but the rendezvous was far from an event to celebrate the mountain man. The gathering was practical. For the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, or any company who participated, to make a profit, they needed to collect their peltries easily, and the rendezvous set defined terms of exchange and centralized the workers to provide their collected furs. In exchange, the fur trappers, company men or otherwise, collected their pay according to the agreed upon contractual wages or according to the market rate. Then,

¹²⁵ Capener, *Legacy of the Mountain Man*, 11:30-11:45.

¹²⁶ Wall text, *Safety First!*, Museum of the Mountain Man, Pinedale, WY.

¹²⁷ Hafen ed., *Trappers of the Far West*, 106-107, 119-122.

¹²⁸ Bown, *The Company*, 360.

¹²⁹ Gowans, *Rocky Mountain Rendezvous*, 33-46, 61-63.

with their hard-earned wages in their pocket, they had to turn around and stock up for the next year.

While not as controlled as the company town was decades later, the rendezvous acted in a comparable manner. After all, what was a man to do if he needed gunpowder, traps, and other fineries but buy them at the place available—the rendezvous. A trip to St. Louis, or at the very least the nearest trading post, took them out of the mountains for weeks, if not months, and brought with it a separate set of risks. The rendezvous was where they went to get paid, and it was where they went to spend their paycheck. The prices they paid for the supplies they bought were exorbitant. Historian Don Berry writes, “what with the up-to-2000 percent markup on goods and the further manipulations during sale, the trapper didn't have a chance.”¹³⁰ Some mountain men struggled to afford goods to adequately prepare for the next years’ hunt. Therefore, they relied on fellow trappers or Indigenous peoples for clothing, food, and munitions.¹³¹

For their toil, the wages could be lucrative. According to an IOU written on behalf of Smith, Sublette, and Jackson company, a trader named Johnson Gardner was owed \$1520.74 in 1830 for furs delivered to the company as a free trapper.¹³² Whether he collected or not is unknown as Gardner was killed by the Arikara in 1833.¹³³ Not all men made it, and even when they did, they did not always make it out alive. Hiram Chittenden assigns the mountain men’s persistent financial woes to the spurning of “frugality or economy.” Thus, they were “always poor.”¹³⁴ Yet, it is

¹³⁰ Berry, *A Majority of Scoundrels*, 302. Berry prescribes historical indifference to the “vaguely unethical” business practice to the fact that modern conditions do not differ a great amount. Readers and historians alike are familiar with the brutality of profit in ways they are not comfortable with the physical brutality often found in the pages of Rocky Mountain fur trade historiography.

¹³¹ Object label and wall text, *Backcountry Apparel*, Museum of the Mountain Man, Pinedale, WY.

¹³² Equivalent to over \$46,000 today.

¹³³ Sublette County Fur Trade Papers, Johnson Gardner IOU, 1830.

¹³⁴ Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol. 1, 59.

difficult for a man to be frugal when his supplies make the difference between a good year and a disastrous year. Smith was the boss of the company and got along in association with Ashley, and later Jackson and Sublette, by ensuring the furs kept coming in. When men under the employ of the company died, they were little more than numbers on a spreadsheet notating the place of their demise, company leadership, who killed them (if known), and essentially the cost of lost goods. Smith himself ended up a line item on the Rocky Mountain Fur Companies records not long after he sold out his shares.¹³⁵ His stature as a man at the foundation and head of operation of the fur trade offered him no special notation or regard in death. Smith was just one more dead trapper for the companies' losses that year.

It was not enough for a mountain man to simply survive to make a profit, a mountain man needed to be where the money changed hands. That strategy worked for Ashley, who had been on the brink of financial ruin when he looked to the fur trade as his last, best hope.¹³⁶ Ashley's background was varied and deeply entrepreneurial. He had tried his hand as a plantation owner, merchant, saltpetre manufacturer, militia officer, and politician, actively serving as the Lieutenant-Governor of Missouri, by the time he became engaged in the Rockies.¹³⁷ His disparate background gave him the experience, and the beaver gave him the stock to turn three long years of mounting losses, and as much as \$100,000 in debt, into an early retirement from the mountains as he maneuvered into politics.¹³⁸ Even so, Ashley had the good sense to not cut all ties with his rendezvous. In selling his interest to the Smith, Jackson, & Sublette company, he remained well placed as their supplier. Suppliers and middlemen stood to make more in a safer

¹³⁵ "Men Killed and Property Lost", 1823-1830, A1585, Box 1, Folder 2, William L. Sublette Collection, 1819-1905, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, MO.

¹³⁶ Ashley Reference Papers. Vertical File, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, MO..

¹³⁷ Morgan, *The West of William H. Ashley*, xvii - xxi

¹³⁸ Berry, *A Majority of Scoundrels*, 4.

environment than the mountain men who risked their necks for their pay. He was in an advantageous place to be while minimizing his exposure to the hostile wilderness. Ashley subsequently ran a losing bid for governor. Still later, he successfully ran for Congress.

His men continued as trappers in the mountains when Ashley left. Trapping was, by now, their livelihood. The men who came west with hope of wealth or wanderlust or something else entirely had not yet found it. Like any group of these early western laborers, the mountain man is difficult to generalize. While scholarship has identified major reasons for fur trappers to have come west, remarkably little is known about these men before their time in the Rockies. The mountain men had an incredible variety of backgrounds. Some were highly educated, some were deeply religious, and some had families back home. They came from these types of situations, and everything in between. Some were artists, some scientists, some farm hands, and even some were pirates. They were from all walks of life, with an untold variety of motives. The mountain men came together to form the foundation of the fur trade society for the sake of capitalism in the West.¹³⁹

When Jim Bridger, Thomas Fitzpatrick, Henry Fraeb, Baptiste Gervais, and Milton Sublette bought out their predecessors in 1830, the trade was near its peak. These men gave the organization its long-associated name, the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. They also saw the company meet its end.¹⁴⁰ The plethora of beaver found in the Rocky Mountains did not go unnoticed by other trapping companies. Where Ashley's Hundred had enjoyed a practical monopoly in the Rocky Mountain trade, the Hudson's Bay Company and the American Fur Company soon brought formidable competition.¹⁴¹ Like the Missouri Fur Company before them,

¹³⁹ Goldman, *The Mountain Men*, 3:45-5:00.

¹⁴⁰ Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol. 1, 294.

¹⁴¹ Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol. 1, 297 – 301.

the Rocky Mountain Fur Company was feeling the heat of competition. Robert Campbell of the company wrote in his journal of his own efforts to secure furs from the American Fur Company as well as other companies' efforts to hire away Rocky Mountain Fur Company men in an effort to undercut them.¹⁴²

The competition between the Rocky Mountain Fur Company and its predecessors and the Hudson's Bay Company was a defining conflict of the era for its workers. Hudson's Bay had a storied history trading furs in North America and had become "one of the most perfect commercial organizations of which the world has any knowledge"—at least, that is, to early trade historian Hiram Chittenden.¹⁴³ In the hundred and fifty years prior to Ashley's Hundred arriving in the West, the Hudson's Bay Company had developed a strong internal structure, method, and policy from the top down. Their continued use of the trading posts, forts, and fur factories gave them a strong standing in British Canada and, through the 1821 merger with the North West Company, the Northwest. Still, despite their dominance, Americans disrupted their control of the trade. The rendezvous had its appeals for trappers seeking to get the top price for their furs as within the Hudson's Bay Company policy there was no option for free trapping, as each trapper worked strictly for the company. Additionally, the topography of the Rocky Mountains made transport of pelts for the river dominant Hudson's Bay men nigh impossible. The American trappers began to erode the authority Hudson's Bay had over the North West territory as they monopolized its furs and opened the door to later pioneers.¹⁴⁴

The response from the Hudson's Bay was decisive and lasting. Hudson's Bay company men were told, "if the American Traders settle near our Establishments, they must be opposed,

¹⁴² Campbell, "Private Journal of Robert Campbell" typescript, 15.

¹⁴³ Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol. 1, 94.

¹⁴⁴ Bown, *The Company*, 358-362.

not by violence, which would only be the means of enabling the Traders to obtain the interference of their government, but by underselling them.”¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, Hudson’s Bay, under the direction of administrator George Simpson and his chosen brigade leader Peter Skene Ogden implemented a policy of “endeavour[ing] to destroy as fast as possible” the beaver of Oregon Country in hopes of preventing Americans from entering the region. Ogden’s efficiency in implementing Simpson’s aims is in no small part thanks to his brigade of “more than seventy armed men, among them many Iroquois and French-Canadian voyageurs [...] and dozens of sundry followers, including the wives and families of many of the men and some multilingual Indigenous traders.”¹⁴⁶ This large hunting party trapped the furs while the trappers’ Indigenous families played the vital role of camp processing furs and doing the upkeep of camp and pack animals. The fierce competition for a time benefitted the workers as Hudson’s Bay hunters were drawn to the American companies for higher pay and freedom from past debts. Nonetheless, through the process of overhunting and underselling Hudson’s Bay was creating an untenable situation for trappers who could no longer make a living as the beaver numbers dwindled. As the Rocky Mountain Fur Company and American Fur Company could not afford to do the same, each began to falter and eventually fail. Meanwhile, American progress into the Oregon Territory had only increased throughout the 1830’s.¹⁴⁷

It can be easy to think about the West, especially early in its history, as a time before the weight of economy, capital, and industry had taken root. Yet, the reality is that capitalism was already heavy at play in the functioning of the fur trade. The Rocky Mountain fur trade provided an early model for the industrialized America to come. The mythos idealizes the period as one of

¹⁴⁵ David Lavender, *Land of Giants: The Drive to the Pacific Northwest 1750-1950* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1956), 136.

¹⁴⁶ Bown, *The Company*, 365-368.

¹⁴⁷ Bown, *The Company*, 368-369.

men independently making their way by themselves. Yet with the rise of the fur companies, individual men found themselves devalued, forgotten, and eventually in death, commodified much like the furs they hunted. Even so, the company bosses that employed the mountain men relied entirely on their laborers for their success. The fur trade industry had transformed in the Rockies, and all costs were kept in-house within the fur company, and laborers became managed by debt to the company. Their mission portrayed by history as one of personal fulfillment rather than being one in service to the company and profit. Yet, it is certain that the mountain man was subject to the demands of the companies that ran his world. His life was defined by economic successes and failures of his company and the markets it served. Still, if riches were his desire, if ever unlikely, examples existed exhibiting the possibility that his hope to make it out a wealthy man was possible.

The company man's fortune, nonetheless, was elusive. The fur trade was a business in which every morning he woke up, the worker was further indebted to the company. Each one of his possessions given to him for the company, his work was a constant cycle of debt and labor.¹⁴⁸ For lack of profit or possessions, reputation was often all a man had. His stories built his name, and those stories, told and retold around dying fires and winter camps as each man sought to build his own notoriety one upping the man before him, allowed him to live on. It was entertainment as much as communication, and in a place as perilous as the Rocky Mountains, those stories were not always that far from the truth. Often known as great liars, the mountain men cultivated their own legend in the greatest ritual in their history—storytelling.¹⁴⁹ From

¹⁴⁸ Goldman, *The Mountain Men*, 15:42-16:03.

¹⁴⁹ Wall text, *Festivities at the Rendezvous*, Museum of the Mountain Man, Pinedale, WY.

witticisms to
 unbelievable feats,
 the first writers of
 their stories were the
 mountain men
 themselves. These
 stories were the basis
 of the mountain
 man's legend, his air
 of adventure an

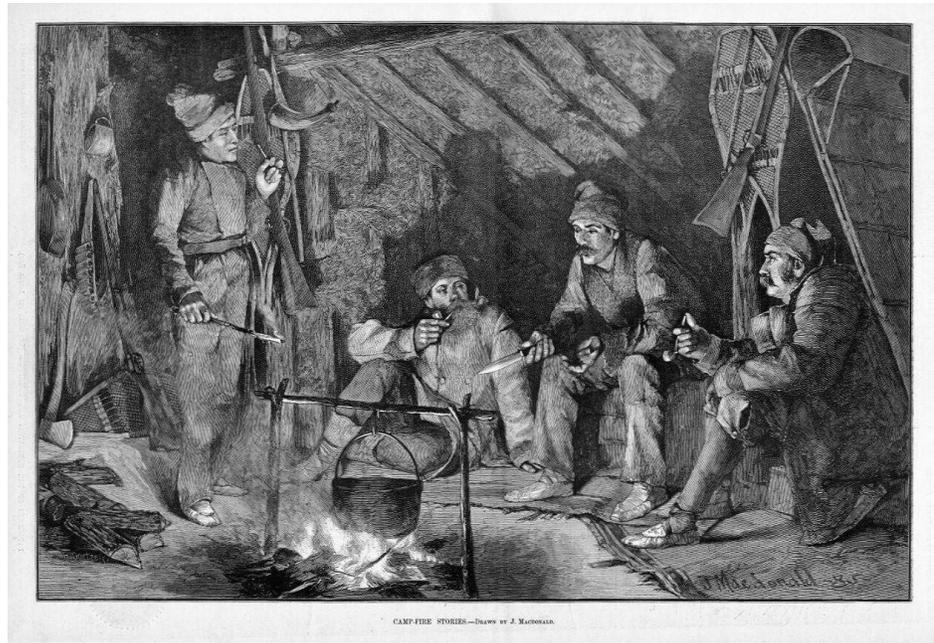


Figure 5. *Campfire Stories*, J. MacDonald, 1885. Courtesy of Utah State University Special Collections.

endeavor to take ownership over his exploitation as a laborer.

When the mountain men's stories made their way east, they captivated the attention of many seeking to follow in the footsteps of the mountain men. James Beckwourth, who had spent a decade in the trade as a trapper and intermediary before leaving it behind knew too well of the toil of his work:

The restless, youthful mind, that wearies with the monotony of peaceful everyday existence, and aspires after a career of wild adventure and thrilling romance, will find by my experience that such a life is by no means one of comfort, and that the excitement which it affords is very dearly purchased by the opportunities lost of gaining far more profitable wisdom.¹⁵⁰

Beckwourth knew as well as any the nature of the fur trade. For everything a man might have gained, he did so at a loss. For each moment he served the company his debts mounted, and a

¹⁵⁰ T.D. Bonner, *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth*, (Williamstown, MA: Corner House Publishers, 1977), 437.

new monotony took hold of him hunting the rivers of the West until there were no beaver left to skin.

The adventure, for as much as it cost, delivered many a mountain man to his home with dreams of one day returning. When Jim Bridger left the fur trade, he stayed in the mountains. He remained there for most of his life establishing Fort Bridger, acting as a guide or scout when the opportunity arose, marrying and starting a family, a few times over. Bridger's time in the Rockies brought him wealth and fame to spare. Unlike so many of his comrades who died young, Bridger's greatest success was that he lived a full life. When his health began to fail him at the age of sixty-four, he found himself forced to retire to his farm in Missouri where he remained for thirteen years. In his final days, he was blind from rheumatism and longed to see the mountains where he lived for so many years one last time.¹⁵¹

In the battle for dominance in the trade, the Rocky Mountain Fur Company could no longer compete. By 1834, the shifting market, competitive giants, and declining beaver populations had done abundant damage to the company necessitating its partners to sell out to Astor's American Fur Company.¹⁵² Industry consolidation meant a bit less fighting between companies for the trappers. But, it also signaled a weakening in the demand for the beaver in the soon to be nearly trivial market. The beaver, trapped to near extinction, and the changing whims of fashion determined the trades' future, or lack of one. Silk hats or those fashioned from the South American nutria were now in style. In July of 1840, the final rendezvous occurred bringing along with it the end of an era. The mountain men knew their time was over: "We are done with this life in the mountains—done with wading in beaver dams, and freezing or starving

¹⁵¹ Alter, *Jim Bridger*, 205-248, 337-340.

¹⁵² Notice of Dissolution, William Sublette Papers B1. F8. June 20, 1834.

alternately—done with Indian trading and Indian fighting. The fur trade is dead in the Rocky Mountains, and it is no place for us now, if ever it was.”¹⁵³ The mountain men could not sustain a dying industry. The trade was at its end.

‘Cross the wide Missouri

Today, the mountain man may find a new place for historians. Whether it be as a burnt-out worker caught up in systems far beyond his control or as one of the impossibly lucky few who were in the right place at the right time to have their names etched in time itself. To truly characterize the hundreds of men who went into the mountains to become fur trappers is an impossibility. It can be said that within this history there are yet layers to discover, nuances and stories yet untold lost in the shuffle of other histories. In telling the mountain man’s story, historians have defined him singularly. The trade was a social operation involving many parties and Indigenous peoples that have been omitted from the history for the sake of the legend. The fur trapper had to rely on his fellow trappers’ abilities to succeed. With this, trappers put immense pride in their own reputations.

Through further exaggeration with each telling, their stories grew grander with aid from early authors who were enthusiastic to commemorate the first American trail breakers. From there, each and every early historian had their work cut out for them sorting fact from fiction. They did excellent work, but they also adapted the grandeurs as part of the history. From the romantic trailblazer hero of the 1800’s, the mythic figure of a bygone era in the early 1900s, and the expectant capitalist of the late 1900’s, the man has been many things to many people. Each adaptation of the man suited to a new era looking for something new in his history. While some

¹⁵³ Victor, *The River of the West vol 1*, 264.

scholars, such as Goetzmann worked to correct past misconceptions, he too made broad judgements that have not always proved fruitful.

As these companies battled for control of the fur trade, the mountain man was caught up in the middle of it all. America's figure of self-reliance had found himself dependent on the everchanging whims of the corporation, a subject of the great dangers of the West, and a means for the expansion of a nation. Individual men's motivations were lost to time. Many lights among them burnt out long before riches ever came their way. The mountain men were no monolith. Of diverse heritage, experience, and by the end of it all, alive enough to call themselves the lucky few. To survive the West and find life anew as a part of the American mythos may have been the greatest honor their labor could have brought them. So, while their mythos may have grown beyond reality, is it not fitting for a group of men who found joy in the wild tales of their lives? The mountain men's notoriety outlived them all. So, in spite of these legends, we might yet learn of the man around the campfire, telling tales, and repairing his gear hoping to make his way in the world, and remember that he was just another working man.

CHAPTER THREE

*“White Men in This Indian World”: The American Fur Trade in Indigenous Land*¹⁵⁴

With his partner and friend, Andrew Henry, William Henry Ashley saw a rich business opportunity to exploit when the fur factories in the East declined after the War of 1812.¹⁵⁵ Looking to the West as a fertile, largely uncapitalized region for trade, Ashley sent out a call to the “enterprising young men” of Missouri to join him in the Rockies.¹⁵⁶ In 1824, after several failed expeditions and finally finding an abundance of beaver in the Rockies, Ashley made the call for his men to remain in the mountains to hunt. Meanwhile, Ashley returned to St. Louis to arrange a supply train to meet the following spring in Shoshone Territory for a rendezvous. With the system in place, his men were able to hunt and resupply without depending on Native trade, at least in theory.¹⁵⁷ After all, the best laid plans of men often go awry.

In practice, for the sixteen years it operated, Indigenous hunters continued to play a part in the trade’s operation. As in the Old Northwest trade, Indigenous hunters knew the value of their furs. How could Ashley suggest that they did not get to share in the wealth? In implementing the Rocky Mountain trade system, Ashley’s Hundred sent a shockwave through established trading networks of the West. Indigenous people responded in a wide variety of ways to the threat of reduction in trade goods and wealth from their lands being diverted to the American trappers instead. From theft and violent retaliation to full cooperation, tribes across the region turned to the various tools at their disposal to secure power in trade relations. In the Rocky Mountain fur trade’s historical memory, their actions became those of the “fickle and

¹⁵⁴ James Clyman, “Narrative of 1823-24,” in Hasselstrom, ed., *Journal of a Mountain Man*, (Missoula, MT: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 1984), 32.

¹⁵⁵ Reference files, June, 25, 1922, A0059, Box 1, Folder 23, William Henry Ashley Collection, 1811-1975, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, MO.

¹⁵⁶ Ashley, “To Enterprising Young Men.”

¹⁵⁷ Gowans, *Rocky Mountain Rendezvous*, 12-13.

treacherous” enemies of the mountain men or, alternatively, as people “less given to beggary and thieving.” Regardless of the characterization, both descriptions seek to undermine the character of Native trade partners, even when complimentary in nature. Certainly, Chittenden’s Native American was resourceful. But he was always “predatory” in nature, of “savage” mind, “revolting[ly]” unclean, and “grotesque” in custom. Though admired by those who lived among them, the Native American’s lifestyle was simply too uncivilized to persevere. Their fate deserving of pity—that no portion of the country could be saved for them—they were “powerless” to maintain their ways. In these descriptions, a central theme develops in which Indigenous life is little more than a sideshow for the trade’s history. According to that narrative, Native hunters were inessential for the trades functioning, and simply seen as another part of the wilderness for which our mountain man hero must overcome and adapt to in order to find success for himself.¹⁵⁸ Furthermore, for each of its strengths, the Rocky Mountain trading system struggled to truly do away with the *old ways*.

Though they were to be set aside, Native people’s role in the trade was hardly diminished by Ashley’s endeavors. The West was their home and their skill made them relevant partners in business. Whether Ashley’s Hundred knew it or not, the trade depended on them. After generations of trapping and trading with the Europeans, Native people were unwilling to let a shift in the industry’s paradigm keep them from making a living off the trade. After all, these lands were theirs to profit from. This was their home, and they knew its resources better than anyone. Ashley’s call for one hundred young men to join him may not have been intended for the Indigenous people, but they showed up, nonetheless.

¹⁵⁸ Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol 1 and vol 2, 263, 864, & 830-837.

Despite that reality, it can be difficult to understand Native roles in the rendezvous era. Obfuscated in the histories of great white men is the reality that these men relied on a group of people considered by early fur trade historians to be little more than savages with no understanding of the value of their land. Scholars have documented the essential role of Indigenous communities in the French system, while those studying the rendezvous have ignored them. Indeed, American historians need to do more than simply affirm that Native Americans continued to exist in the fur trade during the rendezvous era. Studies of the fur trade from its roots in the East to the Rockies reflects a complicated view of Native People—one that transitions from depicting them as victims of Europeans to nearly writing them out of the narrative entirely. It is time to put forward the significant role played by Native Americans—one as trade partners who worked with and against fur trade companies on their lands seeking benefit.

As seen in the myths of the company men, the fur trade historiography has long failed to reflect the efforts of its majority—Native people. For decades, most fur-trade historians agree that once the rendezvous came about, Native Americans were no longer an essential piece of the trade.¹⁵⁹ Bypassed by the Rocky Mountain system, the role of Indigenous hunters was rendered irrelevant in a trade reliant on individual non-Native laborers. The western mythos fueled a belief in many that Native Americans became nothing more than adversaries to overcome as the frontier became conceptualized. Western expansion, especially those early efforts of the American fur trapper, needed merely to push through the conflict to start the story of the American West. Indigenous land, now the forum of foreign business desires, forced an

¹⁵⁹ This notion, as will be elaborated on later, comes from the earliest works of fur trade history from Hiram Chittenden's seminal work through to mid-century works by Fred Gowans to modern efforts by Eric Dolin.

adaptation to new conditions. Whether in direct competition or cooperation with the company men, Indigenous endeavors took new forms in the rendezvous era.

Violence and Fur

Ashley's early efforts in fur had been trying. In their first expedition West in 1822, William H. Ashley and Andrew Henry led a brigade of fur trappers up the river and into a fight. When they met the Blackfoot near modern day Great Falls, Montana, the mountain men were defeated soundly and returned to St. Louis.¹⁶⁰ Unwilling to give up on the Rockies, Ashley headed up a second expedition. Heading east, travelling along the Missouri, Ashley led his men to the banks of the river in present-day South Dakota in late May of 1823. There they rested and met with the Arikara hoping to acquire additional horses, only to be rebuked when the Arikara expected top prices for their animals. The Arikara balked at the goods Ashley offered, forcing him to leave with the American trappers feeling discontented. Although he had hoped his brigade of trappers was large enough to dissuade attack, the Arikara returned in force and killed or wounded the trappers as they scrambled for their keelboats to escape.¹⁶¹ The conflict came to be known as the Arikara War, a definitive moment in the early efforts of the fur companies to establish a western trade. The trappers, including Ashley, knew the Arikaras as hostile toward outsiders and to be avoided if possible.¹⁶²

James Clyman, an early hire of Ashley's, remembered the conflict arose out of a prior altercation involving a kidnapped Sioux woman who sought refuge at a Missouri Fur Company trading house and the death of two Arikara men who sought to retrieve her. The death of these

¹⁶⁰ Account of Joshua Pilcher, Williams H. Ashley Vertical File, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, MO.

¹⁶¹ Roger L. Nichols, "Backdrop for Disaster: Causes of the Arikara War of 1823," 94-95.

¹⁶² Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West* vol. 2, 848.

men was received so severely as to result in the Arikara having “considered war was fully declared between them and the whites.”¹⁶³ Clyman recounts that despite Ashley’s best efforts to “make them understand that he was not responsible for Injuries done by the Missouri fur company”, the Arikara “could not make the distinction”. The reasons for the Arikara viewing it in this manner, whether it was due to the association of Ashley’s men with the Missouri Fur Company or not, is unknown. The Arikara had sought to negotiate a payout for the loss. Ashley, however, refused to pay for the Missouri Company’s damages. Undeterred, the Arikara met with Ashley and his men for trade wanting for nothing but ammunition which they were given in “fine supply.” That night, remaining in the Arikara village, interpreter Edward Rose came rushing back to the camp to inform the company that war had been “declared in earnest” following an altercation that had killed one of his fellow traders.¹⁶⁴ The next morning, a brutal and bloody battle took place that killed eleven trappers on the beach with four other men later dying from their injuries. As he floated down the river safe, if not in a state of shock, Clyman presumed the Arikara to “sing and dance” over the scalps of his deceased colleagues.¹⁶⁵

Returning downriver that same June, Clyman and the rest of the company took refuge for the next six weeks on “scant and frquentle no rations” as they awaited reinforcement from Colonel Henry Leavenworth. When Leavenworth arrived, he brought with him “Seven or eight hundred Sioux Indians [...] on the rout to Punnish the Arrickarees.”¹⁶⁶ The role of the Sioux in this conflict was connected to historical conflicts between the two tribes which the United States’ military was hoping to use to its advantage. To Clyman, their bravery and ferocity in conflict

¹⁶³ James Clyman, “Narrative of 1823-24,” 11. All quotes from the fur trappers are presented as written to preserve their voice.

¹⁶⁴ James Clyman, “Narrative of 1823-24,” 11

¹⁶⁵ Hasselstrom, *Journal of a Mountain Man*, 3, 15.

¹⁶⁶ James Clyman, “Narrative of 1823-24,” 15-16.

against the Arikara made the Sioux welcome allies on the battlefield. During the battle, he recalled the “bravery” of the Sioux, noting at length their achievements in horsemanship and marksmanship in battle.¹⁶⁷ Yet, while these feats of battle stuck with him, Clyman, like many American men of his time, saw little in the Sioux’s future, writing in his journal that “it is easy to make a savage of a civilised man but impossible to make a civilised man of a savage in one Generation”.¹⁶⁸ Following the battle, the Arikara sought peace. Outmatched by the combined forces of the Sioux and fur companies, the time had come to move on.

The Arikara War was the foundation of the then developing dynamic between fur traders and Native communities, but it was not without cause. Ashley had stopped at an Arikara village during the 1822 expedition to trade for horses. The Arikara welcomed them with open arms and requested that Ashley establish a trading post for the tribe. The request fit the standard practice of the trade. After all, the Arikara’s rivals, the Sioux, had fur trading posts provided for them by earlier American companies. Ashley agreed, suggesting that this was “most likely [way] to secure and continue their friendship.” He promised to return the next spring with supplies.¹⁶⁹ Ashley, disinterested in pursuing the unprofitable posts of the old system, had no intention of doing such. He wished only to placate the Missouri Valley tribes—after all, soon his system bypassed them. Failing to understand, and respect, the existing dynamics of the region, the incident with the Sioux woman, as described by Clyman, was merely another inequity brought by the American traders.

The Arikara War demonstrated not simply the fur company failure to consider their impact on the region, but the very nature of their invasion of the West. Ashley’s methods directly

¹⁶⁷ James Clyman, “Narrative of 1823-24,” 16-17.

¹⁶⁸ James Clyman, “Narrative of 1823-24,” 17.

¹⁶⁹ Jedediah Smith, “Journal, 1822,” in Morgan, *West of William H. Ashley*, 14.

agitated established ways of doing business in the West. In its October 9th, 1823 issue, the *New York American* laid the Arikara War squarely on Ashley's shoulders:

General Ashley, with a party armed and equipped for war and not in the guise of mere traders, invades (that is the true expression) the territories of independent Indian nations, for so by making from time to time treaties with them we acknowledge them to be, for the purpose of trapping beaver and taking generally other wild animals.—No permission is asked of the Indians; on the contrary they are known to be alarmed at these forcible intrusions of the whites upon their hunting grounds, and it was because they we known to be thus hostile that all the precautions of war were taken by gen. Ashley and he party against surprise or open hostility. The Indians were therefore authorized to repel the approaches of such a party.¹⁷⁰

Ashley's response to the article was thus, "More errors I have never seen comprised in as few words." Writing to the *St. Louis Enquirer*, Ashley defended his strategy that the Indigenous nations of the West readily "invite the whites to hunt," rather they waged war with "no such considerations" for past invitations for they "delight in war." The attacks of 1822-23 impressed upon Ashley a belief that hostile Indigenous tribes, for as long as they were able to, "continue to do us all the injury in their power" positing that the Blackfoot, Arikara, Cheyenne, and part of the Sioux people "may unite in hostilities against us." This feared united Indigenous opposition never came. Ashley's ignorance on the subject of the Indigenous world itself was something he seemed acutely aware of. Ashley wrote, "I regret that it is not in my power to take, at this time, a more extensive view of the subject and do it more justice."¹⁷¹

Without understanding how his actions might impact the Indigenous world, Ashley brought his men straight into the West with nothing more to show for it than two failed expeditions. Echoing the *New York American*, historian Roger Nichols suggested "the traders seemed both uninformed and uncaring" to the social and economic pressures of various tribes.¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ Morgan, *The West of William H. Ashley*, 64.

¹⁷¹ Morgan, *The West of William H. Ashley*, 63-64.

¹⁷² Nichols, "Backdrop for Disaster", 107-108.

In his lies eschewing Indigenous modes of trade Ashley had cost at least fifteen men their lives. But Ashley was determined, his finances on the line, trade remained his last best hope—he would not submit now. In 1824, Andrew Henry travelled overland to the Yellowstone while Jedediah Smith travelled overland straight through to the central Rockies. The third time was the charm. Under Smith, the company found the beaver they sought.¹⁷³

Ashley’s failures had born fruit and given the mountain men little reason to question the strategy. In the years to come, the trappers repeated the mistakes they made in the leadup to the Arikara War, though no rival of the mountain man was more notorious in the historical record than the Blackfoot. The common reasoning for this, at least among early scholars of the trade, was that their land

was the richest in beaver and the people “most hostile” to the American trapper.¹⁷⁴

In sharp contrast to their relations with the Americans, the Blackfoot tribes had enjoyed friendly relations with British traders. It was only



Figure 6. *A Blackfoot Chief, His Wife, and a Medicine Man*, George Catlin, 1861/1869. Depicts the Blackfoot of the 1830s. Courtesy of National Gallery of Art, Washington D.

¹⁷³ Account of Joshua Pilcher.

¹⁷⁴ Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol 2, 838-842

after early fatal encounters from 1804 through 1809 with Meriwether Lewis and John Colter that relations bittered.¹⁷⁵ Later encounters with Manuel Lisa's Missouri Fur Company were no friendlier when in 1822 the Blackfoot killed four men of the company and stole their pelts, horses, and equipment¹⁷⁶ Despite the open hostilities, the Americans grew to be a persistent presence in the beaver-rich Blackfoot territory. The large hunting knives they carried in tow served as the traders' identifier. The "Big Knives" encroached on land that the Blackfoot had claimed for generations. They were seen as invaders who aided historic enemies.¹⁷⁷

The Blackfoot could see the wealth the fur trade brought to the region. Their land, plentiful in beaver, offered many options for the Blackfoot to earn their share. They raided American trapping parties. From there, the Blackfoot brought their pelts north to the British fur companies and traded for supplies, munitions, and other goods to begin the cycle of raiding once more. American trappers, of course, accused their company rivals of inciting the Native populace, although they offered little evidence to support their claim. The Blackfoot territory, rich in fur, provided the trappers an incentive to improve their relationship with them. The American Fur Company saw that incentive and struck peace by way of establishing trading posts for the Blackfoot to bring furs to.¹⁷⁸

By maintaining the practice of trading posts, Native trappers kept power in trade relations. The rendezvous gave power to the American laborer rather than any Blackfoot hunter. The competition the Rocky Mountain Fur Company brought only furthered hostility. The

¹⁷⁵ John C. Ewers, *The Blackfeet: Raiders on the Northwestern Plains*, (Norman, OK and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), 45-49.

¹⁷⁶ Meanwhile, seven others escaped down river to tell the tale. Neil Van Sickle and Evelyn Rodewald, *The Indian Way: Indians and the North American Fur Trade*, (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2011), 237.

¹⁷⁷ The Shoshone and Crow, who collaborated with trappers and were usual attendants at the rendezvous themselves, were the traditional enemies of the Blackfoot. In turn, the trapper was to be an enemy of the Blackfoot. Ewers, *The Blackfeet*, 45-48.

¹⁷⁸ Ewers, *The Blackfeet*, 54-57.

Blackfoot means of acquiring wealth had to adapt as raiding grew into a necessity to reassert control over western furs. The rendezvous revolutionized the trade, but the Native Americans it affected were not blind to how it displaced them.

At its height, the rendezvous was practically a beacon on the land where American trappers and Indigenous communities came together with furs aplenty. For the Blackfoot, who made their wealth in raiding, the gathering was a clear target. Two days into the festivities of the 1827 rendezvous, James Beckwourth recalled the first alarms of an impending Blackfoot attack with the horses' advance making "the very earth tremble." On their approach, he recalled that the Blackfoot overtook five Shoshone, two women and three men, killing them and pushing on towards the rendezvous site. Without delay, a Shoshone chief, whom Beckwourth refers to as "the old prophet" came to speak to William Sublette and asked for the aid of the trappers. He demanded, "You say that your warriors can fight [...] let me see them fight, that I may know your words are true." In response, Sublette turned to his trappers, "I want every brave man to go and fight [...] Let all cowards remain in camp." As Beckwourth recalled, the ensuing six-hour clash involved three hundred trappers along with an untold number of Shoshone warriors out for retribution. At its end, Beckwourth tallied one hundred and seventy-three Blackfoot warriors and eleven trappers dead.¹⁷⁹ It is a dramatic tale. Although, like many of the mountain man's stories, the story is likely exaggerated. A more restrained version of the same conflict can be found in fellow trapper Daniel Potts' recording of events. Potts recalled two Shoshone killed, a man and his wife. That event incited retaliation. Utes and trappers alike gave aid on the battlefield to the retaliating Shoshone warriors. According to Potts, the battle resulted in approximately four dead on the trappers' side, and at least six Blackfoot killed. Still, Potts admits that an unaccounted-for

¹⁷⁹ Bonner, *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth*, 106-108.

number of dead were carried off by the Blackfoot in their retreat.¹⁸⁰ In this conflict, regardless of life lost, the 1827 rendezvous had been a beacon of wealth and alliances between the Americans and enemy nations. For the Blackfoot, it was just another chance at enriching their people at the cost of the fur trappers and enemy nations of course, but it was a chance all the same.

In 1828 as trappers gathered once more at the south end of Bear Lake, word of the supply trains delay left the men anxious. As they awaited an overdue influx of goods for the year's hunt, a band of Blackfoot warriors saw to achieve what had failed the year before. Still on route to the rendezvous, Robert Campbell's hunting brigade caught the attention of the Blackfoot. At numbers suggested in the two to three hundred range, the Blackfoot aimed to cut off Campbell and take what they could from the brigade. The brigade's luck came only when two men broke through the Native front line to secure reinforcements at the rendezvous site where fellow trappers and Native allies gathered.¹⁸¹ As Daniel Potts wrote, "one hundred Blackfeet[,] mounted[,] attacked thirty odd of our hunters with their families" engaging in battle for over three hours as "balls flew like hail." Potts documents a loss of three on the trapper's side, including a child, as well as six to eight killed in the ranks of the Blackfoot.¹⁸² William Ashley recorded from the encounter that "five thousand dollars worth of beaver furs, forty horses, and a small amount of merchandise" were lost to the Blackfoot.¹⁸³ These attacks were clearly planned. They ambushed the gathering where supplies were most plentiful and mustered a large war party to secure goods. These efforts were not about harming the white trappers, but to conduct a transaction that nearly cost the lives of many in Campbell's party.

¹⁸⁰ Gerard C. Bagley, "Daniel T. Potts, Chronicler of the Fur Trade 1822-1828 And Earliest Confirmed Explorer of Yellowstone Park," (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1964), 135.

¹⁸¹ Gowans, *Rocky Mountain Rendezvous*, 39-41.

¹⁸² Bagley, "Daniel T. Potts," 139.

¹⁸³ Gowans, *Rocky Mountain Rendezvous*, 40

A few days into the 1832 rendezvous in Pierre's Hole in the Teton Valley, in the dark of night, trapper Joe Meek woke to the sounds of gunfire, flying arrows, and the shouts of a fight. The Blackfoot attacked late in the night and made off with horses. As far as Meek could tell, no one was wounded.¹⁸⁴ Following the theft, the rendezvous continued peacefully with the Natives and trappers exchanging goods and partaking in the usual celebrations. Even so, as the rendezvous ended by the seventeenth of July, a Blackfoot party of warriors, women, and children, were spotted moving toward the encampment. Of the multiple accounts of this battle, Joe Meek recalled two of Sublette's men, a mixed Iroquois man named Antione Godin and a Salish man, with grievances to bear against the Blackfoot, meeting with the "principal chief" of this group. When this chief extended his hand in peace, Godin ordered the Salish man to shoot.¹⁸⁵

The Blackfoot, in the ensuing clash, secured their location with the women digging trenches while the men fought among the willows and fallen trees. William Sublette responded to the call for reinforcements with a "considerable" number of whites as well as members of the Nez Perce and Flathead nations.¹⁸⁶ With this support, the mountain men claimed victory in a vicious encounter that left as many wounded as dead. Meek recalled a wounded Blackfoot woman weeping over the corpses of her fallen tribe and begging the "white men" to kill her. Meek, lacking the "disposition" for such an act, saw it was a Nez Perce or Salish who put an end to her suffering. Meek believed the damage done had been so great that they might "quit the neighborhood of the whites."¹⁸⁷ Ready to set fire to the forest, Sublette and his men were told by

¹⁸⁴ Gowans, *Rocky Mountain Rendezvous*, 65.

¹⁸⁵ Gowans, *Rocky Mountain Rendezvous*, 72.

¹⁸⁶ "Account of battle with Blackfoot," September 21, 1832, A1585, Box 1, Folder 6, William L. Sublette Collection, 1819-1905, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, MO.

¹⁸⁷ Gowans, *Rocky Mountain Rendezvous*, 77.

a Native interpreter that the Blackfoot were convinced that the trappers intended to kill them all. All told, Sublette could account for just three of his men killed with five others wounded including himself.¹⁸⁸

The 1832 battle brought to the surface the traders' resentment against the Blackfoot. Here a trader, when given the chance, would sooner reject peace than embrace it. Native encounters such as these were hardly an enigma. The American trappers and traders coming west found themselves in the middle of it all, picking sides as it benefitted them. The trappers knew the effect this dynamic had on all concerned. Trapper Robert Campbell remarked that the "Blackfeet were always at war with us because we were trading with Indians that they were at war with."¹⁸⁹ Those conflicts existed long before the American trappers arrived and were complicated further by the economic alliances between Blackfoot trappers and the British companies. Wars were waged for purposes of intimidation, or to gain respect, or for a need of labor, land, and resources. The American fur trappers meanwhile had moved their way in on a mission for beaver pelts. Indigenous tribes were not going to settle their differences so that they all might benefit from what these outsiders could offer. Meanwhile, with trade goods in hand, savvy trappers, who took care to understand the dynamics of the region, were eager to establish bonds, if only to ease the risks their work brought.

These cycles of raiding and hostility were now the business. The Blackfoot brought furs north, which were then sold, along with Blackfoot trapped furs, to the British fur trading forts all while defending their own territory against incoming American trappers. The rendezvous

¹⁸⁸ "Account of battle with Blackfoot," William L. Sublette Collection.

¹⁸⁹ Robert Campbell narrative written by dictation to William Fayel, 1870, "Original manuscript of Colonel Robert Campbell's Experiences in the Rocky Mountains Fur Trade, 1825-1835," A0226, Robert Campbell Family Papers, 1825-1879, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.

brought with it conflict but not by design. Instead, it threatened the positions of power of Indigenous tribes. A mountain man in the West during this time was under near constant threat. His presence there created a powder keg of competition and conflict under constant threat of exploding. For the companies, if the furs did not make it to the rendezvous as desired, justice, if one could call it that, was dealt in multitudes by vengeful trappers. The bloodshed and injury of the 1832 rendezvous reflect the damage the trade and its allies could level upon rivals. The Blackfoot were not always the instigators of conflict. However, with the 1827-28 rendezvous, in which Blackfoot losses were more substantial than losses of the company, and in reports of the attacks on William Sublette's party in 1831, the fur trader reported making the Blackfoot suffer "severely for their temerity and ill-advised hostility." The conflict involved one hundred and fifty Blackfoot raiders and resulted in thirty dead, with more than that wounded while the losses of Sublette's party were considered "very inconsiderable."¹⁹⁰

Death records differ on how many trappers were killed by Natives in the early years of the trade. Indian Affairs recorded 148 killed by Native individuals between 1820 and 1831. Of these, twenty-eight were cited to be killed by the Blackfoot, twenty-seven by the Arikara, and the remaining killed by other tribes including a supposed attack that killed fifteen by the Shoshone. This attack by the Shoshone, as well as others, were recorded as "supposed." The veracity of the accusations varied. Discrepancies in death records are common. Records kept by company boss William Sublette indicate some 102 individuals killed between 1823 and 1830. Of those, eight were killed in incidents not involving Natives. These records communicate the loss of life of various companies; although, the loss of the life of their adversaries is much more difficult to ascertain. If the mountain men are to be believed in their tales, hundreds of Native men, women,

¹⁹⁰ "Account of battle with Blackfoot," William L. Sublette Collection.

and children were killed over the course of their time in the Rockies.¹⁹¹ Thomas Benton, a senator from Missouri, estimated five hundred trappers dead by the end of the 1820's as a result of battle with Indigenous population but does not account for Native losses.¹⁹² Despite their efforts to profit from the Rocky Mountain trade, the Blackfoot were outgunned. While profits from fur may have helped close the gap, the American operators collected the lion's share of the wealth generated by the trade rather than the nations who had lived and worked on the land for generations.

While raids surely did damage to the company, indeed taking more than a handful of men's lives, the deaths on the Natives' side were simply unparalleled. In recorded losses Smith, Jackson, and Sublette figured about \$43,500 in assets had been stolen from them by the Blackfoot, mostly in horses.¹⁹³ By comparison, at the end of his career, Sublette alone claimed responsibility for bringing home about \$60,000 worth of fur.¹⁹⁴ As for the damage done to the Blackfoot peoples beyond the lives taken, the wealth denied to the Blackfoot from furs taken out of their lands among other injuries is incalculable. Forever labeled the "scourge" of the trapper, the Blackfoot's great crime was an attempt to protect their interests and fend off invaders and thieves.

Encounters with Native Americans that devolved into conflict were indicative of the consistent nature of chaos in the mountains. The richness of the lands gave Native nations immense influence, which fur companies worked to pass over as they hunted in foreign lands.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹¹ "Men Killed and Property Lost," William L. Sublette Collection.

¹⁹² Bown, *The Company*, 359.

¹⁹³ Just over a million dollars in today's money. "Men Killed and Property Lost," William L. Sublette Collection.

¹⁹⁴ Comparable to nearly a million and a half in today's money. "Account of battle with Blackfoot," William L. Sublette Collection.

¹⁹⁵ Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol. 2, 841.

Meanwhile, Native peoples chose to cooperate or to protect their interests. In reality most fur companies involved in the rendezvous along with their Indigenous allies, simply could not overcome a history of conflict with the Blackfoot to cooperate in the long term. That is, unless it was on the Blackfoot's terms. The rendezvous system had agitated the Western trading networks. Native resistance then was a means of fighting back, to establish their own power and refute the American's efforts to cut them out.

For the Blackfoot, years of violence with fur traders was the prelude to further losses, to bullets, to epidemics, to broken treaties, to reservations, to boarding schools, and to termination.¹⁹⁶ Native Americans were struggling against imperial forces when they attacked the rendezvous. For the Blackfoot, that meant assault, robbery, and murder to stay ahead economically. It was simply a struggle for the future and for the balance of power under the coming empire. For the foreign fur trapper, this conflict was a nuisance in the name of doing business. For the Native American, conflict was a fleeting tool to defy a growing force of outsiders who were encroaching on their land and homes. This was one tool that could not last forever.

In the Daily Lives of Trappers and Traders

In the late Spring of 1825, William Henry Ashley set off from St. Louis to guide the yearly supply train toward the first rendezvous location on a tributary of the Snake River.¹⁹⁷ On

¹⁹⁶ The history of Indigenous peoples in the United States is one that cannot be summarized easily. The losses described above are just one part of their story and is not fully representative of the stories Indigenous Americans have to tell. Their stories speak of loss, but also survivance as Native peoples have persisted through great adversity. For further reading on Native American historical perspectives see Vine Deloria Jr., *Custer Died for Your Sins*, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988); Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1970); or Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2014).

¹⁹⁷ Gowans, *Rocky Mountain Rendezvous*, 18.

the journey, Ashley kept a diary at hand notating his daily travels westward. Ashley kept notes of his progress, the weather, his own supplies, and of course, kept a keen eye on the beaver of the area. By the nineteenth of April, Ashley had caught up with trappers under his employ, including James Clyman. On the 22nd, he directed them to hunt as he pushed on to the “place of randavoze” to meet on July 10th of that year. By the 17th of May, Ashley was informed by some of his men that the “Indians generally in this country are a hostile desposed and have killed & robed a 15 or 20 men who were from the neighbourhood of St Louis”.¹⁹⁸ Undeterred, Ashley pushed onwards.

As of the 21st of May, somewhere in the watershed-basin of the Green River, Ashley was seeking out Native Americans for information. He wrote in his diary, “my object is to find Indians of whom I can procure horses and ascertain the true situation of the country described as so verry mountanous and barren.” On the 26th, Ashley met with a local Ute and described him as possessing “great familiarity and Ease as much so as if he had been accustomed to being with white men all his life.” They spent an hour exchanging information through signs. The man departed to speak with his band to discuss the sale of horses to Ashley. The negotiations that followed upon the Ute’s return took multiple days, ending with Ashley only purchasing two horses despite his desire for seven. Ashley noted that the value placed on the horse by the band of Utes was simply too high for Ashley to procure any more. Ashley was surprised to find that the Natives with whom he met were in such good condition: “I expected to find them a poor lifeless set of beings, destitute of the means or desposition to defend themselves; alarmed at the sight of a white man”.¹⁹⁹ Illustrated here, in this meeting of these two worlds, are the faulty expectations of the American trapper.

¹⁹⁸ William Henry Ashley, 1825, “Diary of William Ashley, March 25-June 27, 1825,” A0059, William Henry Ashley Collection, 1811-1975, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.

¹⁹⁹ Ashley, “Diary of William Ashley, March 25-June 27, 1825.”

Ashley witnessed, firsthand, the complex trading networks Native American's had developed in the West. The Ute people during this time were a key ally for the trappers in the region.²⁰⁰ Their goods and services served the interests of the trappers well and continued to do so for years to come. The capability to bring pearls and seashells to the Rockies to adorn their clothing was demonstrative of the Utes experience as traders. Of the Ute's horses Ashley wrote, "their horses were better than Indian horses generally are east of the mountains and more numerous in proportion to the number of persons."²⁰¹ For the people who called the plains home, the horse was essential to their way of life. The prices Indigenous traders set for their horse



Figure 7. Yintah Medicine Man, a Warrior, and a Woman, George Catlin, 1855/1869. Depicts the Ute people of the 1830s. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

directly reflected the value of the animal in their lifestyle.²⁰² In daily trade, this meant that the American trader often left without all they desired. After departing the company of the Ute traders, Ashley met with Frenchmen the next day and purchased three

additional horses—a transaction encounter that left little impression on Ashley.

²⁰⁰ Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol. 2, 872.

²⁰¹ Harrison Clifford Dale, *The Ashley-Smith Explorations and the Discovery of a Central Route to the Pacific, 1822-1829*, (Cleveland, OH: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1941), 151.

²⁰² Pekka Hämäläinen, "The Rise and Fall of Plains Indian Horse Cultures," *The Journal of American History* Vol. 90, No. 3 (Dec. 2003): 833-862.

Encounters, like Ashley's 1825 exchange with Ute traders, were typical. In everyday meetings of Indigenous peoples and the mountain men, the trades gears continually turned through these negotiations. Savvy men, capable of navigating the intricacies of the Indigenous world, found security and success in their meetings with Indigenous trade partners. Natives often, but not always, held the upper hand as witnessed by Ashley's Native trade networks from the Rocky Mountains which developed further than he ever could have imagined. They had no immediate need of what Ashley was offering, but he desperately needed things from them to be successful—and sometimes, to survive. Even in the early years of the trade, depending on Native allies was key.

Back in the fall of 1823, Clyman had been traveling west with other Ashley company men when they determined it prudent to go to the Crow for guidance. Clyman recounted that “a half Breed by the name of Rose who spoke the crow tongue was dispatched ahead to find the Crows and try to induce some of them to come to our assistance.” As they awaited the return of Edward Rose, they pushed further, traveling along the river. It was during this wait that Jed Smith came upon his fateful encounter with a grizzly bear, and here that Moses Harris told the tale of the instantly petrifying forest. Meanwhile, Rose was enlisting the help of his adopted people and soon returned with fifteen Crow to guide the trappers.²⁰³

Rose conveyed that the Crow who joined him had delayed their meeting with the trappers, keeping watch on the camp for two days prior to their approach to ensure no Cheyenne were present since the two tribes were at war. Clyman lacked insight on the politics of Native culture and was uninformed beyond that which he had witnessed firsthand in his first journey

²⁰³ James Clyman, “Narrative of 1823-24,” 20-23.

West. Men like Rose, who had long travelled in the West, compensated for the inexperience of trappers such as Clyman. The Crow offered Clyman spare horses, which allowed their own “Broke down animals” some relief. The Crow led the men through “steep and high ridges” while stopping on occasion to trap beaver together. Travelling briskly through a Crow village and beyond, Clyman left the experience impressed by their resistance to the cold—“dozens of them running buffalo on horseback for hours together[.] all their bodies naked down to the belt around their waists and dismount with but a slight tremble[.] and many of them take a bath every morning even when the hoar frost was flying thick in the air and it was necessary to cut holes in the ice to get at the water[.]”²⁰⁴

The relationship between traders and Natives of the region was about sharing a mutual rapport in the service of mutual interest. Both the fur trapper and the Crow trader shared a desire for their labor to bring wealth home to their people. That said, the two groups remained competitors. The Crow were willing to steal from rival companies if the opportunity arose. Still, if the occasion did arise, they returned stolen goods to keep their alliances.²⁰⁵ Despite any troubles, they “professed friendship” with those coming into their territory.²⁰⁶ They welcomed them, and their goods, into the West. On occasion, they ‘adopted’ trappers, like Edward Rose and James Beckwourth into their ranks or mutually mourned lost allies. When Hugh Glass, Edward Rose, and Hilain Menard were killed at the hands of an Arikara war party, as James Beckwourth told it, the Crow wept with great passion for the men who “were well known, and highly esteemed by the Crows.”²⁰⁷

²⁰⁴ James Clyman, “Narrative of 1823-24,” 25.

²⁰⁵ Campbell, “Private Journal of Robert Campbell” typescript, 53.

²⁰⁶ Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol 2, 843.

²⁰⁷ Bonner, *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth*, 216.

Other trappers enjoyed favorable relations with the Crow people as well. In the summer of 1828, Robert Campbell made the decision to trap in the country of the Crow caching his party's furs as they hunted. A war party of Crow, without the knowledge of Campbell's activities discovered the cache and stole it from him taking one hundred and fifty pelts. Later, without knowledge of the theft, Campbell accepted an invitation to a Crow village to enjoy festivities with their people. As the warriors sang and danced, they boasted of their exploits which included the theft of Campbell's pelts from earlier that day. The principal chief of the village, Long Hair, came to Campbell to inquire of his own hunting in the region. When Campbell explained that he had been caching his furs in the ground to be saved, the chief responded with honesty of his people's theft of the skins.²⁰⁸ Campbell recounted Long Hair's promise to him:

I'll neither eat, drink or sleep till you get all your skins. Now count them as they come in. He then mounted his horse and harangued the village, saying to his people that he had been a long time without traders, and they must not keep one skin back. Then the old squaws and old men would come and pitch the beaver skins into my lodge, until nearly all were returned. The son-in-law of the chief, said to me, "Tell the old chief the skins were all in, and if any are missing, I'll give you the balance." I then told the old chief, the skins were all in, and the next day I invited two or three men into my lodge to satisfy him from their inspection, that the skins were all right; the old chief becoming satisfied, then broke his fast.²⁰⁹

Unwilling to alienate an allied trader for the sake of short-term gain, Long Hair put a personal price on the return of these furs. In turn, his village recognized his experience and saw the furs returned to the trapper. This kindness enabled Campbell to return to the same country the following spring.²¹⁰ Here, without threat or the waste of a bullet, a theft was corrected, and an

²⁰⁸ Robert Campbell narrative written by dictation to William Fayel, 1870, "Original manuscript of Colonel Robert Campbell's Experiences in the Rocky Mountains Fur Trade, 1825-1835," A0226, Robert Campbell Family Papers, 1825-1879, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.

²⁰⁹ Fayel, "Original manuscript of Colonel Robert Campbell's Experiences in the Rocky Mountains Fur Trade, 1825-1835."

²¹⁰ Fayel, "Original manuscript of Colonel Robert Campbell's Experiences in the Rocky Mountains Fur Trade, 1825-1835."

alliance strengthened. These relationships held power in the fur trade. It was good business for the Long Hair and for Campbell alike to return these stolen furs to the company.

Good business was built through consistent trade. Although the rendezvous did aim to consolidate profits within the company, it remained true that in every meeting with Indigenous trading partners for the exchange of goods, fur trappers grew more accustomed to the needs of the Native Americans. Whether buying corn from the Pawnee along the Republican River or offering tobacco to the Arikara in exchange for safe passage home, men like Campbell made it through successful navigation of Indigenous trade. Throughout his time in the mountains, Campbell spent many days hunting with the Nez Perce, with the Salish, and the Iroquois. Campbell describes another encounter in the summer of 1828. He was left alone with a Salish hunter after a band of Crow, who had apparently seen them abandoned or otherwise unaccompanied, had taken their horse. The hunter suggested that if Campbell lent him a knife, he might go down in the night to recover a horse for both of them, but Campbell objected and dissuaded the hunter from doing so.²¹¹ This back and forth displays a kind of camaraderie on the part of these hunters. These meetings brought two men who had little in the way of a shared background together. In that moment, they were allies looking to turn their fortunes and gain from their dealings with one another. Coming from disparate worlds, their shared circumstances made them cohorts—or at the very least, temporary collaborators. These encounters between traders and Indigenous people comprised the dealings of the trade and formed the foundation of success. Without such mutual cooperation, the fur trade could not have existed—let alone, been successful over the long term.

²¹¹ Fayel, “Original manuscript of Colonel Robert Campbell's Experiences in the Rocky Mountains Fur Trade, 1825-1835.”

Collaboration extended beyond direct aid. Many mountain men married into Native communities. *Marriage à la façon du pays*, an essential feature of the French fur trade system, reappeared in the Rocky Mountains.²¹² Indigenous wives played vital economic and domestic roles, aiding the fur companies' mission to profit from the region. The arrangement benefitted the mountain men in several ways. Native wives could act as guides, translators, and provide



Figure 8. *The Trappers Bride*, Alfred Jacob Miller, 1858-59. Courtesy of the Walters Art Museum.

domestic services for the trapper and his brigade as seen in the brigades of Peter Skene Ogden of Hudson's Bay. Further, through their marriage, the trapper was capable of extending trade relationships between his company and his wife's tribe. As for the Native woman, the arrangement brought wealth to her tribe through the aforementioned trade lines, but also through gifts for which the mountain man paid to win her hand. Although accepted as a part of the trade, that is not to say these relationships were always consensual. Indigenous women could be bought and sold by trappers as tokens of trading power, or alternatively, left behind in the mountains altogether when the trader retired from the trade. Meanwhile, some Native wives chose to

²¹² Translates as "according to the custom of the country".

divorce their husbands.²¹³ Whatever the arrangement, marriage acted as a powerful tool for trappers to integrate themselves into Indigenous communities and for Indigenous communities to secure trade goods.²¹⁴

In the winters, the mountain men regularly held camp with Indigenous tribes through the Rockies. These camps epitomized the coming together of the American trappers and the Indigenous world. Trapper Joe Meek described them as such, “for what with their Indian allies, their native wives, and numerous children, the mountaineers’ camp was a motley assemblage, and the trappers themselves, with their affectations of Indian coxcombry.”²¹⁵ At these camps families of mixed heritage surely outnumbered the single mountain men. For the mountain men, it was a matter of practicality as much as it was a personal decision to remain with their Native wives or allies in the winter.²¹⁶ The winter season was the only extended rest period for the trappers in the year, and under the right circumstances, they could rest comfortably despite the bitter winters. While trappers could learn suitable sites through experience, Indigenous tribes were key in aiding the mountain men to hold camp where they might avoid the worst of the weather. An extension of this was that trappers habitually made camp with friendly bands of Bannock, Shoshone, Ute, Salish, or Crow peoples. Together, they might keep camp well stocked with rations, continue trade, and also insulate themselves against hostility from their rivals.²¹⁷

²¹³ Wall text, *Native American Women of the Rocky Mountain Fur Trade*, Museum of the Mountain Man, Pinedale, WY.

²¹⁴ There are a number of works that discuss the roles of marriage in the fur trade. For focus on the French trade see Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*; Susan Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men*, (Amherst, MA; University of Massachusetts Press, 2001). For a broader look at both French and Rocky Mountain systems see Walter O’Meara, *Daughters of the Country*, (New York City, NY: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1960). Finally, for a perspective on the family unit built, initially, by the fur trade see Anne Hyde, *Empires, Nations & Families*.

²¹⁵ Victor, *River of the West*, 83.

²¹⁶ Rory J. Becker, “Finding Rendezvous: An Approach to Locating Rocky Mountain Rendezvous Sites Through Use of Historic Documents, Geophysical Survey, And Lidar,” (Laramie, WY: University of Wyoming, 2010), 47-48.

²¹⁷ Wishart, *The Fur Trade of the American West 1807-1840*, 184-185.

Indigenous communities shared their knowledge, and the mountain men built their legacies as trailblazers. In detailing the ‘discovery’ of the South Pass the *St. Louis Weekly Reveille* pondered on the “white man whose footsteps first awoke” the pass. This navigable route through the Continental Divide went on to be the major outlet for the Oregon, California, and Mormon trails. The *Weekly Reveille* determined Thomas Fitzpatrick was their “white man” writing, “we will not passively see him lose credit” for his achievement. A variety of historians have accredited the South Pass’s discovery to different fur traders from Astor’s American Fur Company in 1812 to Rocky Mountain Fur Company traders Jedediah Smith, or in this case, Fitzpatrick. Paths through the region known to Indigenous communities became the great “discoveries” of the mountain men’s era. The paths were key to Ashley’s fortune becoming “realized.” Yet, it stands out that in the paper’s celebrations of Fitzpatrick, they document his efforts to preserve the Indigenous names of places, rather than rename them himself. Whereas the paper suggests this as a kind of modesty, it suggests his deference to the original discoverers of these pathways through the West.²¹⁸

William Ashley even concerned himself with the legacy of his Indigenous partners. In 1827, three kidnapped young trappers escaped their Native captors. That May, the *Missouri Republican* published an account of one of the men’s kidnapping, labor, mutilation, and his eventual escape. He blamed the Flathead people.²¹⁹ In response to this article, Ashley wrote to the paper’s editor to “declare [his] disbelief.” Ashley wrote that the Flathead people had “uniformly manifested the most friendly disposition towards the citizens of the U.States” going on to detail his own encounters with the Flathead as he knew them during his time in the West.

²¹⁸ Soltaire, “Major Fitzpatrick, The Discoverer of the South Pass,” *St. Louis Weekly Reveille*, March 1, 1847.

²¹⁹ “Boston, May 1”, *Missouri Republican*, May 31, 1827.

He hoped “to do justice to those who have it not in their power to vindicate themselves”.²²⁰ This was a powerful statement from a man who considered Indigenous peoples as little more than “savages” of hostile disposition.²²¹

Indigenous hunters from the East too joined the ranks of the mountain men. Members of the Iroquois Confederacy, in particular, can be found through the historical record on the company payroll. These hunters were no strangers to the fur trade. From early contact with European traders in the 1600s, members of the Iroquois Confederacy conquered their neighbors and dominated the fur trade for more than a century. As the trade moved, so did they. In 1801, more than three hundred Iroquois hunters were under contract with the North West Company. When that company was absorbed by the Hudson’s Bay Company, many Iroquois company men became free trappers in the region to go on to join the American trade and hunt.²²² For instance, an Iroquois man named Frasier had spent seventeen years with the North West Company in Montreal before heading west to join the American trade. There, he started a family and operated as a particularly skilled free trapper. His career was cut short when he was found dead in the Jefferson River.²²³ Louis Kanitagan was another Iroquois mountain man employed under various trappers through the early 1820s. Kanitagan was shot dead by his wife in 1825.²²⁴ Another example, Thomas Tawatcon was an Iroquois hunter from St. Louis employed by the Hudson’s Bay Company. He was with those sent by Hudson’s Bay to recover Jedediah Smith’s property in

²²⁰ William H. Ashley, published letter to John Charless, *Missouri Republican*, June 7, 1827.

²²¹ Typescript letters from Ashley to Lane, Oct 29, 1824, A0059, Box 1, Folder 4, William Henry Ashley Collection, 1811-1975, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, MO.

²²² In the records these men are referred to simply as “Iroquois,” without any specific designation of their tribal affiliation, most were evidently Mohawk men. Regardless, it cannot be certain that the men featured here were all Mohawk. Trudy Nicks, “The Iroquois and the Fur Trade in Western Canada,” *In Old Trails and New Directions: Papers of the Third North American Fur Trade Conference*, edited by Carol M. Judd and Arthur J. Ray, (University of Toronto Press, 1980), 11.

²²³ James A. Hanson and Samantha Eickleberry, “Marginal Men: Lesser Lights of the Fur Trade in the American West, 1800-1865,” *Museum of the Fur Trade Quarterly* 50 (2014), 27.

²²⁴ Hanson and Eickleberry, “Marginal Men,” 36.

1828 following the Umpqua Massacre that killed Peter Ranne.²²⁵ In addition, an Iroquois man called Baptiste Tyaquariche worked for the North West and Hudson's Bay Companies before joining the American trappers. He worked under Johnson Gardner in 1825 before returning to work again under Ogden and the Hudson's Bay Company in 1826 before deserting again in 1831 to join the American trappers once more before falling out of the record entirely.²²⁶ These Iroquois hunters serve as prominent examples of Indigenous laborers who were on the company payroll using their experience to earn a wage.

In a journey west in 1839, a young trader named Willard Smith accompanied fur traders Andrew Sublette and Louis Vasquez, and saw firsthand what over fifteen years of trading had built. In early September, after making camp in the vicinity of one of the Arapaho villages, the traders were quickly spotted. At dusk, twenty-two Arapaho, came out to meet with the traders. Smith was struck by the "fineness of the men and the appeal of the women." The chiefs, long familiar with Vasquez, enjoyed conversation and sharing a pipe. Before the chiefs departed, the fur traders "presented them with some tobacco and knives" as gifts for their continued amity.²²⁷ Their friendship was a byproduct of years of *good* business. Even as the Rocky Mountain fur trade era was in its decline, the relationship between the American trappers and the Indigenous population continued as trappers became guides and Native Americans grew to be outsiders in their own land.²²⁸

²²⁵ Hanson and Eickleberry, "Marginal Men," 72.

²²⁶ Hanson and Eickleberry, "Marginal Men," 74.

²²⁷ J. Neilson Barry, "Journal of E. Willard Smith While with the Fur Traders, Vasquez and Sublette, in the Rocky Mountain Region, 1839-1840," *The Quarterly of the Oregon Historical Society* 14, no. 3 (1913): 260.

²²⁸ Years later, those good relationships became the brief descriptors in reductive Native commentaries of fur trade historians. Kindness with the mountain men made the Arapaho a "a peaceful tribe of brave and honest people." This may be trite phrasing, although it is not uncommon in the describing of the many trade partners of the mountain men. Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West* vol. 2, 864.

In the journeys of the fur trapper, cooperation was the rule, not the exception. In December of 1839, Willard Smith's trapping party met with a large group of Shoshone who informed them about the region and traded pelts with them for "trinkets."²²⁹ The Shoshone, known well by trappers, appear here without much fanfare. As recounted in many fur traders' stories, the trapper quickly obtained his pelts and the Shoshone were satisfied with their trade goods. In one quick exchange of furs, Smith describes an entire economic structure of American laborers bringing payment to Indigenous trade partners in the service of the companies' demand for goods. These encounters do not make for a remarkable tale. They do, however, succeed in putting together a more cohesive picture of Native involvement. Indigenous groups were caught up in the global desires for fashion and wealth, and they responded by building alliances and furthering their own causes to improve their lives. For the Blackfoot, this meant raiding whenever possible to try to capitalize on the demand for fur. For the Shoshone, it meant welcoming the traders in to hold their rendezvous and exchange goods. Still, the reality was that in the lives of Natives and trappers, the modest exchange of stories, goods, and fur ruled the day.

In the early days of the trade, James Clyman learned firsthand the value of Indigenous trade partners. After discovering the abundance of beaver, he and his brigade hunted through the spring of 1824. Clyman and Fitzpatrick were then sent back east to deliver the pelts. Fitzpatrick and Clyman had become separated after running into a war party and breaking off with each other to avoid detection. While Clyman returned to their original position, he did not meet up with Fitzpatrick again and was forced to travel alone. Clyman spent weeks on his own. The lonesomeness weighed on Clyman who was desperate for human contact, even reflecting on his

²²⁹ Barry, "Journal of E. Willard Smith While with the Fur Traders, Vasquez and Sublette, in the Rocky Mountain Region, 1839-1840," 267.

“hopes of meeting some human being even a friendly Indian would be a relief to my solitude.”²³⁰

Clyman acknowledged to some degree that he was an outsider in this land, noting his hopes of seeing familiar “white men in this Indian world.” This tacit statement on the status of the West provided the welcome reminder that for some time it remained a place where Native people set the terms—for a little while longer at least. Upon his arrival in a Pawnee village somewhere along the Platte River, he was stripped of his possessions by one Pawnee man before being rescued by another who mounted the lost trapper up on his horse and took him into the village. He warned Clyman to not wander. Some in the village were not kind and wanted him killed. He let Clyman stay the night and fed him the next morning. That same morning, the Pawnee and his son brought Clyman by horseback to a location two miles from the village hoping to secure him to safety and set him back on the path east. His kindness saved Clyman’s life. In return for this kindness, Clyman granted the man his request allowing him to cut Clyman’s long hair— “he loved me that he had saved my life and wanted the hair for a memento of me.” Clyman further wrote of this incident, “I barely saved my scalp but lost my hair.”²³¹ The Pawnee for whom Clyman had little regard, had saved his life. These types of encounters were necessary for the fur trade to succeed. Even though the fur companies could provide tools, weapons, and various other luxuries that the Native society could not produce, it was the trappers who needed the Native’s aid as if their lives depended on it—which very often, they did.

These incidents represent only a small handful of the many encounters between company men and Native Americans. In these years, this region remained Native ground, a world where

²³⁰ James Clyman, “Narrative of 1823-24,” 32.

²³¹ James Clyman, “Narrative of 1823-24,” 32-35.

Natives controlled trade and diplomacy and placed themselves firmly at the heart of all Europeans' interactions with the land.²³² Native Americans held the power in the day to day lives of traders. From selling horses to William Ashley, to saving a hapless trader alone on his journey home, these tribes made the difference between life and death. Nonetheless, the story of the Indigenous peoples who aided the trade inevitably end much the same as those who fought against it. Early victories were preludes to losses as the trade abandoned its allies to the United States government's wants.

Indigenous Business

It takes extraordinarily little time to 'find' Native Americans in the Rocky Mountain trade. They are featured, to some degree, in the journals of every trapper to step foot in the region. Where some hardly considered Natives as human beings, let alone as trusted allies, other American traders found adventure and companionship with them. Interactions between those traders and Natives, no matter how mundane, should guide modern perceptions of the trade, just as they do in the eighteenth-century French system. The stories told above are a mere handful of those that shift the narrative away from the work of American trappers alone and to the ways in which Native America played a role in this trade. The Rocky Mountain system of the fur trade was one of the most exciting chapters in western history for good reason. Its legends have held great acclaim over the years, and it is high time that Native roles are celebrated as well.

From its inception, the Rocky Mountain fur trade was part of the colonial machine. Aiming to drive American traders into the positions once entrusted to Indigenous hunters, it altered the game—or at least, sought to. The response from Native communities was as diverse

²³² Kathleen DuVal, *The Native Ground: Indians and Colonists in the Heart of the Continent*, (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

as the peoples of the various tribes. Where some rejected the fur companies' efforts of appeasement, others sought to make the most of the situation working with the mountain men. The fur companies brought new forms wealth to the West as they extracted wealth in furs, and in response, Indigenous peoples went to work. Exerting influence where they could, in peace and conflict, Natives set the terms. Trappers, meanwhile, did what they could to build relationships where possible and violently snuffed out resistance. For the mountain men, Indigenous communities were as much a part of the work as the beaver was.

The trapper's life was never one of isolated peoples hunting and selling pelts. Natives knew this better than anyone. They shared knowledge of the land, their skills in a fight, and continued hunting furs as partners in the business of fur. Their cooperation and aid were necessary if the Rocky Mountain system was going to thrive. The rendezvous gatherings were punctuated by feasts, games, drinks, and general merriment between both the traders and Natives on Shoshone lands. This meeting of worlds showed that the sprawling web of connections seen in the French system had been maintained. Communities tied together made for good business. They saved the lives of many men who often thought little of them, and they did so with kindness to the relationships they had built with the trappers. Given the stories of their day, it is a wonder they were ever set aside.

CHAPTER FOUR

“For the Freedom of Equal Rights”: Portraits of the Black Fur Trapper²³³

The story of the mountain man has long been steeped in iconography. There have been certain aspects of the mountaineer’s appearance that authors have taken care to accentuate over the years from his buckskins to his worn features. As should be evident by now, conceptions of the mountain man were built, not to memorialize, but to symbolize something beyond his role. As part of this, the mountain man’s race became deeply associated with his role in American expansion. He was an Anglo-American. His rivals were foreigners and Native Americans. According to that narrative, any deviation from that story was an anomaly. But, of course, this history was much more complicated. Black fur trappers, in particular, were operating from the earliest days of the western fur trade, long before the rendezvous. They remained in the West long after.

Admittedly, there are challenges for historians of the Rocky Mountain fur business’ reflecting trade workers. An individual can appear in the record briefly without context or description and vanish just as quickly. To identify these men at all, let alone specify their race and role in the company business is a nigh impossibility. While remembrances of the mountain man have focused on the success stories among them, even successful black fur trappers have failed to find starring roles in the historiography. The Black mountain men have been deemed unreliable narrators. Their stories are validated only through the historical record of the *great* mountain men. Generations of scholarly work has perpetuated the idea that the history of the trade was a history of white men stepping foot into the unknown. While the majority of company

²³³James Clyman, “Harris epitaph,” in Hasselstrom, ed., *Journal of a Mountain Man*, 87.

and free trappers were white men, it remains the fact that they were not alone in their endeavors. Joining them in the West were a variety of other men of color ready to try their hand in the trading of furs. If not outright silenced without mention, the stories of Black mountain men have been muddled in controversy, and they have found themselves relegated to the support of their white contemporaries.²³⁴

Their story begins with the expansion of the United States when, in 1803, Congress approved and funded the Louisiana Purchase. With a desire to see what fifteen million dollars had bought them, Congress dispatched the Corps of Discovery under the leadership of Captain Meriwether Lewis. Among Lewis' expedition party was a man named York. The slave of William Clark, Lewis' friend, and second in command, York was but a brief visitor to the West. Nevertheless, his participation in the expedition was invaluable. His skill as a marksman aided in his ability to feed the expedition party. As a slave, York served in the hard work rowing upstream, transporting the party's equipment, and maintaining the camp, including gathering and potentially preparing food. A further reference in Clark's field notes, York appears as particularly responsible for the direct care of Sergeant Charles Floyd in his final hours after his appendix burst. He also functioned as a bridge between the worlds of American explorers and Indigenous communities. York became the middleman as the party's main trader meeting with

²³⁴ The Black West is an outgrowth of the new western history movement looking to expand our understanding of the West by looking at African American individuals present there. Fantastic examples of this study include William Loren Katz, *The Black West*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1971); Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, (New York City, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999); Douglas Flamming, *African Americans in the West*, (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clio, 2009); and Bruce A. Glasrud and Charles A. Braithwaite, eds., *African Americans on the Great Plains: An Anthology* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2009). Each of these works seeks to fill the gaps left by earlier historical works, covering broad periods of western history to achieve this goal. As such, most miss offering comprehensive dialogues regarding Black fur trappers, although Black fur trappers are always present.

the Indigenous tribes along their route to trade. He was the first Black man who travelled into the region and his dark skin coloration made him popular among the local bands.²³⁵

York had seen a glimpse of freedom over the course of the expedition across the mountain heights and the feeling seemed to stick with him. He saw that freedom ripped away from him when he returned home with Clark in September of 1806. Clark allowed York to marry, but soon after, he hired him out and separated the couple. Denied his freedom and separated from his wife, York grew sullen. In letters to his brother, Clark denigrated York as “insolent,” whipped him, jailed him, and made clear his intent to sell him for the trouble. Years later, Clark recounted to Washington Irving that he had freed York and given him land and equipment to start a life of his own. According to Clark, York was too lazy to make good use of those resources. He returned to servitude only to die from cholera. There is no historical evidence to support Clark’s version of events.²³⁶ York’s name fell out of the historical record in 1815.

York’s role in aiding this expedition was representative of the roles many African American men took up in the years to come. As the fur trade swept over the region, the use of African American men to act as middlemen was not only common, but a standard practice. In 1888, Bureau of American Ethnology’s Colonel James Stevenson noted, “the old fur traders always got a Negro, if possible, to negotiate for them with the Indians because of their “pacifying effect.” They could manage them better, with less friction.”²³⁷ Stevenson’s “pacifying effect”

²³⁵ Descriptions of York’s role in the expedition are discussed scattered through Robert B. Betts, *In Search of York: The Slave Who Went to the Pacific with Lewis and Clark*, (Denver, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2000), chapters 1-4.

²³⁶ Betts, *In Search of York*, 119, 159-164. and Darrell M. Millner, “York of the Corps of Discovery: Interpretations of York’s Character and His Role in the Lewis and Clark Expedition.” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 104, no. 3 (2003): 306–10.

²³⁷ Katz, *The Black West*, 24.

presented a contemptuous approach to describe the intermediary roles Black men served in the historical record. York's role as a middleman between his expedition party and local tribes is reflected in the stories of the known Black mountain men. Journals from York's time in the mountains strongly suggest that his dark skin served as a kind of "passport" to through the western tribes land.²³⁸ Whether it was as simple as the relative strangeness of a man with darker skin brought into the mix of Indigenous-American meetings or something else entirely, the end result saw Black fur trappers become proficient intermediaries between Indigenous bands and the companies. That said, Stevenson's theory fails to fully capture the variety of roles Black men held within the trade.

Black men were more than intermediaries. Historian Kenneth W. Porter posited that while other racial or national groups excelled in specific roles within the fur trade, African American men were adaptive:

[In] roles which included the entire range of cast, from cooks, personal servants, voyageurs, hunters, guides, and interpreters to salaried traders and Independent entrepreneurs. The Negroes have not dominated any one role, as have the Highland Scots, the French-Canadians, or the Kentuckians, but it is probably fair to say that they have been more versatile in their fur-trading activities than any of the latter.²³⁹

As company men, contract workers, free trappers, and beyond, Black mountain men found a place in the Rocky Mountain trade for the entirety of its operation. Nevertheless, Black fur trappers were rarely able to tell their own story—whether because of illiteracy, early death, or the preservation of the white stereotype. The Black fur trappers, nonetheless, have left a mark on the trade's history. Wherever they are found, they tell of a dynamic group of men who

²³⁸ Betts, *In Search of York*, 57-58.

²³⁹ Kenneth W. Porter, "Negroes and the Fur Trade," *Minnesota History* Vol. 15, No. 4 (Dec., 1934), 432-433.

challenged assumptions of their day. And again now, as historians' endeavor to recognize their place in a trade that has long relegated them to the margins.

The Black Mountain Men

The business of fur used up many men, but none played as complex a role as the Black trapper. For as much as the West was set apart from the intense racial lines of the East, it was not independent of them. The fur trade companies, from their earliest days in the West, brought slaves with them. The American fur trade—the quintessential symbol of freedom—used slaves at forts as late as 1848. For example, a man named Mose worked at Fort Sarpy, someone named Auguste toiled at Fort Berthold, and Joseph and an unnamed cook worked at Fort Union. Jim Hawkins was another cook at Fort Union. At one time forced out of another position due to debt incurred with “immoral Indian women,” Hawkins left Fort Union in dissatisfaction with his boss for Fort Clark. Traveler Rudolf Friedrich Kurz said Hawkins was a slave and sent back his earnings to his owner in St. Louis.²⁴⁰ Charles Bent brought Charlotte, Dick, and Andrew Green, all enslaved people, when he moved from St. Louis to establish his trading post on the Arkansas River in 1833.²⁴¹ David Jackson, of Smith, Jackson, and Sublette, brought a slave known only as Jim, overland on the Santa Fe trail and through to California not long after Jackson had sold his

²⁴⁰ Rudolf Friedrich Kurz, *Journal of Rudolph Friederich Kurz: An Account of His Experiences Among Fur Traders and American Indians on the Mississippi and the Upper Missouri Rivers During the Years 1846 to 1852*, (United States: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), 101-102.

²⁴¹ Charles Bent, founder of the fort had brought Charlotte and Dick from St. Louis. The two were a married couple and held various posts at the fort, involved with cooking and blacksmithing. When Bent was killed during the Taos Rebellion, Dick rode with various trappers to avenge him. William Bent, in gratitude for his actions informally granted Charlotte and Dick their freedom. While they returned to Missouri, Andrew, Dick's brother, stayed in the country to trap and trade. William Gwaltney, “Beyond the Pale African-Americans in the Fur Trade West,” *Lest We Forget*, Jan. 1995.

shares in the company.²⁴² Jim's origin and eventual fate are unclear. These individuals are difficult to trace except in accounts by individuals visiting the forts.

Slavery played only a partial role in bringing Black men westward. Long mythologized as the ultimate bastion of freedom for its laboring class, the fur trade may indeed have offered some sense of freedom to the Black men who set out to join its workers. Among the earliest was a man named Cadet Chevalier who was a "mulatto" trapper employed by various trappers, but mainly the Missouri Fur Company in the early 1800s.²⁴³ Baptiste Point du Sable, killed in the later winter of '14, was another Missouri Fur company man between 1812 and 1814.²⁴⁴ The first among Ashley's Hundred was a man called Willess. He joined Ashley's ill-fated Missouri River expedition in 1823 being wounded when Arikara warriors attacked their keelboats. We only know about him from a notation in the report of those injured or dead.²⁴⁵ Similarly, death records tell us about Polette Labross, a mixed-race man who had set out with Jedidiah Smith in 1827 to travel to California. In August of that year, the party came into conflict with a Mojave band who killed ten of the men travelling with Smith, including Labross.²⁴⁶ We know Labross worked for Smith, Jackson, and Sublette. The rest of his life, however, remains unknown. Just a few years earlier in 1826, Peter Ranne, a Black man, also accompanied Smith to California. The first Black man to have entered the territory, Ranne appears in the records as a "servant" to Smith. He travelled with Smith in 1828 and suffered the same fate as Labross the year prior, dying alongside most of his trapping party in a battle with a band of Kuitsh people of the Lower

²⁴² Jedediah Smith and William Sublette also owned slaves, however, there is no documentation to suggest they ever brought them out West. "David E. Jackson," in Hafen ed., *Trappers of the Far West*, 90.

²⁴³ Hanson and Eickleberry, "Marginal Men," 16.

²⁴⁴ Porter, "Negroes and the Fur Trade."

²⁴⁵ Morgan, *The West of William H. Ashley*, 28-29.

²⁴⁶ Morgan, *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West*, 236-240, 341. and Morgan, *The West of William H. Ashley*, 286.

Umpqua.²⁴⁷ Another Black man, James Parker, was recorded as working in the Fort Tecumseh-Fort Pierre area in the winter of 1831-32. In addition, a notation made about Bonaventure Lebrun, a Black man, states that he owed the American Fur Company \$56 of debts in 1832 according to records.²⁴⁸

Further still, Black men are noted in every corner of the trade working in multiple other functions. For instance, James Reed served as a blacksmith to Jedediah Smith, who after an unknown offense, flogged Reed.²⁴⁹ Many notations exist about people of color serving as cooks and camp keepers. A man known only as “Jim” served as a cook for trapper Jim Bridger in 1836. At one point, responding to theft of Bidger’s horse by an Indigenous chief, Jim “seized a rifle and shot the chief dead.” The quick act threw the raiding party into disarray and left Jim “elated.”²⁵⁰ John Duchonquette was another cook of the American Fur Company at Fort Union. His father, Francois Duchonquette, was known to be an early explorer with the Astorians.²⁵¹ Another instance concerns John Brazeau and his son Frank Grouard who worked for the American Fur Company. Brazeau was once employed by fur trade bourgeois, Kenneth McKenzie, to “flog malefactors.” The story goes he was driven to shoot one of these men at one point.²⁵²

Beyond the Rockies, there were other notable Black men in the trade. Allen Light, also known as “Black Steward,” hunted sea otter in California through the late 1830s. Born in

²⁴⁷ The conflict’s origin seemingly from the behavior of the trapping party towards Indigenous women of the region, combined with the alleged theft of an ax from the tribe. Regardless, this violence was an exception to the behavior of the Kuitsh people towards trappers. Morgan, *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West*, Ch. 13.

²⁴⁸ Hanson and Eickleberry, “Marginal Men,” 44.

²⁴⁹ Dale, *The Ashley Smith Explorations*, 206.

²⁵⁰ Victor, *The River of the West vol 1*, 197-198.

²⁵¹ Hanson and Eickleberry, “Marginal Men,” 23-24.

²⁵² Hanson and Eickleberry, “Marginal Men,” 10; Ian Frazier, “Great Plains—II. Notes from a six-thousand-mile ramble through America,” *The New Yorker*, (February 27, 1989).

Philadelphia, Light sailed from New York to Santa Barbara to begin a new life in Mexican California. His time there a success, he was an employer of hunters in the region and a trusted ally of Governor Alvarado. He vanishes from the historical record by 1851.²⁵³ In the Old Northwest Territory, the Bonga brothers, George and Stephen, descended from a fur trading dynasty. Their father Pierre Bonga and Grandfather Jean Bonga were in their time skilled tradesmen of the French system. George was deeply involved with the American Fur Company in the mid-west. He spoke Ojibwe, and he held a powerful role as interpreter, fur trapper, clerk, and Indian agent in this little pocket of the American Fur Trade.²⁵⁴ Their stories were not dissimilar to their contemporaries in the mountain trade.

All told, these men account for a few names recorded in the Rocky Mountain trade. It is likely, if not certain, that there were more Black men who joined the ranks of the mountain men. Much like their white counterparts who failed to make their mark on the trade, most of the accounts of Black fur traders have been lost. In a fur trade defined by success or failure, the Black trapper started on the backfoot more often than not. In comparison to their white counterparts, still fewer who started as basic hired hands became independent, trapping capitalists.²⁵⁵

With most Black fur traders' records too sparse to spin a story, it left just three significant men—Rose, Harris, and Beckwourth—who, by all accounts, made their years in the trade a success. Their lives, as well documented as many of their contemporaries, were ready to be

²⁵³ David J. Weber, "A Black American in Mexican San Diego," *San Diego Historical Society Quarterly*, Spring 1974, Volume 20, Number 2.

²⁵⁴ Katz, *The Black West*, 28-30.

²⁵⁵ Of all the men discussed thus far none were free trappers. Of the more significant men Moses Harris and James Beckwourth despite moving between companies were always employed as guides or interpreters during their time in the trade. Edward Rose, the closest to a free trapper of the time seemed disinterested in defined capitalistic success. For early discussion on this issue see, Porter, "Negroes and the Fur Trade," 421–433.

immortalized as part of fur trade mythos. Yet, they never were. Rose died with Hugh Glass, but his name never became well known. Harris, a close ally of William Sublette, spent longer in the trade, yet he never wrote his own autobiography. Beckwourth, who lived a life as full as any man in the trade, if not more so, had his name slandered for decades.

Rose

The story of black fur traders begins with the life of Edward Rose. An early aid to Ashley's expeditions, Rose had a hand in the region long before Ashley had arrived. Details of his life, especially his childhood, are sparse. Piecing them together forms a portrait of an enigmatic man who took to life in the West. Born in Kentucky, Rose was the son of a white man and a mixed-race woman of Cherokee and African American descent.²⁵⁶ As a young man, Rose, a thief and brawler, claimed to have been a member of a band of pirates who travelled the Mississippi from St. Louis to New Orleans.²⁵⁷ He was a formidable and fierce-looking man, with a brand on his forehead, and a piece of his nose missing—supposedly bitten off in a brawl in Louisiana.²⁵⁸ He earned the nickname *Nez Coupé*, or “Cut Nose.” Washington Irving described him as “a dogged, sullen, silent fellow, with a sinister aspect and more of the savage than the civilized man.”²⁵⁹ Later on, he gained the nickname “Five Scalps,” after he singlehandedly killed five men with an axe while others of his band stood back and watched.²⁶⁰ Rose was known by the marks of conflict and his reputation in the West was all the more complicated as a result.

²⁵⁶ There is no record of Rose's age or when he first travelled West. Hasselstrom, *Journal of a Mountain Man*, 37.

²⁵⁷ Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol 2, 676.

²⁵⁸ The brand said to have been crudely implemented resembling “the most unfortunate letter of the alphabet.” Rose himself claimed it as a bite mark from a Frenchman. Reuben Holmes, “Glimpses of The Past: The Five Scalps,” *Missouri Historical Society* 5, Jan-Mar, 1838, 7 and Hasselstrom, *Journal of a Mountain Men*, 37.

²⁵⁹ Irving, *Astoria*, 165.

²⁶⁰ Holmes, “The Five Scalps,” 12-16.

He spent time living along the Osage River, purportedly “fond of the independent and lawless life.” There he enlisted with Manuel Lisa’s Missouri Fur Company in 1807 and spent the winter among the Crow learning their language and settling into a life supplying them with trade goods.²⁶¹ Rose returned to the company the following Spring with little to report. What occurred in the meeting between Lisa and Rose is unclear. We only know that a “scuffle” ensued, and that Rose attempted to fire on Lisa’s boat with a swivel gun. According to author Rueben Holmes, it took fifteen men, working together, to restrain Rose’s “ungovernable passion.”²⁶² Leaving Lisa’s employ, Rose returned to the Crow for the next three years.²⁶³

In 1811, Rose was contracted by Wilson P. Hunt and the Astorians. Because of his experience, Hunt hired Rose on to guide his crew through Crow territory. During the expedition, Hunt grew increasingly “panic-stricken” over Rose’s allegiances to the Crow and dismissed him.²⁶⁴ Irving defended Hunt’s actions suggesting that Rose was plotting with some of Hunt’s company to steal horses and trade goods before deserting to join the Crow.²⁶⁵ According to Irving’s romanticized account, Hunt *valiantly* recognized Rose’s “sinister designs,” disarmed him, and informed him his services were no longer required. Hunt then paid Rose handsomely, “half a year’s wages in consideration of his past services,” along with a horse, beaver traps, and trade goods, and then parted.²⁶⁶ Historian Hiram Chittenden dismissed this account and suggested there was “not the slightest evidence” of ill intent on Rose’s part. The possibility of Hunt bribing Rose seemed, to Chittenden, a “little better than ridiculous.”²⁶⁷ Indeed, Rose and

²⁶¹ The reason for this total disbursement of trade goods differs between sources. Holmes argues that Rose did this to elevate himself among the Crow. See Holmes, “The Five Scalps,” 7, 10.

²⁶² Holmes, “The Five Scalps,” 8-10.

²⁶³ Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol 2, 676.

²⁶⁴ Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol 2. 677.

²⁶⁵ Irving, *Astoria*, 170-172.

²⁶⁶ Irving, *Astoria*, 174-175.

²⁶⁷ Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol 2. 677.

the Crow returned just two days later to guide them safely through the Bighorn Mountains where Hunt and his party were stranded.²⁶⁸

Irving disparaged Rose as a man who lived as a murderous pirate, before taking to life with the Crow since their supposed “predatory habits were congenial with his own.” Marrying and living among them, Rose “had identified himself with those vagrant savages.”²⁶⁹ In Rose, we find the conflation between being Black in the West and racist portrayals of what it meant to be Indigenous. On this matter, author Reuben Holmes, a contemporary of Rose, suggests that Rose had embraced his “nativity” renouncing the comforts of early 1800’s America for a life of roaming and brutality.²⁷⁰ This suggestion, something scholars had adapted for their discussions of Rose in the years since, remains problematically rooted in the settler colonial perspectives of Native life from the time.

After leaving Hunt’s employ, Rose returned to life with the Crow, once more vanishing from fur trading records. He appears again in 1812 working for the Missouri Fur Company, this time as a free trapper. Fur trader Joshua Pilcher suggests that in this time Rose had “left the Indian Country in chains.”²⁷¹ In author Rueben Holmes’ account, Rose left to live among the Omaha, married and fathered two children before being taken away by some kind of law enforcement in “irons” to St. Louis. This occurred after a series of drunken encounters—most notably a brawl with Big Elk, the chief of the tribe.²⁷² This story does not appear in subsequent histories of Rose—whether it happened or not is difficult to substantiate.

²⁶⁸ Taylor, *In Search of Racial Frontier*, 50.

²⁶⁹ Irving, *Astoria*, 172

²⁷⁰ Holmes, “The Five Scalps,” 6.

²⁷¹ Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol 2, 676-677.

²⁷² Holmes, “The Five Scalps,” 39 – 43.

By the early 1820s, Rose left the Crow to live with the Arikara.²⁷³ He appears once more in the record in 1823. Ashley hired Rose as an interpreter to guide him and his men on an expedition up the Missouri River. Along the way, Ashley met with the Arikara to trade. The Arikara left the encounter dissatisfied, but Ashley remained sure of his expedition party's safety. Rose cautioned Ashley to distrust the Arikara's "pretend friendship." It was a warning Ashley ignored.²⁷⁴ The Arikara later attacked on the banks of the river forcing Ashley and his men to retreat, but not before several men were wounded or killed. The trappers retreated, sheltering along the river. When the army commissioned Rose as an interpreter, he brought peace between the two warring factions. Colonel Henry Leavenworth saw Rose was a "brave and enterprising man, well acquainted with the Indians," although, Leavenworth admitted he had later "heard that [Rose] was not of good character."²⁷⁵ Under Leavenworth, Rose played a vital role in communications between Native villages and the army. Of Rose, Leavenworth wrote, "I had not found any one willing to go into these villages, except a man by the name of Rose."²⁷⁶ Integral to the mission, Rose was well suited to serve as the middleman between the Indigenous world and the coming empire.

In the first characterizations of Rose, Holmes distinguishes him as a man who had adopted the skills and knowledge of his Indigenous home:

He could endure any kind of fatigue and privation as well as the best trained Indian. He studied men. He knew every secret spring and impulse that gave energy to the mind and action of an Indian. There was nothing that an Indian could do, that Rose did not make himself a master of. He knew all Indians know, and had, besides, the advantage of

²⁷³ Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 49. The details of Rose's life among the Arikara, like much of his life, remain unknown. Historian Don Berry suggests that in the three years he spent among the Arikara had allowed to grow familiar of their tactics in turn lending credence to his warnings of their danger. See Berry, *Majority of Scoundrels*, 45.

²⁷⁴ This conflict is discussed in greater detail later on. Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol 2, 676-677.

²⁷⁵ Holmes, "The Five Scalps," 3-4.

²⁷⁶ Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol 2, 677-678.

knowing much of what white men know. He was a great man in his situation. He seemed born for it.²⁷⁷

Seeking out “death where it was most likely to be found,” Rose’s legend was as a capable man at home among the Indigenous bands of the West. In his evident skill in navigating life in the West, one also finds the unfavorable tales of deception and betrayal. However, Rose may well have known the power of appearances. Taking on a “stage effect,” Rose appeared to have intentionally built his reputation as a reckless fighter and commanded it to further his influence.²⁷⁸ His encounter with Hunt tells of a man of ill intent, even where there may have been none. Hiram Chittenden wrote, “Rose bore bad reputation, but the singular thing is that everything definite that is known of him is entirely to his credit.”²⁷⁹

Following the disastrous river expeditions west, Rose accompanied Jedidiah Smith on an overland expedition serving once more as an interpreter and guide. Rose delivered Smith and his company through Crow territory before leaving the trappers and returning to live among the Crow.²⁸⁰ Accounts on Rose’s whereabouts after his early employ with Ashley are nonexistent. It is likely that he remained with the Crow working as a trapper, trader, interpreter, and guide as he had done for the previous thirteen years as a contract worker and free trapper. The work required a thorough knowledge of the land as well as the ability to communicate and negotiate with Indigenous bands. Rose was highly skilled in both regards. Rose reappears one final time in the winter of 1832-33. This time, he enlisted under the American Fur Company. He was on route to deliver a message to Fort Union with trappers Hugh Glass and Hilain Menard when the Arikara killed all three in an ambush.²⁸¹

²⁷⁷ Holmes, “The Five Scalps”, 11.

²⁷⁸ Holmes, “The Five Scalps,” 11 – 12.

²⁷⁹ Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol 2, 676.

²⁸⁰ Hasselstrom, *Journal of a Mountain Man*, 37.

²⁸¹ Hafen, *The Mountain Men and The Fur Trade of The Far West* vol. IX, 345.

Rose's withdrawal from the "civilized" world, along with his early death, and the lack of any personal papers, left few records with which historians could use to tell his story.²⁸² In his day, his "ferocious temper, stunning readiness for battle and savage humor" had made him a celebrity. Today, he draws little attention.²⁸³ Only a caricature of the man remains. Regardless of intentions, we know that Rose was a skilled interpreter, guide, and trapper. A bridge between the companies and the Indigenous world, Rose aligned himself with the interest of his adopted peoples while aiding when and wherever needed by the trappers.

Harris

Born in Union County, South Carolina, Moses Harris' early years are a mystery.²⁸⁴ Harris first appears in historical record in 1823 working with Ashley and Henry's river expeditions west and was already known to be "an old and experienced mountaineer [...] in whom the general reposed the strictest confidence for his knowledge of the country and his familiarity with Indian life."²⁸⁵ How and when he first came to the mountains to work with Ashley and Henry in St. Louis is unclear, but it is possible he responded to Ashley's advertisement in the *Missouri Gazette* in 1822.²⁸⁶ Regardless of when his employment began with the company, Harris' skills and knowledge of Indigenous sign language and his ability to survive made him an invaluable asset in the West.

²⁸² The only notable modern work that focuses on Rose is fictional. Entitled *Five Scalps: The Life of Edward Rose* author Jerry Matney details some facts of the fur trapper's life and makes up the rest. Matney, like Chittenden further claims without merit that Jim Beckwourth simply stole Rose's tales for himself. See Jerry Matney, *Five Scalps: The Life of Edward Rose*, (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2006).

²⁸³ Morgan, *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West*, 80

²⁸⁴ *St. Louis Democrat*, June 12, 1844. Author W. H. Gray suggested an opposing origin from Kentucky, opposed by historian Charles Camp who refers to the *St. Louis Democrat's* Union County origin in the pages of his work *James Clyman, Frontiersman*.

²⁸⁵ Bonner, *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth*, 38.

²⁸⁶ Clyman, James, and Charles L. Camp. "James Clyman: His Diaries and Reminiscences (Continued)," *California Historical Society Quarterly* 4, no. 3 (1925): 279.

Moses Harris exists in just about every mountain man's journal of the Rocky Mountain trading era. Harris worked with Ashley during his ill-fated expedition up the Missouri river in 1823. Undeterred by the violence he found there, he nevertheless pushed on overland in November of '24, to trap the Rockies.²⁸⁷ It is during this overland trek, that Harris found himself travelling some three hundred miles with Beckwourth to near starvation in a quest for horses that instead found them packing furs.²⁸⁸ Beckwourth's high regard for Harris lasted long past their time in the mountains. In remembering him, Beckwourth recalled Harris as "a man of 'great leg' and capable, from his long sojourning in the mountains, of enduring extreme privation and fatigue."²⁸⁹ It was a reputation any mountain man would envy.

Surviving the journey with Beckwourth in one piece, Harris continued on as a company trapper. By 1825, trade leadership sent four men out to circumnavigate the Great Salt Lake in search of the fabled Buenaventura River.²⁹⁰ Harris, along with James Clyman, Louis Vasquez and Henry Fraeb, all at one point or another, made claim to have done just that, indicating high likelihood that these were the four men sent out to the Great Salt Lake.²⁹¹ The next year, Ashley sold his shares in the company to Smith, Jackson, and Sublette, with Harris being present at the sale. Along with other old friends and transfers from Ashley, Robert Campbell, Thomas Fitzpatrick, Jim Bridger, and Beckwourth, became "able lieutenants" that came to head their own brigades in time. A trusted ally by year's end, Harris accompanied Sublette to St. Louis to deliver a request for merchandise for the following year's rendezvous.²⁹²

²⁸⁷ R. Gregory Nokes, "Black Harris," *Columbia Magazine* vol. 30.4 Winter 2016-2017. 14

²⁸⁸ Elinor Wilson, *Jim Beckwourth*, (Norman, OK and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), 31-32.

²⁸⁹ Bonner, *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth*, 38.

²⁹⁰ The river's fabled existence originated from the belief that the Great Salt Lake was surely an inlet of the Pacific.

²⁹¹ Morgan, *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West*, 185.

²⁹² Mathew Field, "Journal of Rocky Mountain Expedition", August 6-29, 1843, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, MO; John E. Sunder, *Bill Sublette: Mountain Man*, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1959), 68-70.

The two set off on New Year's Day of 1827. Their only companion was a pack dog pulling a travois, a practice they learned from local Indigenous tribes of the region. Trudging through deep snow in rudimentary snowshoes, by mid-January passing Ham's Fork, the pair was already running low on food. Although able to resupply and camp at various points, the duo struggled to find food. Along the Platte River, they began to grow desperate. Turning first to a stray raven for supper before nearing starvation and feeling ill, the two, with reluctance, killed their pack dog. Their loyal companion provided them with less than two day's food. They then came upon their saving grace, a flock of wild turkeys who supplied them the rest of their journey. When they reached the Old Kansas Village, Harris' ankle had given out and the duo were running out of time to meet with Ashley. Sublette bartered away his pistol for a horse, and the pair hurried to St. Louis—arriving late, but still alive.²⁹³ It was not the first time Harris had made this journey, nor was it be the last, but it was likely the most difficult. In surviving the journey this time and under the circumstances that he and Sublette did, Harris proved his resilience and the insight to become the route guide in years to come.

As time went on, Harris remained in the mountains trapping as far west as Oregon. Harris's longtime employer, The Rocky Mountain Fur Company, witnessed their debts growing as steadily as competition grew. By 1834, under mounting pressure, the Rocky Mountain Fur Company dissolved, and the American Fur Company took over. With a new supplier, Harris too found a new place in the trade as a guide to the supply train to and from the rendezvous. In route to the rendezvous in 1836, '38, and '39, Harris brought with him parties seeking safe passage to the Oregon Territory.²⁹⁴ In the caravan, recently married couples Marcus and Narcissa Whitman

²⁹³ Sunder, *Bill Sublette: Mountain Man*, 71-72.

²⁹⁴ Nokes, "Black Harris," 16.

and Henry and Eliza Spalding headed west to serve their Christian missions. Narcissa seemed delighted by the trapper's company. At one point, she invited "Maj. Harris" and his fellow trappers to join her in the evening for tea. She was delighted with their company. She cheerfully wrote, "I never was so contented and happy before."²⁹⁵ Harris, despite a reputation as a "specialist in solitary travel" seemed to make a habit of keeping company along the trail.²⁹⁶

As the rendezvous era came to its close, Harris had found reliable work as a guide through the West and spent much of the 1840s escorting folks to Oregon. His interest in the territory sparked early in his time in the trade, he settled down there along the Luckiamute River, at least for a time. He continued working as a hired hand for pioneers and trappers alike, responding whenever asked for help. For the latter part of the 1840s, he returned to guiding wagon trains west.²⁹⁷ In remembering his friend in 1844, James Clyman wrote a mock epitaph:

*Here lies the bones of old Black Harris
who often traveled beyond the far west
and for the freedom of Equal rights
He crossed the snowy mountain Hights
was free and easy kind of soul
Especially with a Belly full.²⁹⁸*

In 1849, Harris died of cholera in an epidemic that swept through encampments along the trail. In Independence, Missouri, the story of the old mountain man and trail guide came to its close.²⁹⁹ In his final moments, he asked a bystander to "spread the news as [they] passed on, that Black Harris was dead" so that his wife and two children whom he left in the mountains might learn of

²⁹⁵ DeVoto, *Across the Wide Missouri*, 252; Narcissa Whitman, "Platte River just above the Forks June 3rd, 1836," letter.

²⁹⁶ DeVoto, *Across the Wide Missouri*, 343.

²⁹⁷ Nokes, "Black Harris," 18-20.

²⁹⁸ Hasselstrom, *Journal of a Mountain Man*, 87.

²⁹⁹ Hasselstrom, *Journal of a Mountain Man*, 87.

his demise.³⁰⁰ Beyond these final moments, communicated through third party in the local newspaper, Harris left behind no other indications he had a family.

Moses Harris is an enigma in the discussion of fur traders of color. Like most fur trappers, he left remarkably little behind which has left scholars stumped on many questions regarding his youth and identity. Thus, with Harris, there are yet unresolved debates on whether he was indeed a Black man at all. Surviving descriptions of the man by artist Alfred Jacob Miller describe Harris “of



Figure 9. *Trappers*, Alfred Jacob Miller, 1858-1860. This painting by Miller is widely believed to depict Harris (left). Courtesy of the Walters Art Museum.

wiry form, made up of bone and muscle, with a face apparently composed of tan leather and whip cord, finished off with a peculiar blue-black tint, as if gunpowder had been burnt into his face.”³⁰¹ Author W.H. Gray later depicted Harris as “of medium height, black hair, black whiskers, dark brown eyes, and very dark complexion.”³⁰² Another description of Harris comes

³⁰⁰ “Gerald”, *Independence Daily Union*, May 14th, 1849.

³⁰¹ Morgan, *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West*, 218.

³⁰² Camp. “James Clyman: His Diaries and Reminiscences (Continued),” 279.

from the 1838 rendezvous in which Cushing Eells, another missionary whom Harris escorted, described him as a “half-breed”. In his autobiography, Beckwourth describes Harris, and another man named Portuleuse as “white men.” This description of the two men found enclosed in quotation marks is an oddity for the biography which used the markers in standard fashion to indicate conversation, of which this is not an example³⁰³ In 1903, pioneer Jesse Applegate suggested that Harris, “tho a white man, his face was the color of his coat.”³⁰⁴ Guided by Harris through the West, Applegate surely had met the man, but his claim is contradictory and without significant historical backing.³⁰⁵ While neither Miller nor Gray outright refer to his race, their descriptions of him concur with Applegate’s observations.

Questions surrounding Harris’ background and his skin color have lingered for some time. Despite there being an absence of official documentation of Harris’s race, there is considerable evidence in support of Harris being a man of color. Surviving physical descriptions lean into Harris’ sobriquets “Black Harris,” and less commonly, “Black Squire.” As scholar Darrell Milner proposes, “those were insulting ‘fighting words’ if he did not consider himself to be that [black], and goodness knows those mountain men didn’t need much of an excuse to start

³⁰³ Bonner, *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth*, 100. It is possible, although impossible to say for certain, that the use of this punctuation choice suggests irony. Although the use of ironic punctuation has a history dating back to ancient Greece, scare quotes, are decidedly more recent. Regardless, Beckwourth’s suggestion could be attributed to the failings of memory, to the idea that Harris may have passed for white, or been mixed-race, allowing individuals who did not know him well to assume his race. Perhaps, it is an indication of them behaving and doing jobs perceived to be those of white men. Harris definitely was in a position of responsibility and had the respect of those he encountered. Contrary to the perception of Black men of the time. Portuleuse, the other man mentioned is only found in the pages of *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth*, as to his identity, including his race, we cannot be certain. Regardless, the suggestion further clouds the already foggy identity of Moses Harris.

³⁰⁴ *The Polk County Observer*, March 13, 1903.

³⁰⁵ Writing fifty-six years after his initial encounters with Harris there are reasonable explanations to Applegate’s suggestion Harris was white. As discussed, anything from a lapse in memory to an assumption on Applegate’s part could explain the description which does still infer Harris’ skin color was enough to suggest he was not a white man. Regardless, Applegate’s suggestion of whiteness is characteristic of the general assumptions of whiteness made about fur trappers from the time.

a fight—in effect, he would have been in constant combat.”³⁰⁶ Furthermore, taken at face value Clyman had suggested in his poem about Harris, that his reason for coming West was in search of “equal rights”. This was a common draw of the West for many African American individuals, at least those who were free to do so. It was rare for a white man of the time to have similar drive, nor are any other men of the period remembered for such motivating factors for their movement west.

If Moses Harris was a freed Black man, like Beckwourth was, it is reasonable to suggest that Clyman knew of this past and communicated it through his writing. Harris, a private man by all accounts, was a friend of many trappers who spent extended periods of time together. It is nearly certain that he shared bits and pieces of his life before the fur trade around the winter camps, if not in the pages of historical record. Harris’ early skill in the mountains, along with his ability to speak sign, was reflective of contemporaries such as Edward Rose. His hiring was in line with the use of Black men to act as intermediaries between the white company men and the Indigenous peoples of the region.³⁰⁷ Further evidence to suggest his race may be found in his origin, or lack thereof. While missing documentation is not entirely uncommon in men of the time, the total absence of historical record from his youth could suggest he was born a slave and traveled west without proper documentation.

We will never know for certain Harris’ origins or find answers to his identity. Although it is worth saying that like other Black trappers, Harris’ race never truly defined his work as a trapper and guide for many headed west. He was a valued ally and friend to many fur trappers—a leader, guide, and trusted lieutenant to the fur trade’s “great” men. His story was one of

³⁰⁶ Nokes, “Black Harris,” 14.

³⁰⁷ Katz, *The Black West*, 24.

resilience, reliability, and most notably, that of a reputation as a private man who cultivated the image of an isolated figure who took his greatest stories to his grave.

Beckwourth

A man with accomplishments to rival Kit Carson, James Pierson Beckwourth has become a stand in for all traders of color. Scholars refer to him as *the Black trapper*.³⁰⁸ Nonetheless, Beckwourth remains a somewhat obscure figure in the trade—a representative of a minority populace, and not a whole lot more. Why is he so poorly understood if he exemplified the life of a model mountain man? An explorer, leader, entrepreneur, and survivor of all the West's great dangers, Beckwourth was one of few to record his adventures and preserve the memory of his time in the trade, unlike so many of his contemporaries.³⁰⁹ In his autobiography,



Figure 10. James Beckwourth, photograph, 1850s. Courtesy Robert G. McCubbin Collection

³⁰⁸ In the most recent study of the fur trade, *Fur, Fortune, and Empire*, historian Eric Dolin presents Beckwourth, and Beckwourth alone, as his example of the Black trader. Dolin, *Fur, Fortune, and Empire*, 379.

³⁰⁹ Recorded by Thomas D. Bonner in the winter of 1854-55, Beckwourth's autobiography is unlike any other source of its kind for its in-depth retelling of the life of a black fur trapper and social history during this time.

he described his childhood as a slave, his service in the fur trade, and his life with the Crow. The result is an autobiography that provides a unique view of the West from the perspective of the region's most noted Black mountain man. He defined himself by his adventuresome spirit and in another world, Beckwourth might have been regarded as one of the fur trades greatest legends. However, it was not to be. Instead, his remembrance is as a "gaudy liar" of the trade and has the legacy that title carries with it.³¹⁰ For most early scholars of the era, Beckwourth was a man lacking any shred of credibility.

Born a slave in Virginia, Beckwourth took his first steps west when his father and enslaver, Sir Jennings Beckwith, moved to Missouri. Beckwourth's childhood reflected an affection on the part of his father. Jennings Beckwith, who likely lived openly with Beckwourth's mother "Miss Kill," educated his son in the manners of a gentleman.³¹¹ He was a beloved son, and his father ensured he did not remain a slave. On three occasions, he personally appeared in court to deliver deeds of emancipation to free Beckwourth from slavery.³¹² Beckwourth was formally educated for a short while by own admission. He was no less literate than his white contemporaries.³¹³ For five years beginning in 1814, he learned the blacksmith trade in an apprenticeship arranged by his father. Though Beckwourth broke his bosses' rules, having become "enamored [with] a young damsel," was caught courting her. In a resulting scuffle, he threw a hammer back at his boss. Still legally a slave and fearing capture, he went to

³¹⁰ Wilson, *Jim Beckwourth*, 3.

³¹¹ "Miss Kill" is the only name ever recorded for Beckwourth's mother, it is almost certainly an inaccurate recording of the woman's identity. For lack of a full record, it is what she will remain known as. Wilson, *Jim Beckwourth*, 14, 18.

³¹² Wilson, *Jim Beckwourth*, 19.

³¹³ Wilson, *Jim Beckwourth*, 18.

his father who counseled him to return to the apprenticeship. Beckwourth refused and went to explore the banks of the Fever River.³¹⁴

In 1824, the same year he was freed by his father, Beckwourth moved out from his parental home “possessed with a strong desire to see the celebrated Rocky Mountains” and enlisted under William Ashley to be a fur trapper.³¹⁵ How Beckwourth came to meet Ashley is unknown—whether it be a chance encounter, a response to the paper, or something else altogether—it was an opportunity for Beckwourth to fulfill his desire to wander. The same unknowns surround the specifics of when the hiring of Beckwourth by Ashley took place. While there is limited evidence to suggest Beckwourth had accompanied Ashley in the Fall of 1823, it is certain that he was employed with the company when they departed from Fort Atkinson on November 3rd, 1824. In the early portions of this journey, Beckwourth, along with fellow trapper Moses “Black” Harris, went ahead to acquire horses from the Republican Pawnee. The journey nearly killed them. With the help of friendly Native people, they avoided starvation. Both settled into packing furs for the Chouteau trading family to get by in the winter season.³¹⁶

By the spring of 1825, Beckwourth had returned to Ashley’s party with whom he remained working as a wrangler and managing the care of horses. During his travels with Ashley, Beckwourth set the general and himself apart. Ashley was an unreasonable boss, not unlike his blacksmithing master years earlier, and Beckwourth was a prideful young man hoping to carve out his own place. This conflict resolved when, after a falling out with Ashley regarding

³¹⁴ Bonner, *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth*, 33-35.

³¹⁵ Beckwourth’s father’s first appearance in court to free his son was in 1824, for unclear reasons he appeared twice more in 1825 and 1826 to deliver deeds of emancipation. Wilson, *Jim Beckwourth*, 19. Bonner, *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth*, 38.

³¹⁶ Although the exact date of Beckwourth and Harris’ brush with death is unknown, given inconsistencies in Beckwourth’s recollection, scholars agree it happened early in Beckwourth’s employ in the fur trade sometime during the November 1824 overland expedition. Wilson, *Jim Beckwourth*, 30-32

poor treatment for otherwise faithful service, he had a cursing match. Beckwourth briefly left the company, before fellow trappers Thomas Fitzpatrick and Baptiste La Jeunesse at the behest of Ashley himself persuaded him to return.³¹⁷ Ever prideful, Beckwourth went on to recount that, despite their differences, he saved Ashley's life three times over. This included once saving him from drowning in the Green River, earning him Ashley's begrudging respect. When offered leadership of a trapping party, he flatly declined, for he knew he was simply "too young to undertake the responsibilities of the charge."³¹⁸ This was a humble boast, almost certainly exaggerated for effect, but it is one supported by evidence of the time.³¹⁹

Living in the mountains with his fellow trappers and Indigenous people alike, Beckwourth found a home in the hunt, in the fight, and in the freedom of the trade. This life offered the young man a chance to fulfill his wanderlust, see the West, and learn from its first disciples. Under the tutelage of James Clyman, Jim Bridger, Thomas Fitzpatrick, and others who had journeyed West just two to three years prior to Beckwourth himself, he learned the trade.³²⁰ Beckwourth returned home to St. Louis once in this time. He reunited with his father, rekindled past romance, and shared a drink with Ashley who served his "best" despite past disagreements. No sooner had he returned did Ashley, now retired from life in the Rockies, ask him to return to the mountains to deliver dispatches to William Sublette. No longer a tenderfoot, Beckwourth was a trusted trader who when given a task bid "*au revoir*" to his sweetheart, friends, and father whom he did not see again.³²¹

³¹⁷Bonner, *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth*, 57-61. Wilson notes that the aggression displayed here, while authentic is likely tinged by some level of "braggadocio" see Wilson, *Jim Beckwourth*, 49.

³¹⁸ Bonner, *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth*, 64-68.

³¹⁹ Wilson, *Jim Beckwourth*, 39-40.

³²⁰ Wilson, *Jim Beckwourth*, 44-45

³²¹ Bonner, *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth*, 88-93.

Once more in the mountains, Beckwourth found himself on the front lines of alliance building. For a short while, Beckwourth travelled into Blackfoot territory in an effort to bridge the divide between the American traders and the Blackfoot. In 1827, Beckwourth led an effort to establish a trading post within the Blackfoot territory. The Blackfoot, long resistant to the rendezvous system, welcomed the trading post. In celebration, the Blackfoot hosted Beckwourth at a ceremony and presented a Blackfoot woman to him for marriage. What happened to this woman is uncertain. Beckwourth claims to have left her behind in Blackfoot country. There is also the horrific suggestion that he accidentally killed her.³²² This bleak detail notwithstanding, Beckwourth's time with the Blackfoot was short-lived. When Beckwourth's colleague Caleb Greenwood floated a rumor during the 1828 rendezvous that Beckwourth was a long-lost son of a Crow chief, Beckwourth found his next great adventure. He soon followed in the footsteps of Edward Rose and went to live among the Crow.³²³

By the winter of 1828-29, Beckwourth had found the moment to capitalize on his ruse of Crow ancestry. When he and his trapping companion, Jim Bridger, *stumbled* upon an Apsáalooke encampment, Bridger fled while Beckwourth remained to be captured.³²⁴ On the reason Beckwourth went to live among the Crow, some scholars have posited that he did it for personal glory or respite. However, there is some evidence to suggest Beckwourth made the decision as part of good business. Beckwourth had signed a promissory note, with Robert Campbell acting as a witness, for a credit of \$275.17½ with the Smith, Sublette, and Jackson

³²² Neither account is entirely reliable as both accounts were told years after the fact. Beckwourth's suggests that he had struck her with the cheek (side portion) of his axe and that she fell—knocked unconscious. Later suggestion was that this strike had killed her, and Beckwourth being dragged to the edge of Blackfoot territory to run for his life. See Wilson, *Jim Beckwourth*, 41-42. The marriage of trappers and Indigenous women, common practice in the earlier French systems of trade and maintained in this new era, will be discussed in greater detail later on.

³²³ Wilson, *Jim Beckwourth*, 46-48.

³²⁴ Wilson, *Jim Beckwourth*, 46-48.

company. This money may well have gone toward securing Beckwourth an outfit to begin his life with the Crow.³²⁵ Notwithstanding, with resources to establish himself among the Crow, Beckwourth aligned with the American Fur Company becoming a contract trapper.³²⁶ As their representative, he ensured that as long as his Crow allies' pelts went to the company, guns, ammunition, beads, cloth, and other trade goods from the company went to the tribe.³²⁷ Beckwourth's place among the Crow provided a key inroad for the American Fur Company. Beckwourth's work was still highly dependent on the demands of the company, something that eventually sowed his end in the trade.

With the Crow, Beckwourth found a new family of "near and dear Crow relatives" with whom he remained for nearly a decade. They offered him things he could not find with the fur companies—domesticity, and glory. The former came easy for the long-lost son of the Crow. Not long after his arrival, he experienced the presentation of three young women for him to choose from to welcome him home. The marriage of fur traders and Indigenous women brought disparate communities closer together. Having previously married and abandoned wives among the Blackfoot, Beckwourth was familiar with the practice. Even so, in his marriages among the Crow, Beckwourth found a domestic peace uncommon to his life in the West up to that point. He described his first wife, Still-water, as a woman whose demeanor matched her name. She was "Affectionate, obedient, gentle, cheerful, and apparently, quite happy." He reported, "no domestic thunder-storms, no curtain-lectures ever disturbed the serenity of our connubial lodge."

³²⁵ Morgan, *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West*, 305-306.

³²⁶ Although there is suggestion Beckwourth was a free trapper in this time, his name is listed on American Fur Company payroll. Nonetheless, his work as a contract trapper was dramatically different from any other contract trapper. It left Beckwourth free from the scorn of a boss and allowed him to follow other desires outside company life.

³²⁷ Wilson, *Jim Beckwourth*, 60.

Beckwourth recalled, it was as if the “irrevocable knot” of the Holy Christian Church had tied them together and cemented his place among the Crow.³²⁸

Regardless of his happiness with Still-water, Beckwourth continued to pursue carnal pleasures and further marriages. A year into his life among them, he had seven Crow wives with an eighth pursuing him. Polygamous relationships were common among the Plains tribes. A man who established himself as an accomplished provider could be entrusted with the care of additional women within the tribe.³²⁹ Beckwourth was no different in adapting this familial structure. This girl, named Nom-ne-dit-chee, was but a “little girl” when she first asked to marry him. Called “little wife” by Beckwourth, he invited her to live with one of his wives until she was of age to marry.³³⁰ In time, she became his wife and with her Beckwourth had a son, Black Panther (or “little Jim”)—the only child Beckwourth ever acknowledged with his Native wives.³³¹ While Nom-ne-dit-chee held Beckwourth’s affection, none of his wives quite enraptured him like Pine Leaf—a woman who Beckwourth regarded as “the heroine of the Crow nation.” She responded to his advances with a casual nonchalance that only increased his determination to be with her.³³² Like many of the women he had married among the Crow, she was a strong willed and intelligent woman who was unafraid to fight by his side and a central figure in these years of his narrative. After years of friendship and continued pursuits, Pine Leaf

³²⁸ Bonner, *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth*, 133-136.

³²⁹ For a complete discussion on Crow marriage customs see Robert Harry Lowie, *The Crow Indians*, (United States: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 44-61.

³³⁰ Beckwourth referred to his plural wives as sisters despite no obvious relation between them. Bonner, *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth*, 150-151.

³³¹ Wilson, *Jim Beckwourth*, 51-52. Beckwourth claimed that by 1855, the year his autobiography came out that Black Panther had become first counselor of the Crow nation. See Bonner, *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth*, 207.

³³² Bonner, *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth*, 189. While some consider Pine Leaf to be a total fabrication from Beckwourth or T.D. Bonner, there is reason to believe she existed. Two separate accounts recall a strong-willed Crow woman who joined the warriors on the battlefield and refused to be barred from meetings of chiefs and warriors. Wilson, *Jim Beckwourth*, 52-54.

finally married him becoming the last of his wives among the Crow.³³³ For all the warmth Beckwourth conveys towards these women, they are not the reason he remained with the Crow. Nor did they prevent him from leaving when the time came.

Beckwourth was in his element on the battlefield. Where his temper and pride had gotten him into trouble with the company men, his ability in a fight came to benefit him greatly as he sought out chieftaincy among his adopted people. To attain the rank of chief, a warrior must achieve each of the following in combat: to strike an enemy in combat without killing him (counting coup), to lead a successful war party, to capture a horse from an enemy encampment, and finally, to take the weapon of an enemy combatant. Among the Apsáalooke, a chief was a man of merit. For Beckwourth, it appeared that respect by merit was something to strive for at every juncture. As such, little time elapsed between his joining the Crow and his first time in a war party.³³⁴

In the wars between Crow and Blackfoot peoples Beckwourth cut his teeth becoming Ar-ra-e-dish, the Bloody Arm.³³⁵ Each battle brought new accolades and congratulatory titles such as Bull's Robe, Is-ko-chu-e-chu-re (Enemy of Horses), Baoh-hish-a (Red Fish), Shas-ka-o-hush-a (Bobtail Horse), and eventually, Nan-kup-bah-pah (Medicine Calf).³³⁶ Beckwourth's names were a way of growing fame and building his reputation. As Chief Medicine Calf, Beckwourth became an influential member of the Crow. He used his position to levy the Crow into maintaining a flow of fur to the American Fur Company. Beckwourth's years living among the

³³³ Bonner, *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth*, 331-332.

³³⁴ Wilson, *Jim Beckwourth*, 58.

³³⁵ Bonner, *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth*, 195.

³³⁶ Wilson, *Jim Beckwourth*, 59.

Crow had served him personally. Despite this, the reasons for him to remain always came with the existence of a contract with the company.

After ten years in the West, many of them among the Crow, Beckwourth had accomplished more than most. Still, there were some goals too lofty. The American Fur Company had long tasked Beckwourth to “conquer a peace” in the region. His inability to do so saw the company decline renewal of his contract. Beckwourth understood the reason, but defended his strategy:

these incessant wars were very prejudicial to the Company's interest, but it was impossible for me to remedy the evil. Other tribes were continually attacking the Crows, killing their braves, and stealing their horses, and, of course, they were bound to make reprisals. In justice to the Crows I must say, that other tribes were generally the aggressors, until the policy was forced upon me of endeavoring to "conquer a peace." I thought, if I could make the Crow nation a terror to all their neighbors, that their antagonists would be reduced to petition for peace, and then turn their battle-axes into beaver-traps, and their lances into hunting-knives.³³⁷

His service to the companies was over now. For whatever personal freedom Beckwourth received, the company received plenty in profit through the furs he, and later the Crow, sent to the company. His failure to alter the political landscape is hardly unforgivable.

Accepting the end of his contract, Beckwourth was off again to find a new adventure. His years in the fur trade were at their end.³³⁸ He left the Rockies to serve in the Seminole War and Mexican American War, before eventually returning to take advantage of the Gold Rush. Beckwourth eventually settled down as a storekeeper, doing contract work as a scout, Indian agent, and courier for the government. He lived a full life, well into his sixties which was longer than most of the Rocky Mountain traders. Acting as a courier in the fall of 1867, complaining of

³³⁷ Wilson, *Jim Beckwourth*, 75.

³³⁸ Wilson, *Jim Beckwourth*, 73-75.

severe headaches and nosebleeds, Beckwourth died of natural causes as he was travelling through a Crow village at sixty-six years of age.³³⁹

To wholly abbreviate Beckwourth's life is a nigh impossibility. As Chittenden argues Beckwourth lived "a series of experiences that filled every month of his life with more adventures than the average mountaineer could boast in twice as many years."³⁴⁰ At face value, Chittenden calls into question Beckwourth's validity. Yet, the book does capture Beckwourth's wandering spirit as a man who sought out his own sense of fulfillment at every juncture in his life. Beckwourth was one of the lucky ones. He survived just long enough to attract historians' attention. At the end of it all, he might have been remembered as one of the fur trades greatest success stories had his reputation not suffered as it did.

Remembrances

When it was first published in 1856, reviews of *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth* derided the titular mountain man as a "half-savage" spinning a "long yarn" filled with a "discordant mass of material" of which there was "no one at hand positively to contradict him".³⁴¹ It was an immediate question of Beckwourth's legitimacy. That doubt persisted for several decades after his death. He became comic relief for other men's histories—"For Jim Beckwourth was a 'liar'." Historians carefully maintained his odious label, if only to brutally damn him as a liar and villain when opportunity arose.³⁴² It was his legacy, despite the fact that to be a liar was, for better and worse, to be a mountain man. Most mountain men knew how to spin a yarn around the camp during long winter nights and were happy to do so. Success

³³⁹ For Beckwourth's later years see Wilson's *Jim Beckwourth*, chapters eight to fifteen.

³⁴⁰ Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol 2, 680.

³⁴¹ "Review of *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth*," *The National Era* (Washington, District of Columbia 21 Aug 1856)

³⁴² Wilson, *Jim Beckwourth*, 5

generally remained at an arm's length. Company trappers did not even own most of their own equipment, which meant that their reputation was the only thing they really had that was theirs. Every man told his fair share of true stories which grew into epic tales with each subsequent boastful delivery. Dangers doubled in size and the impossible became real as the yarns were unspun for entertainment and the building of a legacy. Beckwourth was not unlike his peers, but the damning of his reputation was lasting.

Rose met a similar fate. Washington Irving slandered him in his time by saying he was an untrustworthy and disreputable man for what was otherwise the mistrust William Hunt had for a Black man in 1811. Harris as well, endured some share of derision from author George Frederick Ruxton for his own tall tales. Remembered as the “darndest liar” whose “lies tumbled out of his mouth like boudins out of a buffler's stomach.”³⁴³ This was sharp critique for a man otherwise remembered fondly by his peers and those he guided. Even so, there remains the great lie for which Harris' supposed penchant for lies grew out of. Harris' yarn regards the supposed instant petrification of a forest. As it has been retold, Harris, having gone out hunting, shot a songbird in the trees. The instant his shot rang out and killed the bird, the forest turned to stone and all the birds along with it.³⁴⁴ Certainly in the vein of other preposterous tales of the mountain men, it was unbelievable. Jim Bridger himself once spun a tale of becoming cornered in a box canyon by a hundred Cheyenne warriors. Before taking a pause, his listeners breathless for the resolution on his daring escape, Bridger went silent. When pressed for the conclusion, Bridger told his captive

³⁴³ Morgan, *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West*, 218. “Boudins” being a sort of blood sausage and “buffler” being a slang term for buffalo.

³⁴⁴ The main version of this story appears in George Frederick Ruxton's *Life in the Far West*. According to Ruxton, the events in the story are all factual even if the narrative connections are more heavily fictionalized to create a thread between the stories. Although contrived, Ruxton does see Harris refer to himself as a “niggur”, quote “Travler, marm,” says Black Harris, “this niggur's no travler; I ar' a trapper”. The basis for the use of the slur unclear. See George Frederick Ruxton, *Life in the Far West*, (United Kingdom: W. Blackwood and Sons, 1851), 5.

audience there was no escape and he was shot dead.³⁴⁵ As for Bridger, his stories remained a part of his greatness regardless of how obviously untrue they were. A true hero of the West, he apparently earned the leeway to have a little fun.

It begs the question, why the derision toward these Black mountain men? After all, in the journals of the fur trappers, there is nothing to suggest fellow trappers felt any hostility toward their Black companions. Yet, in the histories that followed, prejudice distorted the legacy of these men. The obvious answer is racial prejudice. While white fur trappers are remembered as magnificent storytellers, Black fur trappers are portrayed as liars. In her contemporary assessment of Beckwourth, Wilson argues much the same notion that race made all the difference. Beckwourth was on the receiving end of many racist insults during his life and in death. Early *historian* Charles Christy drew Beckwourth as a man born in a place where they “spelled Afro-American with a double g” and passed around as slave among various men involved with the fur trade giving him the nickname “Nigger Jim” to distinguish him from his father who supposedly shared his same name. Christy’s judgment of Beckwourth was blatantly racist. Moreover, for whatever reason, he got all the details wrong. This kind of slander went so far as to put lies in the mouth of Beckwourth which discredited popular “historians” of the time in their own efforts to discredit Beckwourth. Beckwourth’s centralization in this conflict was the simple fact that his own narrative was made publicly available, and it was often in contrast to the work of “historians” of the era who perceived Beckwourth as a mixed blood “mongrel” interfering in their studies.³⁴⁶

³⁴⁵ The story of the petrified forest is also credited to Bridger, although with no historical backing. Frederick J. Chiaventone, “Jim Bridger,” *Cowboys & Indians, August/September (2015)*.

³⁴⁶ Wilson, *Jim Beckwourth*, 5-7.

With prejudiced “histories” of the 1800’s as their foundation, historians of the 1900’s built the monolithic mountain man’s portrayal as caucasian. His image was symbolic of Manifest Destiny, and by extension, was perceived as the Anglo-American man extending his reach over the land.³⁴⁷ Nonetheless, the Black fur trappers are a part of that same narrative. They embodied American ideals of individualism and freedom as much as any mountain man.³⁴⁸ Living disparate lives, they belonged to no specific community of African American workers, but instead the broader category of fur trade workers. Edward Rose integrated himself deeply among Indigenous people and remained. He maintained a loose participation with the fur companies as a free trapper until his death. James Beckwourth moved freely between the Anglo world of the company and the Indigenous world of the Crow. All the while he maintained a contractual obligation to the companies despite disagreements with fur trade bosses. Meanwhile Moses Harris remained a part of the Anglo-American company world during his trading years. So much so he was thought to be one of them. He was a company man serving the needs of the rendezvous to the last. Their work a testament to the liberty found in the West for Black men.³⁴⁹

Even so, many historians have underscored the unreliability of Black stories. Through the twentieth century, James Beckwourth remained a “redoubtable prevaricator” whose account was of “a most questionable authority.” On the “charming liar,” historian Hiram Chittenden went as far as to insinuate that Beckwourth’s name itself was a fabrication.³⁵⁰ Further, Chittenden says, outright, that Beckwourth adopted Rose’s achievements as his own. Without his stories Beckwourth was made a man of “ordinary importance.”³⁵¹ Nonetheless, his stories were his.

³⁴⁷ Despain, “The Mountain Man in American History and Culture,” 23.

³⁴⁸ Flammig, *African Americans in the West*, 31-34.

³⁴⁹ Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 51-52.

³⁵⁰ Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol 2, 679, 681.

³⁵¹ Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol 2, 678, 681.

Morgan takes a softer tone, suggesting that although a “a gifted liar” the skill “was as much a part of the mountain honor as hard drinking or straight shooting. Embroider your adventures, convert to your uses any handy odyssey, and spin it all out in the firelight, the only sin the sin of being dull.”³⁵² Harris and Rose, in that sense, escape the severest insults of the time, given both died before ever getting the chance to say their piece. Beckwourth, on the other hand, was audacious enough to speak for himself—something not done at the time for a man of his race and background.

Efforts to appeal the memory of Beckwourth, as far as can be recalled, began in 1907 with William Connelly who wrote “few men equal James P. Beckwourth, and he lived in the age of great men. The West owes him a debt it would be hard to pay for leaving such a record of his adventures on the plains and mountains.”³⁵³ Connelly’s defense was the start of a lengthy effort to rehabilitate a man whose name had been firmly entrenched in the mud. It was not to suggest Beckwourth, nor other Black mountain men, were always honest. They, and he, were not. Nor was any mountain man, for the tall tale was the nature of the mountain man. Yet, it remains that the Black mountain men are the ones who are remembered as liars, in an era of rogues. Elinor Wilson, the preeminent scholar on Beckwourth, admitted that when she first set out to research Beckwourth, extraordinarily little was known about him beyond his reputation as a liar.³⁵⁴ Her book, the seminal ‘fact check’ of *The Life and Adventures*, openly took an innovative approach, saying of Beckwourth:

[He] was a courageous, intelligent, independent pioneer who exemplified the spirit of his day: there might be something on the other side of the mountain and he would go and see. That in each instance he “tried it out” and, disillusioned, moved on, speaks for his refusal

³⁵² Morgan, *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West*, 156.

³⁵³ Wilson, *Jim Beckwourth*, 8.

³⁵⁴ Wilson, *Jim Beckwourth*, vii.

to settle for the ordinary and for his enduring belief in the charm of life and its endless new innovations.³⁵⁵

Beckwourth's life was that of the model mountain man. His embellishments echo something at the heart of his experiences in life, that of a man trying to prove he was a *somebody*. To that end, his fabrications might well be a defense of his own honor as a Black trader. In a time when the buying and selling of Black men for slaves was commonplace, for Beckwourth owning his name may have been just as important as the adventures themselves. In a system so dependent on reputation, in a time of slavery, a bold lie here and there were the building blocks of reputation for the mountain men. Given Rose, Harris, and Beckwourth's shared reputations, it is certainly plausible.

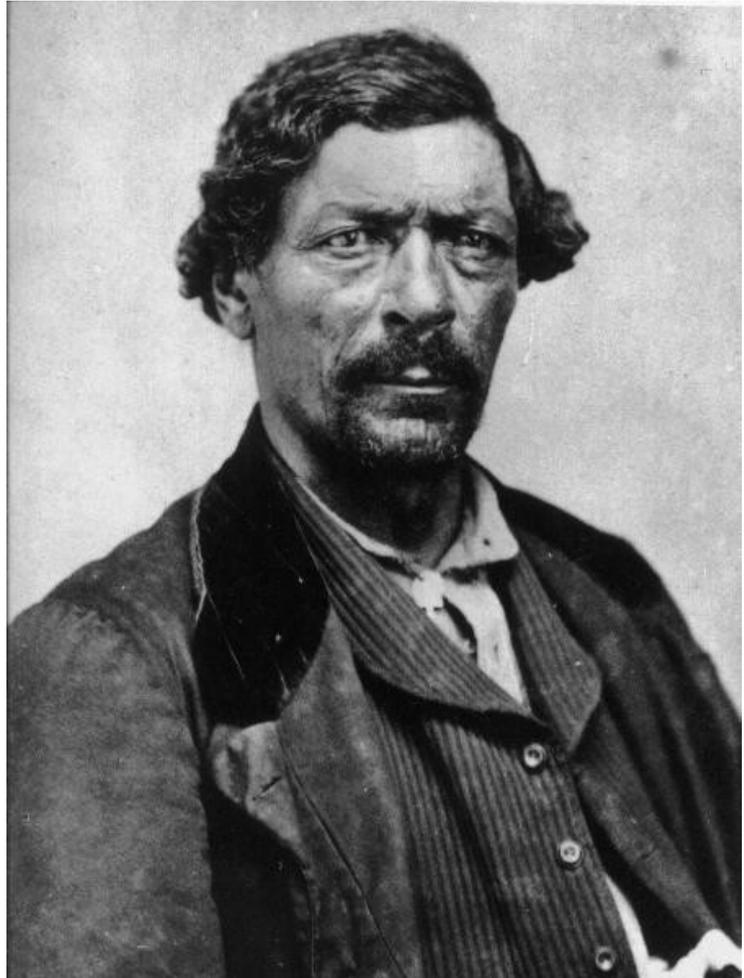


Figure 11. James Beckwourth, photograph, 1854-1856. One of few surviving photographs of the man, this image was taken to accompany T.D. Bonner's autobiography.

At publication of the autobiography, T.D. Bonner agreed to split profits fifty/fifty with Beckwourth on *The Life and Adventures*. It was an agreement Bonner never honored, taking the profit from sales in the United States and England while selling the rights to a French translation. His life story taken, and turned against him, Beckwourth did not

³⁵⁵ Wilson, *Jim Beckwourth*, viii.

see a penny.³⁵⁶ As to Rose and Harris, their stories told and retold by those they knew with what they knew, death could not do much to alter that. Neither was there much that could be done to salvage their reputations after death.

Here and There Along the River

In 1832, trapper Zenas Leonard was working his first year as a trapper in the Rocky Mountains. There, he recalled a man who spoke the language, acted as a chief, and had married four wives among the Crow. The tribe helped him and his fellow trappers, coming and going from the mountains in 1832-34. Described as old, courageous, and with Black skin, he led his people without hesitation against the Blackfeet. As to his identity, the man “informed [them] that he first came to this country with Lewis & Clark — with whom he also returned to the State of Missouri.” After some years there, he “returned again with a Mr. Mackinney, a trader on the Missouri river, and ha[d] remained.”³⁵⁷ While he is never named, only York matched the man’s description.³⁵⁸ York, by all definitions, was one of the first Black mountain men. After all those years while aiding the fur trappers along their way, York had once again found freedom in the West, on his terms this time around.

The Rocky Mountain fur trade was just one of many fields in which white workers were able to find a place. The trade presented a relatively well-paying, if unpredictable, job that attracted a diversity of backgrounds. From the illiterate wrangler to the educated businessman looking for his next big break, the Rocky Mountains were an option on a lengthy list that

³⁵⁶ Wilson, *Jim Beckwourth*, 152-156

³⁵⁷ Leonard, *Narrative of the Adventures of Zenas Leonard*, 84.

³⁵⁸ Edward Rose, the only other older black fur trapper to live among the Crow was dead by 1832. As to Beckwourth, he was not much older than Leonard himself, surely not the old Black man Leonard describes. All this to set aside the fact that these two men were not involved with Lewis and Clark in any form. Nonetheless, not all historians agree it was York. Despite this, Leonard’s accounts have otherwise been accurate and as such indicate the man’s identity as none other than York. See Betts, *In Search of York*, 135-143.

included plenty of opportunities in the East. For men of color, options were more limited, but the promise of the West was enticing. Black men went West for many of the same reasons as their white counterparts, but their experiences as tools of the company there differed. So too did their histories, which continue to suffer from the slander of men who have been dead almost as long as the trade itself.

Knowing these men is just the start for the Black trader, and for a time it may have been the end of it too. If the first “historians” of the era had it their way, the life of James Beckwourth would be little more than nonsense rather than a rare recording of social history of the region it is. The limited information of the other Black traders underscores the reality that in this time, people of color were not the ‘great men’ of fur trade society. Across the Missouri or not, the prejudices of the time and place were maintained. Black men quickly became silent and invisible, despite being involved at all levels of this economy, when the time came to author the story of the trade. The lives of the Black fur traders are indicative of a more complicated fur trade than most histories have communicated thus far. It was never solely the business of Anglo-American men in the wilds, but instead a business in which Black men aided in bridging a divide between the company and the peoples whose lands the company was there to exploit.

Whether they came freely or were brought against their will, the Black fur traders’ roles are a key part of the stories of any *great* fur trader. For the men who helped along the way, we are lucky to know but few of their names. Edward Rose, James Beckwourth, and Moses Harris remain the few known Black trappers of the Rocky Mountain Fur Trade. Even in their stories, we struggle with questions about their past, their veracity, and their very identity. On their names, and the names of so many other men, the business of fur began, grew and was eventually torn

down. For that, we can only acknowledge their work and how their lives were a part of the very story of the fur trade.

CONCLUSION

Eighteen years of exhaustive hunting had drastically diminished beaver numbers. The effects of competition had seen the companies, Hudson's Bay in particular, overhunt to undercut the prices of their competitors. Hudson's Bay company men had put considerable effort into underselling the competition to regain a monopoly on the fur trade. The Hudson's Bay Company succeeded in claiming what was left with the end of the rendezvous.³⁵⁹ Yet, the beaver's disappearance from the valleys of the West was hardly the sole cause for the Rocky Mountain trade's demise. The price of beaver pelts had been on steady decline since its peak in 1832 from six dollars a pound to two dollars a pound. A skilled trapper who had once been able to bring in four or five hundred pounds of fur himself was now seldom able to secure more than a hundred pounds of fur. Furthermore, as British and New England ships expanded their trade routes with China, the rise in availability of silks saw fashion industries shift away from hats made from beaver felt to hats of silk. Beyond this, the use of the pelts from other animals, including the South American nutria, meant that the demand for the beaver's pelt was nonexistent.³⁶⁰ By 1840, the beaver was practically extinct, but by some chance, the shift in fashion had ensured their survival.

The American Fur Company declared bankruptcy in 1842, just eight years after it had absorbed the Rocky Mountain Fur Company.³⁶¹ An entire labor force was out of work. Those involved in the fur trade, mountain men and their allies alike, had played their part, however small, in this early capitalist system. While some left the mountains, others used the knowledge

³⁵⁹ Richard S. Mackie, *Trading Beyond the Mountains: The British Fur Trade on the Pacific, 1793-1843*. (Canada: UBC Press, 1997), 108-110.

³⁶⁰ Cleland, *This Reckless Breed of Men*, 344-345

³⁶¹ J. Ward Ruckman, "Ramsay Crooks and the Fur Trade of the Northwest," *Minnesota History*, 7, No. 1 (1926), 28-30.

and skills they acquired in the West, elsewhere. Some settled in the lands they had called home for twenty years, but most left the mountains all together. As for work, some took to life as wagon train guides, army scouts, Indian agents, or trading post operators.³⁶² They were the fortunate bunch to escape death in service of the company. Their purpose now was to aid the next generation of Western travelers.

The Indigenous fur traders' struggle against shifting power structures was far from over. The trade had offered a steady supply of goods and wealth for generations. The death of those trading systems was one matter. Making matters worse, the mountain men had charted the best routes for more settlers to follow. Just as the American trappers had blundered into the West without care or conscious of the Native world, now thousands upon thousands of migrants were coming to stake a claim in the West. The flow of American settlers coincided with the United States government violently asserting their own claims of ownership.³⁶³ Indigenous tribes, just as they had with the fur traders, took a variety of approaches to United States' aggressions. The results of this encroachment are stories for another time. What had begun with a few men's desire to make it big, had inadvertently hastened the end of Native American sovereignty in the West.

The West of 1840 was dramatically different from what the mountain men first encountered twenty years before. Large scale migration via the routes charted by trappers to Oregon, California, and Utah, meant the mountain men were no longer the solitary figures of the West they once had been, at least in the popular imagination. The California Gold Rush particularly drove immigration. Following the Mexican American War and the discovery of Gold

³⁶² Capener, *Legacy of the Mountain Man*, 26:28-27:18.

³⁶³ The legacy of the American West's settlement as it came under the direct oversight of the United States government is best followed in Anne F. Hyde, *Empires, Nations, and Families*, part III.

in California in January of 1848, tens of thousands felt exactly the driving hope for travelling west that so many of the mountain men felt just a few decades earlier.³⁶⁴ They answered the call of the West overcome by the hope that their fortune lay ahead on this journey to the gold fields. In this wave of immigrants, the American West found its next great legends, the forty-niners. Another batch of diverse and driven individuals just looking for the same thing anyone is looking for—purpose and prosperity.

The image of the mountain men, much like the beaver skins they had spent their years hunting, was similarly processed for the mass market. First, the image was used to promote further western expansion. Later, it was used as the image of an American icon. In time, that icon became the bewhiskered entrepreneurs whose stereotypes this very work has spent so much time debunking. The folkloric mountain man has, and will, remain a powerful notion in the story of the American mythos. His story captures the essence of the American spirit, but unfortunately, remains a cobbled together mix of fiction and fact. It was only in death that most mountain men were able to become the free-spirited wanderers celebrated by this period. In life, the mountain men were workers. Both company men and the free trapper served the demands of the industry. They came from all walks of life from businessmen to farm hands to slaves and freemen. Their work diverse and challenging, they toiled away in hopes of making it big. Few did. They left behind them a legacy of stories that captivated the imagination. Gone from the mountains, they ushered out a generation of American workers who gave their lives to the corporation in the hopes of one day escaping their debts, only to be succeeded by the next.

³⁶⁴ Hyde, *Empires, Nations, and Families*, 392.

In a world of myths and fables, the efforts of the mountain men deserve a remembrance in the history books as something greater than legend. The mountain men's trails soon became interstate highways, paving a route for future wanderers to travel in search of something greater than themselves. The mountain men's legacy for an exceptionally long time has been in the imaginations of their successors. Yet, as we travel these roads ourselves, we might yet find that we have more in common with these men than once thought. The mountain men's work changed the landscape of the West, for better and worse. It is time we remember them as more than heroes and more than capitalists. They were simply flawed workers in a changing time—for better and worse.

APPENDIX

Hiram Chittenden's Map of the Trans-Mississippi of the United States during the period of the American fur trade as conducted from St. Louis between the years 1807 and 1843, 1902.



Courtesy of the Library of Congress Geography and Map Division Washington, D.C.

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