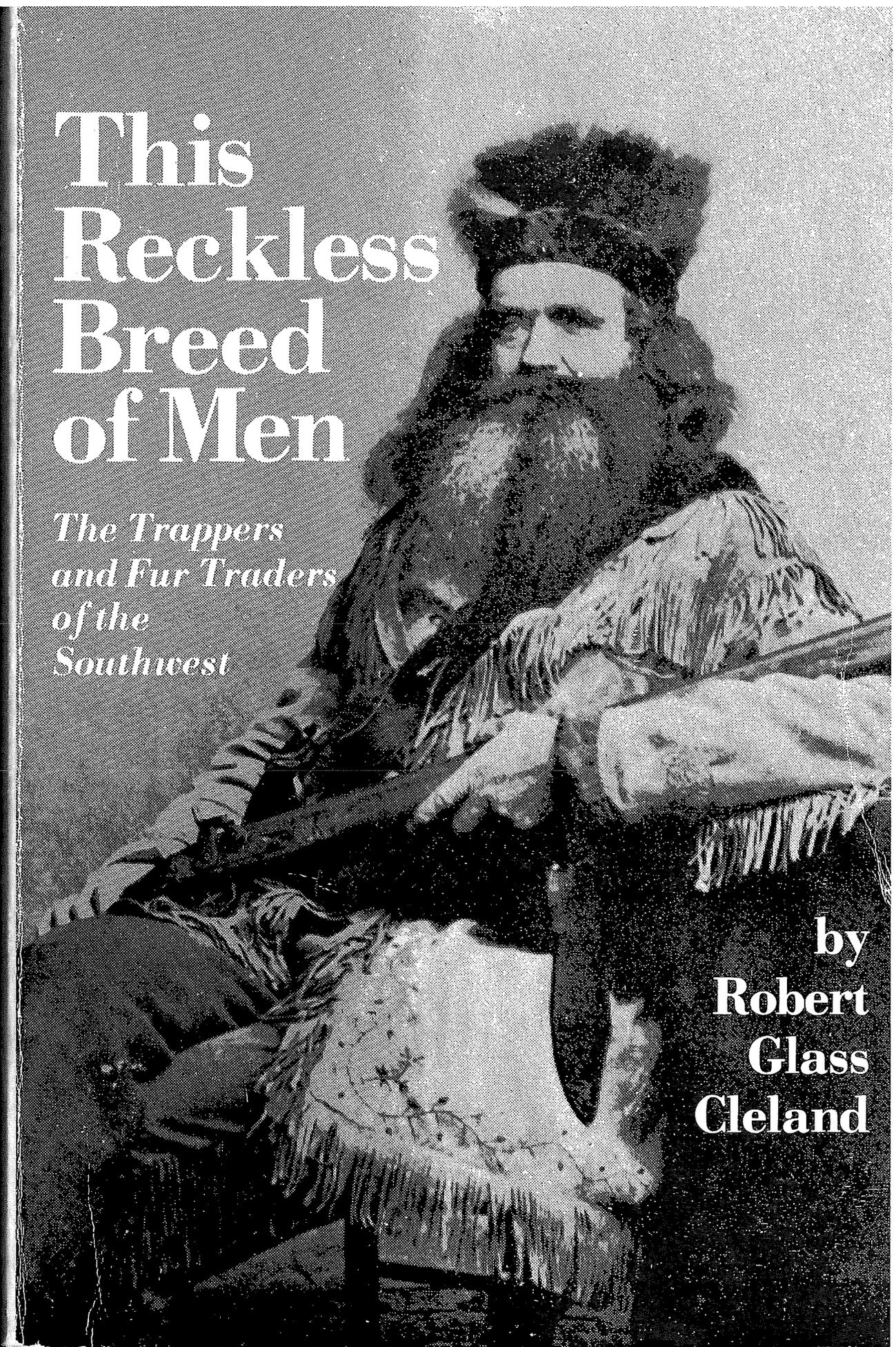


This Reckless Breed of Men

*The Trappers
and Fur Traders
of the
Southwest*

by
**Robert
Glass
Cleland**



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CHAPTER 1

Beaver and Mountain Men

THE BEAVER, whose peltry constituted the basis of the Western American fur trade, flourished in North America from the Arctic Circle to the gulfs of Mexico and California. After the close of the eighteenth century, three great river systems west of the Mississippi — the Missouri, Columbia, and Colorado — constituted the principal hunting-grounds for American trappers; but beaver were also found in large numbers on the Rio Grande, Arkansas, Humboldt, Sacramento, San Joaquin, and a hundred other independent streams.

Contrary to common opinion, many of the desert or semi-desert rivers of the Southwest were major trapping fields. For the beaver was — and still is — at home alike in the deep chasms of the San Juan and Colorado rivers, where the summer heat becomes almost unbearable for human beings; in the warm, sluggish waters of the lower Gila; and along the winding channels of the Colorado delta. The fur of the desert river beaver, though somewhat lighter in color and practically worthless from early spring to late fall, is only slightly inferior to that of the northern beaver during the remainder of the year.

As a preface to this study, it is also necessary to point

out that the Spanish province of Alta California once had a large beaver population. California beaver were of three types or races: the Shasta beaver in the interior, the large golden beaver in the central delta area of San Francisco Bay, and the Sonora beaver on the Colorado. The rivers of southern California apparently had too little water to maintain beaver colonies; but the animal flourished in large numbers in the northern drainage basins of the state, especially on the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers and their tributaries, and in the low, marshy regions tributary to San Francisco Bay.

A few beaver were found in the streams that flowed out of the northern Coast Range Mountains into the Pacific; but though the animal thrived at high altitudes in other mountain systems, it had not established itself above the thousand-foot level in the Sierra Nevada by the time the trappers reached California, and the fur-hunters' narratives make no mention of beaver in the Owens, Walker, Carson, Truckee, and other rivers that flow eastward out of the central and southern Sierra.¹ No satisfactory explanation has been found for this curious restriction of the animal's habitat.

A beaver of average size weighs between thirty and forty pounds, but fifty- or sixty-pound adults are not uncommon,

¹ For confirmation of these statements and the beaver's present distribution in California, see Grinnell, Dixon, and Linsdale: *Fur Bearing Mammals of California* (Berkeley, 1937), Vol. II, pp. 635-6. I am also indebted to Seth B. Benson of the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology of the University of California at Berkeley, for further information on the subject.

Silt from mining operations apparently drove the beaver out of many northern California streams after 1850.

and a few authentic specimens running over a hundred pounds have been reported. The animal's hind feet are webbed, his scaly tail possibly furnished the pattern for the first Indian canoe paddles. The beaver finds it an instrument of many uses — a rudder when he swims, a balancing device when he runs or gallops, a prop when he sits down or squats on his haunches, and a convenient artifice for slapping or plopping the surface of the water when he wishes to warn other beaver of approaching danger.

The bark and leaves of the aspen, cottonwood, willow, and similar trees furnish the animal's chief supply of food. His teeth and jaws are powerful enough to cut through the hardest oak, but the old belief that a beaver felled a tree in a predetermined direction has been discarded. In quiet water the beaver builds a house of branches, twigs, and mud. He is then called a lodge beaver. In swift-running streams the same beaver tunnels into the bank and makes his nest above the water level. He is then spoken of as a bank beaver.

In his monumental work on the American fur trade Chittenden thus described the methods commonly used in trapping this traditionally sagacious animal:

The universal mode of taking the beaver was with the steel trap, in the use of which long experience had taught the hunters great skill. The trap is a strong one of about five pounds' weight, and was valued in the fur trade period at twelve to sixteen dollars. The chain attached to the trap is about five feet long, with a swivel near the end to keep it from kinking. The trapper, in setting the trap, wades into the

stream, so that his tracks may not be apparent; plants his trap in three or four inches of water a little way from the bank, and fastens the chain to a strong stick, which he drives into the bed of the stream at the full chain length from the trap. Immediately over the trap a little twig is set so that one end shall be about four inches above the surface of the water. On this is put a peculiar bait, supplied by the animal itself, castor, castorum, or musk, the odor of which has a great attraction for the beaver. To reach the bait he raises his mouth toward it and in this act brings his feet directly under it. He thus treads upon the trap, springs it and is caught. In his fright he seeks concealment by his usual method of diving into deep water, but finds himself held by the chain which he cannot gnaw in two, and after an ineffectual struggle, he sinks to the bottom and is drowned. Not infrequently he wrests the chain from the stake, drags the trap to deeper water before he succumbs, or, taking it to the shore, becomes entangled in the undergrowth.²

In addition to the castoreum, "a granular, sticky, yellow substance of a rather pleasant odor," to which Chittenden refers, both male and female beaver secrete a thick, pungent, yellow oil from two small glands behind the castors. During the mating season beaver of both sexes deposit oil and castoreum on spots regularly visited by other beaver and add mud, sand, dead leaves, and other material to form so-called "scent-mounds." These hillocks, the largest

² *History of the American Fur Trade*, Vol. II, p. 820. In the summer of 1947 Charlie Young, of Ovando, Montana, a trapper of seventy-seven years' experience, told me that a cottonwood wand planted beside a trap would serve as well for bait as the twig dipped in castoreum. While attempting to strip the bark from the wand, the beaver stepped on the trigger, sprung the trap, and was caught as Chittenden described.

of which are about a foot high, served the trappers as markers for the trails or runways of the beaver. Some trappers believed that the beaver also rubbed castoreum on his fur to make it waterproof.³

Beaver-skinning, like trapping, was an art. After being slit along the animal's belly and on the inside of the four legs, the hide was carefully removed, dried on a willow hoop, and later scraped or grained to rid it of all adhering particles of flesh. A trapper smoked the hides of other animals on a framework of sticks planted around the edge of a hole containing a fire of rotten wood or punk. The process required ten or twelve hours. The Indians followed a somewhat different technique.

"Their mode of dressing the skins is very simple," said an early American writer on the West.

When they wish to preserve the hair, they first extend the skins in the shade, and spread a thin covering of the recent ordure of the buffalo mixed with clay, on the fleshy sides, which for two or three days, are kept constantly moistened with water. In the next place, they are thoroughly cleansed, and subsequently rubbed in the brain of some animal, till they become dry, soft, and pliant.

They are then washed in water thickened with corn bran, dried, and finally scraped with bones, sharp stones, or knives, or sometimes they are worked soft, by drawing them backwards and forwards over the rounded end of a piece of timber, fixed permanently in the ground. When sufficiently dressed, in the manner above described, they are hung up to

³ The castors, sexual organs of both male and female beaver, ran about six pair to the pound. Castoreum itself was worth approximately three dollars a pound in the mountains.

be smoked, either in the smoke aperture of the lodges, or in places constructed exclusively for the purpose.⁴

Beaver skins were folded with the fur inside and packed in bundles by means of a crude press. The bundles were then tied with green buckskin thongs, which contracted while drying and finally became almost as hard and inelastic as iron bands. More elaborate and efficient "wedge presses" were used at the fur-trading posts to bale much larger packs.⁵ According to Chittenden, the standard pack contained "ten buffalo robes, fourteen bear, sixty otter, eighty beaver, eighty raccoon, one hundred and twenty foxes, or six hundred muskrat skins."⁶

Upon reaching a promising beaver country, a trapping expedition usually established a base camp from which small parties or single trappers radiated out for many miles to carry on their operations. In the northern and central Rocky Mountain region the trapping season was limited to the spring and fall; but in some parts of the Southwest, where there was little snow or ice, trapping was continued through the winter.

The American trapper borrowed the word *cache* from his French associate and used it as both noun and verb. A cache was a hiding-place, usually a hole or pit — square, circular, or bottle-shaped — in which food, supplies, or furs were stored for safekeeping or to await more convenient means of transportation. A cache was designed to

⁴ John D. Hunter: *Manners and Customs of the Western Indians* (Philadelphia, 1823), p. 295.

⁵ Carl P. Russell: *Picture Books of the Fur Trade History*, reprint from the *Missouri Historical Society Bulletin*, April 1948.

⁶ Chittenden, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 40 n.

keep its contents dry, safe from destruction by wild animals, and secure from discovery by Indians. All the skill and ingenuity of the trappers were used in the construction of such a hiding-place, but frequently the cache was ruined by flood or seeping water, or found and plundered by keen-eyed Indian thieves. The expectant trapper then returned to the site only to face the loss of goods, fortune, or even life itself.

By 1820, after more than a decade of experimental development, the Rocky Mountain fur trade had assumed a fairly clear-cut, standardized pattern. It was carried on by independent or "free" trappers and by powerful, well-organized partnerships or companies. The free trapper—or freeman, as he was called in the usage of the Hudson's Bay Company—operated entirely on his own. He furnished his own equipment, trapped where he pleased, sold his furs to the highest bidder, and recognized no overlord. His status was distinctly higher than that of a regular company trapper or *engagé*. If a free trapper served temporarily with a company brigade, he received his outfit from the company and sold his skins to his employer.

Instead of joining a company expedition, however, the typical free trapper usually chose either to unite with a large number of other freemen like himself, to set out with only one or two companions for "tother side of the great mountains" or across the continent, or to trap entirely alone.

A band of free trappers, though much looser in organization than a company expedition, customarily elected a leader, drafted a set of regulations governing the conduct

of the expedition, and provided stringent penalties for the violation of these self-imposed rules. In actual practice, however, such punishments were seldom imposed. Each man's equipment in such a party usually included a gun with two locks, a hundred flints, twenty-five pounds of powder, a hundred pounds of lead, a good powder horn, a double shot bag, a butcher or skinning knife, a tomahawk or shingling hatchet, and from four to six traps.

The partnership or company represented "big business" in the fur trade. It had the advantage of capital, organization, continuity, and large-scale operations. It sought to monopolize both trade and trapping wherever large-scale operations were profitable, and often employed drastic methods to discourage competition. The trappers regularly in its employ were outfitted by the company, trapped under orders of one of its captains, turned their furs over to their leader, and lived under semimilitary discipline.

With the exception of John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company, an enterprise comparable in its field to the Standard Oil Company in the early petroleum industry of the United States, most American organizations, such as the Rocky Mountain and the Missouri fur companies, originated in St. Louis and had their headquarters in that gateway to the continent.⁷ Almost always the partners in such companies were themselves successful and experienced mountain men. Many of them were capable executives, as imaginative, adventurous, and persistent in their business undertakings as they were bold, resourceful, and resolute

⁷ For Chittenden's criticism of the monopolistic tendencies and ruthless practices of the American Fur Company, see *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 378, 380.

in their leadership of an actual trapping party in the field.

A full-scale trapping expedition sometimes numbered as many as fifty or a hundred men. Its personnel included trappers, hunters, packers, cooks, and miscellaneous camp attendants, hired on a year-to-year basis. In the wilderness the leader, captain, or partisan (to use a term borrowed from the Hudson's Bay Company's terminology) had almost as much authority over the personnel of the company as the captain of a ship exercises over the passengers and members of the crew; and disobedience of his orders was punishable by fine, flogging, or even death. The equipment of a trapping party, though fairly well standardized, depended in part upon the size of the company, the nature of the country, and the length of time the expedition proposed to be away.

Before the members of a trapping party separated into small bands to trap the surrounding country, the leader selected a conspicuous and easily identified spot at which the trappers could rejoin their companions. In 1825 one of Ashley's companies made an extensive reconnaissance of the Seedskedee or Green River Valley, and for several months the leader, William L. Sublette, kept an illuminating diary of the expedition. The following extract indicates the care with which he marked the site of the rendezvous and briefed his lieutenants in recognizing it:

Sunday 19th [April 1825]

We left the creek which turned south traveled west 6 miles over a broken sandy country & came to the Shetkedee which runs SE by Se & NW — is one hundred yards wide 4 to five

feet deep with a rapped current — mountains W.N. — & westerly about 15 or 20 miles — and a range of mountains at a great distance say 40 or 50 miles southwardly — pleasant weather — game scarce some fresh sign of beaver on this river and much old sign — timbered with long leaf cotton wood & small yellow —

. . . .

Tuesday 21st

The 5 men sent to procure skins arrived early this morning with six with which we proceeded to make a boat. They also brought meat. The day is fine and our work advances rapidly —

Wednesday 22nd

Our boat 16 by 7 feet was finished this morning at 9 ock AM, arrangements made for starting to make our hunt. The following are the directions given to Wm. Ham & Clyman who conduct each a party, one of six; The other of five men —⁸

That I will transport the goods and extra baggage down the river to some conspicuous point . . . [and] make choice of the entrance of some river that may enter on the West side of the Shetskedee for a deposite should there be any such river. Should the mountains through which the river first passes be a less distance than we imagine, the deposite will be made on or near the river a short distance above the mountain at some suitable place — The place of deposite as aforesaid, will be the place of randavoze for all our parties on or before the 10th July next & that the place may be known — Trees will be pealed standing the most conspicuous near the junction of the rivers, or above the mountain as the case may be — should such point be without timber I will raise a mound of earth five feet high or set up rocks the tops

⁸ William Ham, for whom a branch of the Green River is named, and James Clyman, whose name appears frequently in later pages of this book.

of which will be made red with Vermillion. Thirty feet distant from the same — and one foot below the surface of the earth northwest direction will be deposited a letter communicating to the party any thing that I may deem necessary — Mrss C. & H. will each at a proper time apoint each a man of their party to take charge of their business should anything occur to make it necessary — the men so appointed will be informed of my arrangements will with their parties proceed accordingly in the most carefull & alert manner for my interest — copies of the foregoing directions were delivered to Mrss Ham, Cly. & Fitzpatrick, our boat launched and at 3 ock P.M. the parties started. Clyman with six men to the sources of the Shetskedee Ham westerly to a mountanous country that lay in that direction Fitzpatrick with 6 men southwardly — & myself with 7 men embarked on board the boat with all my goods and extra baggage of the men, we decended the river a short distance and encamped —⁹

The trapper's costume, which nearly every writer who visited the mountains took pains to describe in considerable detail, was more distinctive than that of any other American frontiersman. "His dress and appearance are equally singular," wrote Rufus Sage, a merchant trapper of unusual descriptive ability.

His skin, from constant exposure, assumes a hue almost as dark as that of the Aborigine, and his features and physical structure attain a rough and hardy cast. His hair, through inattention, becomes long, coarse, and bushy, and loosely dangles upon his shoulders. His head is surmounted by a low crowned wool-hat, or a rude substitute of his own manufacture. His clothes are of buckskin, gaily fringed at the seams with strings of the same material, cut and made in a fashion

⁹ Missouri Historical Society Collection, Sublette Papers (microfilm).

peculiar to himself and associates. The deer and buffalo furnish him the required covering for his feet which he fabricates at the impulse of want. His waist is encircled with a belt of leather, holding encased his butcher-knife and pistols — while from his neck is suspended a bullet-pouch securely fastened to the belt in front, and beneath the right arm hangs a powder-horn transversely from his shoulder, behind which, upon the strap attached to it, are affixed his bullet-mould, ball-screw, wiper, awl, &c. With a gun-stick made of some hard wood, and a good rifle placed in his hands, carrying from thirty-five balls to the pound, the reader will have before him a correct likeness of a genuine mountaineer when fully equipped.

This costume prevails not only in the mountains proper, but also in the less settled portions of Oregon and California. The mountaineer is his own manufacturer, tailor, shoemaker, and butcher — and, fully accoutred and supplied with ammunition in good game country, he can always feed and clothe himself and enjoy all the comforts his situation affords.¹⁰

In dangerous country, trappers sometimes wore a deer-skin overshirt that reached from chin to thighs. Soaked in water and wrung out, the dried shirt became a veritable buckskin coat of mail that only the hardest-driven Indian arrow would penetrate.

The American fur trade, as distinct from the French or British, made use of three separate institutions — the factory, the fortified trading post, and the rendezvous. The factory was in effect a government monopoly designed to safeguard the welfare of the Indians and prevent their ex-

¹⁰ Rufus Sage: *Scenes in the Rocky Mountains* (Philadelphia, 1846), p. 18.

ploitation by aggressive and unscrupulous whites. Though ineffective in some particulars, the system on the whole served a useful and beneficent purpose. It was never a feature of the trade of the Southwest, and went out of existence elsewhere at the beginning of the most important decade of the fur trade, partly because of changed conditions and partly because of the constant pressure of private interests.¹¹

Following the policy used so successfully by the British companies in Canada and the Northwest, most of the large American fur companies and a few independent trappers built fortified trading posts at strategic locations in the beaver country.¹² Such establishments, like the presidio, pueblo, and mission of the Spaniard, were distinctive, highly effective frontier institutions. They were civilization's outposts in the wilderness and served not only as important trading centers but also as military forts, supply depots, and havens of refuge for trappers, immigrants, and other wilderness refugees.

The director of one of these great trading posts was a man of unusual and varied talents. He had to be. His authority extended over a region larger than many a European kingdom, and his decisions involved the fate of the post, the welfare of Indians as well as trappers, and the grave issue of peace or war.

He was required to organize the post's numerous trap-

¹¹ For a detailed description see Edgar B. Wesley: "The Government Factory System among the Indians, 1795-1822," *Journal of Economic and Business History*, Vol. IV, pp. 509-10.

¹² A detailed description of one of these posts will be found in Chapter 4.

ping expeditions, to instruct the parties where and how to operate, to exercise control over the most independent and undisciplined product of the Western frontier, and to maintain the peace of the border, despite the presence of many hundreds or even thousands of warlike savages, hostile to the whites by nature and often the implacable foes of other tribes. The men who successfully met such tests were indeed well qualified "to command armies, manage great railroads, or fill any high calling to which the fortunes of life might have led them."

In 1825 General William H. Ashley, most famous of the fur-trading entrepreneurs of St. Louis, revolutionized the Rocky Mountain fur business by introducing the rendezvous as a substitute for the fortified trading post. Unlike the trading post, the rendezvous was not confined to a fixed or permanent location, but followed the movement of the trappers from one region to another and thus created much more accessible trading centers for Indians and mountain men alike.

In contrast again to the company fort, where the Indians and trappers might trade the year round, the rendezvous was held only once a year, usually at the close of the spring hunt. The site for the grand event, an accessible, well-known valley, abounding in game, grass, and water, was usually selected one or two years in advance so that word could be widely circulated through the mountains of the time and place of the gathering. As the opening of a rendezvous drew near, trappers and Indians hundreds of miles away began to move toward the site to participate in the combined festival and fair.

The trappers' rendezvous, in some of its features the wilderness version of the medieval fair, was distinctly an American institution. It was held only in the Rocky Mountains. It was picturesque, spectacular, riotous, magnificently barbaric. To it the company brought its goods, gewgaws, and merchandise — blankets from England (because both wool and workmanship were notably superior to the products of the American mills); powder from the Du Ponts of Delaware; lead from the mines of Missouri; rifles from the Bolton Gun Works of New York and other factories and establishments of St. Louis or the East; short-barreled guns known as fusils or fusees from American or English gun works; traps, light and strong, from England, Montreal, ironworking plants on the Atlantic seaboard, and smithies in Pennsylvania and St. Louis; gaudy-colored shawls and calicoes from the mills of New England; little bells and mirrors from Cologne, beads from Italy, merinos and calicoes from France; coffee, sugar, and tea from importers of New York, Philadelphia, and New Orleans; and liquor — raw, crude, and poisonous — from Turley's distillery in New Mexico and the devil knew where else besides.

Beaver fur, like the cowhide on the Spanish-American cattle frontier, was the standard medium of exchange. A prime skin weighed at least a pound and a half, and during the heyday of the industry the price ranged from four to six dollars a pound in the mountains. Trade goods sold at the rendezvous at prices that neither the risk of loss nor the high cost of transportation could properly justify; but the trappers and Indians must either buy or go without. Even

as late as the mid-forties, tobacco brought from one to three dollars a pound, blankets from twelve to sixteen dollars each, coats as high as forty dollars, sixpenny calicoes fifty cents a yard, and beads a dollar a bunch.¹³ Russell estimated the gross profits of such transactions, before deducting necessary costs, at two thousand per cent.¹⁴

As already suggested, the rendezvous, like the medieval fair, was an extraordinary mixed and colorful affair. It was a place of buying, selling, haggling, cheating, gambling, fighting, drinking, palavering, racing, shooting, and carousing. Here a majority of the trappers traded the furs that had cost them months of incredible danger and hardship for a year's supply of powder, lead, knives, traps, tea, coffee, and blankets that would enable them to return to the lonely reaches of the Green, Yellowstone, Snake, Gila, or Sacramento.

An additional part of the catch went for trinkets and gewgaws for their Indian wives and concubines, as well as for their own adornment. The remainder was then too often squandered in roaring, riotous debauch, devoted in about equal measure to lethal whisky, reckless gambling, usually at euchre, poker, or seven-up, and an orgy of sexual abandon with the complacent Indian girls and squaws.

In soberer moments there were horse races, shooting matches, athletic contests, and long hours of feasting, smoking, and talk around the campfires. Thus the rendezvous furnished a market for the trapper's furs, provided him with a relatively convenient source of supplies, and af-

¹³ Sage, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

¹⁴ Osborne Russell: *Journal of a Trapper* (Boise, Idaho, 1921), p. 63.

forded almost his only opportunity for social intercourse and contact with civilization's ragged fringe.

In the regions drained by the Missouri and its larger tributaries, canoes, bullboats, and keelboats were common means of transportation. A keelboat was a heavy, flat-bottomed affair with a raised cargo box running down the middle, a battery of six oars on a side, and a sail for auxiliary use. The boat, usually from fifty to seventy-five feet long, was commonly towed upstream by means of a long rope or cordelle, manned by a tough, hard crew of twenty or thirty men who "scrambled along shore, through water, over rocks, sometimes swimming, sometimes wading, sometimes on solid, dry ground." Such a boat was used only on the largest rivers when heavy cargoes of furs or other freight required transportation.

The bullboat, in striking contrast to the slow, cumbersome keelboat, could be manned by a single trapper. In his account of the activities of Jedediah Smith, Stanley Vestal vividly described the making of one of these awkward-appearing but serviceable craft:

Smith had made bullboats before. He knew how to cut limber willow shoots nearly as thick as his wrist, how to set the butts in the ground in a four-foot circle — as big as the round coracle was to be, how to bend them over and lash them into a rounded framework, how to weave and lash smaller branches across this sturdy frame into a basket.

That done, he skinned several buffalo, and . . . sewed the skins tightly together, making a sheet of hide large enough to cover his willow framework. Then he stretched this skin, flesh-side out, over the basket, and fastened it securely to the gun-wale all around. He next built a small fire under the

raw-hide tub, to make the hides shrink and harden, all the time smearing melted buffalo tallow over the seams and surface of the hides. The smoking and soaking in warm grease made the boat waterproof.

Finally, Smith had a leather tub big enough to float him and his packs, light enough to be carried on his back, and small enough to be easily concealed in any thicket or patch of tall grass near which he might drift on his lonely way down the muddy Missouri. . . .¹⁵

With rare exceptions, the streams of that vast region of uncertain extent and indefinite boundaries called the Southwest were too small and erratic or too swift and tumultuous to permit the use of boats of any type. In its lower reaches the Colorado was navigable by canoes and even larger craft, but from Green River, Utah, to the Mojave villages the river was not a highway but a menace. The trappers were a rash and reckless breed, but even they had no stomach for the rapids, whirlpools, and gray, jagged rocks of that stretch of the Colorado, or for its almost equally treacherous tributary, the San Juan.

This lack of navigable rivers compelled the fur traders of the Southwest to rely almost entirely upon the caravan or pack train for transportation. For such overland travel each trapper had one or more riding-animals equipped with saddles usually of the Mexican type, and two pack mules or horses. The pack animals were equipped and packed after the Mexican fashion and usually carried a load of from two hundred to two hundred and fifty pounds. The stock foraged for itself the year round, and when grass

¹⁵ Stanley Vestal: *Mountain Men* (Boston, 1937), pp. 168-9. Reprinted by permission of the publishers, Houghton Mifflin Company.

and bushes failed, the inner bark of the quaking aspen or sweet cottonwood furnished a satisfactory substitute. Warren A. Ferris, an educated and experienced trapper, noted that the trappers bled their horses every spring "to make them thrive, and render them healthy," and that stock thus treated invariably became fatter, stronger, hardier, and more active than the others.¹⁶

Each trapper carried his personal articles — pipe, flints, bullet-mold, and the like — in a buckskin bag known as a "possible sack." Traps were carried in a similar but larger bag called a trapsack. Except for running buffalo, a form of sport for which some hunters preferred the fusil or short-barreled shotgun especially designed for the Indian trade, the mountain men employed a forty- to sixty-caliber "plains rifle," the barrel of which ranged in length from thirty to thirty-six inches. Such a gun fired a long, heavy lead bullet and used two to four times as much powder as the famous Kentucky squirrel rifle of Daniel Boone's day. The latter was a little larger in bore than the modern thirty-two-caliber rifle and had a barrel at least four feet long. The plains rifle was a powerful gun, designed under the stress of necessity to deal successfully with buffalo, elk, mounted Indians, and grizzly bears. Its effective range was well over two hundred yards.¹⁷

¹⁶ Warren A. Ferris: *Life in the Rocky Mountains* (Denver, 1940), pp. 264-5. I have found no other references to this custom, though Texas ranchers, according to J. Frank Dobie, the authority on the Western mustang, used to bleed their horses for certain kinds of sickness. In bleeding, a vein was opened above one of the horse's hoofs.

¹⁷ Chauncey Thomas: "Frontier Firearms," *Colorado Magazine*, Vol. VII, No. 3, p. 103. See also Ferris: *Life in the Rocky Mountains*, p. 241; John G. W. Dillin: *The Kentucky Rifle* (New York, 1946), *passim*.

The most celebrated of the plains and trappers' rifles was made in the gun works of two brothers, Jacob and Samuel Hawken, of St. Louis. Both brothers were born in Hagerstown, Maryland. Jacob moved to Missouri before 1820, and Samuel followed in 1822. The rifle was hand-made and had a thirty-six inch barrel of soft iron instead of steel.¹⁸

The trapper used a peculiar technique in buffalo-running which the following contemporary account very adequately describes:

When running buffaloes the hunters do not use rifle-patches but take along several balls in their mouths; the projectile thus moistened sticks to the powder when put into the gun. In the first place, on buffalo hunts, they do not carry rifles, for the reason that they think the care required in loading them takes too much time unnecessarily when shooting at close range and, furthermore, they find rifle balls too small. The hunter chases buffaloes at full gallop, discharges his gun, and reloads without slackening speed. To accomplish this he holds the weapon close within the bend of his left arm and, taking the powder horn in his right hand, draws out with his teeth the stopper, which is fastened to the horn to prevent its being lost, shakes the requisite amount of powder into his left palm, and again closes the powder horn. Then he grasps the gun with his right hand, holding it in a vertical position, pours the powder down the barrel, and gives the gun a sidelong thrust with the left hand, in order to shake the powder well through the priming hole into the touchpan (hunters at this place discard percussion caps as not practical).

¹⁸ A Hawken rifle is on exhibit in Pioneer Hall, Society of California Pioneers, San Francisco. The above data was taken from the exhibition cards.

Now he takes a bullet from his mouth and with his left hand puts it into the barrel, where, having been moistened by spittle, it adheres to the powder. . . . Hunters approach the buffaloes so closely that they do not take aim but, lifting the gun lightly with both hands, point in the direction of the animal's heart and fire.¹⁹

As tracker, scout, plainsman, or woodsman the mountain man was at least the equal of the Indian. He had to be if he intended to survive. "A turned leaf," wrote George Frederick Ruxton, one of the best-informed observers in the Rocky Mountains, "a blade of grass pressed down, the uneasiness of the wild animals, the flight of birds, are all paragraphs to him written in Nature's legible hand and plainest language."²⁰

With the exception of scant supplies of salt, flour, tea, and coffee, the trapper, like the Indian, lived wholly off the country. His favorite meat, day in and day out, was the buffalo, and trappers who had once formed a liking for buffalo humps, ribs, marrow, and steaks were never content with other kinds of meat for any length of time. The craving, in fact, was so pronounced that one wonders if there was not a definite physiological reason for it.

When a hunter killed a buffalo, he often cut the animal's throat and drank the thick, red blood, a draught that reportedly had the taste of warm milk.²¹ The heavy layer of fat that ran from the buffalo's shoulder along the backbone

¹⁹ Bureau of American Ethnology: *Journal of Rudolph Friederich Kurz* (Bulletin 115. Washington, 1937), pp. 194-5.

²⁰ *Adventures in Mexico and the Rocky Mountains*, p. 235

²¹ Thomas James: *Three Years among the Indians and Mexicans* (St. Louis, 1916), p. 116.

was stripped off, dipped in hot grease, and then smoked. It was eaten with lean or dried meat.²²

Deer, elk, antelope, and bear were also favorite food animals with the mountain men. Beaver tail was a great delicacy, but the rest of the beaver was eaten only when other meat was scarce. According to many reports, a true mountain man preferred lynx meat to any other delicacy.²³ French dumplings, a very special treat, were made of minced meat rolled in balls of dough and fried in buffalo marrow.²⁴

Thomas Jefferson Farnham, whose writings on the West attained wide popularity in the early forties, made his reader hunger-conscious with the following vivid account of a trapper's feast on buffalo:

The marrow bones were undergoing a severe flagellation; the blows of the old hunter's hatchet were cracking them in pieces, and laying bare the rolls of "trapper's butter" within them. A pound of marrow was thus extracted, and put into a gallon of water heated nearly to the boiling point. The blood which he had dipped from the cavity of the buffalo was then stirred in till the mass became of the consistency of rice soup. A little salt and black pepper finished the preparation. It was a fine dish; too rich, perhaps, for some of my esteemed acquaintances, whose digestive organs partake of the general laziness of their habits; but to us who had so long desired a healthful portion of bodily exercise in that quarter, it was the very marrow and life-blood . . . of

²² Alpheus H. Favour: *Old Bill Williams* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1936), pp. 200-1; William Thomas Hamilton: *My Sixty Years on the Plains* (New York, 1905), p. 33.

²³ Ferris: *Life in the Rocky Mountains*, p. 248.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

whatsoever is good and wholesome for famished carnivorous animals like ourselves. It was excellent, most excellent. It was better than our father's foaming ale. For a while it loosed our tongues and warmed our hearts toward one another, it had the additional effect of Aaron's oil: it made our faces to shine with grease and gladness. But the remembrance of the palate pleasures of the next course, will not allow me to dwell longer upon this. The crowning delight was yet in store for us. While enjoying the said soup, we believed the bumper of our pleasures to be sparkling to the brim; and if our excellent old trapper had not been there, we never should have desired more. But how true is that philosophy which teaches, that to be capable of happiness, we must be conscious of wants! Our friend Kelly was in this a practical as well as theoretical Epicurean. "No giving up the beaver so," said he; "another bait and we will sleep." Saying this, he seized the intestines of the buffalo, which had been properly cleaned for the purpose, turned them inside out, and as he proceeded stuffed them with strips of well salted and peppered tenderloin. Our "*boudies*" thus made, were stuck upon sticks before the fire, and roasted till they were thoroughly cooked and browned. The sticks were then taken from their roasting position and stuck in position for eating. That is to say, each of us with as fine an appetite as ever blessed a New-England boy at his grandsire's Thanksgiving Dinner, seized a stick spit, stuck it in the earth near our couches, and sitting upon our haunches ate our last course — the dessert of our mountain host's entertainment. These wilderness sausages would have gratified the appetite of those who had been deprived of meat a less time than we had been. The envelopes preserve the juices of the meat with which while cooking the adhering fat, turned within, mingles and forms a gravy of the finest flavor. Such is a feast in the mountains.²⁵

²⁵ *Travels in the Great Western Prairies* (Poughkeepsie, 1841), pp. 85-6.

On the prairies the trapper usually built his fire of buffalo chips — not a bad substitute for wood when the chips were old and dry, but poor fuel indeed when wet by rain or snow. Pitch-pine was the most inflammable of all mountain wood; dry aspen burned without smoke and made a brilliant light; juniper gave out a hot, steady flame and lasted as long as oak. Buffalo fat made excellent candles.

In choosing a site for its winter camp, a trapping party selected a hidden, well-watered valley, sheltered as far as possible from wind and snow, remote enough to escape the notice of small bands of roving Indians, and sufficiently wooded to afford shelter for the company's horses and mules and provide an adequate supply of sweet cottonwood, willow, or aspen bark to supplement the supply of grass. Here the trappers erected skin lodges or rough log cabins and "holed up" for the winter.

"The winter-camp of a hunter of the Rocky Mountains would doubtless prove an object of interest to the unsophisticated," wrote Sage.

It is usually located in some spot sheltered by hills or rocks, for the double purpose of securing the full warmth of the sun's rays, and screening it from the notice of strolling Indians that may happen in its vicinity. Within a convenient proximity to it stands some grove, from which an abundance of dry fuel is procurable when needed; and equally close the ripplings of a watercourse salute the ear with their music.

His shantee faces a huge fire, and is formed of skins carefully extended over an arched frame-work of slender poles, which are bent in the form of a semicircle and kept to their places by inserting their extremities in the ground. Near this is his "graining block," planted aslope, for the ease of the

operative in preparing his skins for the finishing process in the art of dressing; and not far removed is a stout frame, contrived from four pieces of timber, so tied together as to leave a square of sufficient dimensions for the required purpose, in which, perchance, a skin is stretched to its fullest extension, and the hardy mountaineer is busily engaged in rubbing it with a rough stone or "scraper," to fit it for the manufacture of clothing.²⁶

The dirt floors of the skin lodges, such as Sage describes, were covered with reeds, dried grass, or small evergreen boughs, and on these the trappers spread their fur robes and heavy woolen blankets. The larger pieces of baggage were then placed inside the lodge, close against the walls, to help exclude the wind and cold.

Of all frontier callings, that of the trapper was the most hazardous and rash. Indians, grizzly bears, quarrels, hunger, thirst, flood, storm, accident, and disease — perils of nature, man, and beast — took unremitting toll even of the most seasoned of the mountain men. Chittenden estimated that at least a hundred men lost their lives in the service of the American Fur Company. In 1856 Antoine Robidoux declared that he could account for only three survivors out of a force of three hundred hunters and trappers who were in the Rocky Mountains thirty years before. James Ohio Pattie thought that only sixteen men out of a total of a hundred and sixteen survived their first year's trapping experience in the Southwest.

The Indian was the trapper's greatest menace. Responsibility for the traditional blood feud between the mountain

²⁶ Rufus Sage, *op. cit.*, p. 288.

man and certain Indian tribes is hard to apportion. Perhaps both were equally at fault. Encounters between the two were grim, savage, merciless; and if the savage practiced nameless cruelties on wounded or captured whites after a victorious engagement, the trappers not infrequently killed the wounded enemy and on occasion burned Indian villages and shot the fleeing inmates, men, women, and children, without discrimination.

Following the Indian practice, the trapper customarily scalped his victim. "Scalp-taking is a solemn rite," wrote an English traveler about the middle of the last century. "When the Indian sees his enemy fall he draws his scalp-knife . . . and twisting the scalp-lock — round his left hand, makes with his right two semicircular incisions, with and against the sun, about the part to be removed. The skin is next loosened with the knife point. . . . The operator then sits on the ground, places his feet against the subject's shoulders by way of leverage, and holding the scalp-lock with both hands he applies a strain which soon brings off the spoils with a sound which, I am told, is not unlike 'flop.'" ²⁷ According to Ferris, the Flatheads "raised the scalp" of a dead Indian "by cutting around the edge of the hair and pulling off the entire skin of the head from the ears up." ²⁸

In justice to the mountain men, however, it may be said that they inherited the practice of scalping Indians from an earlier generation of frontier whites. In 1791, for example, "an association of the most civilized, humane, and

²⁷ Richard F. Burton: *The City of the Saints* (London, 1861), p. 138.

²⁸ *Life in the Rocky Mountains*, p. 129.

pious inhabitants of Pittsburg” offered a reward of a hundred dollars “for every hostile Indian’s Scalp, with both ears to it.”²⁹

In general, however, the more responsible, far-sighted leaders of the mountain men, and the more humane trappers among the rank and file, endeavored to remain on friendly terms with the Indians and deal fairly with them. Liquor was one of the major sources of difficulty between Indians and whites and the most demoralizing of all factors in the Western trade. The better class of traders deplored its use; but when a company’s representative brought it into a locality, other traders were forced to follow suit or lose the trade of Indians and trappers alike to their unscrupulous competitor. American companies damned the Hudson’s Bay Company for thus debauching and ruining the Indians; the Hudson’s Bay Company laid the blame on the Americans. The independent companies charged the American Fur Company with responsibility for the practice; the American Fur Company accused the independents.

Meanwhile, despite well-intentioned but unenforced federal laws to the contrary, poisonous and adulterated liquor poured into the rendezvous and trapping-grounds, and Indians and trappers alike paid the Devil’s price. From the accounts of contemporary observers, who, almost without exception, emphasized the ruinous influence of the traffic, Chittenden drew the following composite picture:

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

²⁹ See *Magazine of American History*, Vol. II, Part I, p. 58.

could not have been carried further. A baneful and noxious substance to begin with, it was retailed with the most systematic fraud, often amounting to a sheer exchange of nothing for the goods of the Indian. It was the policy of the shrewd trader first to get his victim so intoxicated that he could no longer drive a good bargain. The Indian, becoming more and more greedy for liquor, would yield up all he possessed for an additional cup or two. The voracious trader, not satisfied with selling his alcohol at a profit of many thousand per cent, would now begin to cheat in quantity. As he filled the little cup which was the standard of measure, he would thrust in his big thumb and diminish its capacity by one-third. Sometimes he would substitute another cup with the bottom thickened up by running tallow in until it was a third full. He would also dilute the liquor until, as the Indian's senses became more and more befogged, he would treat him to water pure and simple. . . . the duplicity and crime for which this unhallowed traffic is responsible in our relations with the Indians have been equalled but seldom in even the most corrupt of nations.³⁰

Nearly all mountain men had Indian wives or concubines; some of the trappers were adopted into Indian tribes; a few, such as Jim Beckwourth, Old Bill Williams, and Edward Rose became influential chiefs. The mountain man who smoked the peace pipe with an Indian chief, "one puff to the skies, one to the earth, two to the winds and waters on the right and left,"³¹ was assured of a measure of temporary security; but even when the two races were ostensibly at peace, some act of treachery, skulduggery, or open hostility might end the hair-trigger truce and start

³⁰ *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, Vol. I, pp. 23-4.

³¹ James: *Three Years among the Indians*, p. 205.

a conflict that knew no mercy on either side. The trapper's typical attitude found expression in the saying that the rifle was the only pen with which a treaty could be written that the Indians would not forget.³²

But before too harshly condemning the perfidy and treachery of the savages, it would be well if the uninformed American acquainted himself, at least in some slight measure, with the other side of the picture. Somewhere in the archives in Washington there is a dust-covered file of treaties running into the score, if not the hundred, that the government of the white interloper who trespassed on the savage's homelands and hunting-grounds negotiated with the Indian and then deliberately violated, grossly neglected, or carelessly forgot.

Yet wherever the fault lay, the Indian menace was a constant, inescapable factor in the trapper's life. It dogged the trail of the solitary mountain man as he explored the streams for beaver signs, set and visited his string of traps, hunted or loafed, ate or slept, sat by his campfire, or rode his wild and lonely trails. Even the largest trapping expeditions were subject to raids, ambush, and attack. The battles of Pierre's Hole, of Fort Mackenzie, and of Ashley's men with the Arikaras were typical examples of such large-scale engagements.

It is true that many tribes — the Cheyennes, Snakes, Gros Ventres, Utes, even the Apaches — at times made common cause with the trappers against their traditional Indian foes; but only one tribe, the Flatheads or Salish, kept their relations with the whites permanently inviolate.

³² Osborne Russell: *Journal of a Trapper*, p. 63.

They alone were never guilty of theft or violence against trapper, settler, or passing emigrant. The small tribe lived in western Montana. Its members spoke a language "remarkable for its sweetness and simplicity," and were noted, as Ferris wrote, for their "humanity, candour, forbearance, integrity, truthfulness, piety, and honesty." To this he added:

They were the only tribe in the Rocky Mountains that can with truth boast of the fact that they have never killed or robbed a white man, nor stolen a single horse, how great soever the necessity and the temptation. I have . . . been often employed in trading and travelling with them, and have never known one to steal so much as an awl-blade. Every other tribe in the Rocky Mountains hold theft rather in the light of a virtue than a fault, and many even pride themselves on their dexterity and address in the art of appropriation, like the Greeks deeming it no dishonor to steal, but a disgrace to be detected.³³

Ferris might have explained the Flathead character by adding that the Indians had learned some of the great truths of Christianity from early missionaries or Christian traders and very naïvely determined to put these truths into daily operation.

The danger of ambush, the horrors of Indian torture, and the stark necessity either of outwitting his savage enemies or losing his own scalp, made the Anglo-American frontiersman, whether Kentucky long-rifleman or Far Western mountain man, a superb master of woodcraft, self-de-

³³ *Life in the Rocky Mountains*, p. 88. Notwithstanding many writers to the contrary, Flathead mothers did not deform the heads of their children. The name was a misnomer.

fense, and border warfare. The trapper's skill with the rifle has become an authentic American tradition. He could throw a tomahawk or scalping knife (probably the most dangerous of all border weapons at close range) more accurately than an Indian, and developed a resourcefulness in combat that matched the savage's uncanny skill. In an account of one of his many skirmishes Russell gave the following excellent example of the trapper's ingenuity: "When I first stationed myself at the tree, I placed a hat on some twigs which grew at the foot of it and would put it in motion by kicking the twigs with my foot in order that they might shoot at the hat and give me a better chance at their heads."³⁴

As previously suggested, the Indians with whom the trappers traded or fought, as occasion demanded, were proverbially warlike, crafty, treacherous, and cruel. Their principal native weapons were the bow, scalping knife, tomahawk, and war club. The Indian bow, which differed both in effectiveness and craftsmanship from tribe to tribe, was distinctly inferior as a weapon either to the English longbow of Crécy and Agincourt or to the bows of modern manufacture. But an Apache Bowman could send an arrow clear through the body of his enemy at a hundred yards, and Kit Carson found the Klamath Indians of northern California and southern Oregon able to drive an iron-pointed arrow four inches deep into the trunk of a pine tree.

Arrowheads and even rifle balls were poisoned in a variety of ways. The Snake and Mojave Indians, both of

³⁴ *Journal of a Trapper*, p. 22.

Shoshonean stock, dipped their arrows in a mixture of antelope or deer liver and rattlesnake venom. To secure the venom, the Indians placed the snakes in a small enclosure and tormented them with sticks until they struck the pieces of liver and injected the contents of their poison sacs into the spongy flesh. The liver was then placed in the sun and allowed to putrefy. A wound made by an arrow smeared with this repulsive poison was nearly always fatal, for if the victim survived the rattlesnake venom, he still faced death from blood poisoning or tetanus. Some trappers asserted that the Shoshones added the blood of a woman to the deadly mess to increase its potency.

The literature of the fur trade is full of the drama of Indian warfare. The story runs the whole gamut of border conflict, from single-handed combat to pitched battle, from incredible escape to wholesale massacre and torture. A few concrete examples, chosen almost at random, will confirm this general statement.

“From the time we parted from Maj. Riley, at the western terminus of the Arkansas sandhills, until we were met by Ewing Young and his ninety-five hunters,” wrote William Waldo, “we seldom obtained more than three or four hours sleep out of the twenty-four. Men became so worn down with toil by day and watching by night, that they would go to sleep and fall from their mules, as they rode along. For forty or fifty days, we were not permitted to take off our clothes or boots at night, and all slept with their pistols belted around them and their guns in their arms. In several instances, men seized their knives in their sleep and stove them into the ground, and the men became afraid

to sleep together, for fear of killing each other in their sleep." ³⁵

While searching for two lost members of a company of trappers on one of the tributaries of the Colorado, the Kentucky adventurer James Ohio Pattie came upon a party of Indians engaged in cooking the dismembered bodies of his companions over a campfire in much the same way that the trappers roasted the flesh of a buffalo or beaver.

Pursued by Indians, four members of a trapping party became separated from their companions and attempted to cross the Snake River. Forcing their horses to swim to the other side, the trappers stripped themselves naked, placed their belongings on a raft, and attempted to push the awkward craft across the current. Now, the Snake River is not to be trusted, as too many tragedies even among present-day trout fishermen attest. The raft capsized, and everything — clothes, shoes, guns, food, and saddles — disappeared. Naked as the day they were born, the wretched trappers suffered an experience as cruel and painful as it was novel and grimly ludicrous. Ferris gave this vivid picture of their predicament:

The burning heat of the sun parched their skins, and they had nothing to shield them from his powerful rays; the freezing air of the night chilled and benumbed their unprotected bodies, and they had no covering to keep off the cold; the chill storms of rain and hail pelted mercilessly on them, and they could not escape the torture; the friction produced by riding without a saddle or anything for a substitute, chaffed

³⁵ Recollections of a Septuagenarian," *Missouri Historical Society Quarterly*, Vol. V, Nos. 4-6, pp. 77-8.

off the skin, and even flesh, and without any means of remedying the misfortune, or alleviating the pain, for they were prevented from walking by the stones and sharp thorns of the prickly pear [pear], which lacerated their feet. They were compelled though the agony occasioned by it was intense, to continue their equestrian march, till amidst this accumulation of ills, they reached our camp; where by kind treatment, and emollient applications, their spirits were restored and their sufferings relieved. Add to the complication of woes above enumerated, the gnawing pangs of hunger which the reader will infer, that they must have experienced in no slight degree, from the fact that they did not taste a morsel of food during those four ages of agony, and we have an aggregate of suffering hardly equalled in the history of human woe.”³⁶

Next to the Indian, the grizzly bear was the trapper's greatest menace. “An enormous animal, a hideous brute, a savage looking beast,” the grizzly, gray, or white bear, as the trapper indiscriminately called him, was one of the most formidable creatures modern man has ever had to face. He was enormously powerful, fearless, truculent, and crafty and as tenacious of life as a rogue elephant. Few trapping expeditions returned from the mountains without having lost some of their members to the savage fury of this great gray monarch of the wilderness.

In places the grizzly was found in numbers that now seem as incredible to us, the children of an overcrowded, over-

³⁶ Reprinted by permission from *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*, by Warren A. Ferris; edited by Dr. Paul C. Phillips; published by The Old West Publishing Company (Denver, 1940), p. 208.

civilized land, as the stories our grandsires told of the passenger pigeon and the buffalo. Pattie saw two hundred and twenty in a single day. "They were everywhere — upon the plains, in the valleys and on the mountains," said George C. Yount, "so that I have often killed as many as five or six in one day, and it is not unusual to see fifty or sixty within the twenty-four hours."³⁷

If he escaped the Indian and the grizzly, the luckless fur trader too frequently died — or suffered even greater agony than death — from cold, hunger, thirst, prairie fires, cloudbursts, snowslides, and disease. Snow-blindness made his eyes feel "as if they were filled with coarse sand." Hunger sometimes led him to bleed his horses and cook and eat the blood. Mosquitoes, especially of the snow and swamp varieties, tormented him almost beyond endurance. Wounds became infected and produced blood poisoning and tetanus. Poisoned liquor and venereal disease brought paralysis, madness, and lingering death.

Except in rare instances, the services of a physician or surgeon were unavailable, and the victim of wounds, accident, or disease was compelled to rely on the crude ministrations of his fellow trappers. Novel remedies, the efficacy of some of which might even warrant investigation by modern medical science, were used for many ills. Rattlesnake bites were cauterized by burning small quantities of gunpowder on the open wound. A salve for wounds and lacerations was made from sugar and soap or from beaver's oil

³⁷ Mrs. F. H. Day: "Sketches of the Early Settlers of California," the *Hesperian*, March 1859, p. 1.

and castoreum.³⁸ Liver pills of calomel and tar drops for colds and sore throats were common remedies.

"I here became for the first time acquainted with a kind of beverage very common among the mountaineers," wrote Sage.

The article alluded to may with much propriety be termed "bitters," as the reader will readily acknowledge on learning the nature of its principal ingredient.

It is prepared by the following simple process, viz: with one pint of water mix one-fourth gill of buffalo-gall, and you will then have before you a wholesome exhilarating drink.

As a sanative, it tends to make sound an irritated and ulcerated stomach, reclaiming it to a healthful and lively tone, and thus striking an effective blow at that most prolific source of so large a majority of the diseases common to civilized life.

From what I have seen of its results, I consider it one of the most innocent and useful medicines in cases of dyspepsy. . . .³⁹

In reply to a request for medicine, Captain William Becknell sent some rhubarb and camphor to Bartolomé Baca, Governor of New Mexico. Becknell was not an educated man, in the narrow sense of that term, and his directions for the use of the two remedies involved certain liberties both with syntax and spelling. His letter read:

The Rubarbe you can take at ny time what will Ly on the pinte of apocket Knif sum shuger and a spunful of cold warter you may Eaeght or drinke any thing Hot or Cold.

³⁸ Sage, op. cit., p. 295; Maurice S. Sullivan: *The Travels of Jedediah Smith* (Santa Ana, California, 1934), p. 78.

³⁹ Sage, op. cit., pp. 132-3.

The Best time to take it is of aneigh [a night] When you go to Bed it is not apecke [ipecac?] agental purge and wil creteefy [gratify?] the stomak when in Bad order The Campor you can desolve in whiskey put a few drops in a dram of whiskey in the morning will Help the stomake very much. I send you A few of the qusawit Barks [Jesuits' bark or camphor] put them in to abotel of whisky 1 quart in and . . . stand in the sun for one or 2 days and then drinke them. . . .⁴⁰

The trappers, though inclined to let Nature work her own cures, sometimes resorted to crude surgery to save a man's life or limb. When Dr. Marcus Whitman visited Fort Hall on his way to Oregon, he removed a three-inch Blackfoot iron arrowhead that had been embedded in Jim Bridger's back for several years. "It was a difficult operation," wrote the Reverend Samuel Parker, "in consequence of the arrow being hooked at the point by striking a large bone, and a cartilaginous substance had grown around it. The doctor pursued the operation with great self-possession and perseverance; and Captain Bridger manifested equal firmness."⁴¹

Ferris was once wounded so severely in the shoulder by a rifle ball that the blood ran out of his mouth and nose and covered his body. A friend, "who had some knowledge of practical surgery," probed the wound with a ramrod and "dressed it with a salve of his own preparation."⁴²

⁴⁰ The letter was sent from Santa Cruz, New Mexico, October 29, 1824. It is number 80 of the Ritch Collection (hereafter indicated as RI) of the Huntington Library Manuscripts.

⁴¹ *Journal of an Exploring Tour beyond the Rocky Mountains* (Ithaca, New York, 1840), p. 76. Dr. Whitman also removed an arrowhead which had lain under the shoulder of another hunter for two and a half years.

⁴² *Life in the Rocky Mountains*, p. 178.

In his historic account of the Santa Fe trade Josiah Gregg vividly described a rough-and-ready operation performed on a member of the caravan whose arm was shattered by an accidental gunshot wound. Gangrene had set in and the man's death seemed inevitable. In response to the sufferer's desperate plea, however, three or four of his companions undertook to amputate the infected arm.

Their only case of instruments [wrote Gregg] consisted of a handsaw, a butcher's knife, and a large iron bolt. The teeth of the saw being considered too coarse, they went to work and soon had a set of fine teeth filed on the back. The knife having been whetted keen and the iron bolt laid upon the fire, they commenced the operation, and in less time than it takes to tell it the arm was opened round to the bone, which was almost in an instant sawed off; and with the whizzing hot iron the whole stump was so effectually seared as to close the arteries completely. Bandages were now applied and the company proceeded on their journey as though nothing had occurred. The arm commenced healing rapidly and in a few weeks the patient was sound and well, and is perhaps still living to bear witness to the superiority of the hot iron over ligatures, in taking up arteries.⁴³

In the literature of a popular or semipopular character that has grown up around the fur trade, the mountain man is portrayed, almost without exception, as illiterate, drunken, licentious, brutal. The picture is exaggerated and too one-sided. Though a majority of the trappers perhaps belonged in this familiar category and gave themselves free

⁴³ Josiah Gregg: *The Commerce of the Prairies* (New York, 1844), Vol. I, pp. 59-60.

license whenever they had the opportunity, they did not constitute the dominant, stabilizing element in the fur trade.

That element, to which many of the leaders and responsible trappers belonged, was sober, literate, and often deeply religious. Peter Skene Ogden, one of the most illustrious of the explorers of the Far West, gathered his men together daily for public prayers when they were on the march.⁴⁴ Louis Vasquez requested his brother to send him some novels and to tell Emilie, his sister, "not to worry about my health; tell her that the God of men who are above reproach is with me and besides I have nothing to fear."⁴⁵

Jedediah Smith, perhaps the greatest of all the American mountain men, was as devout a Christian as a Scotch Covenanter and as faithful in his prayers and daily reading of the Bible. Harrison G. Rogers, who served as clerk of Smith's historic expedition to California in 1826, was equally sincere in his religious experiences and conviction. On New Year's Day, 1827, he delivered an address "to the Reverend Father of San Gabriel Mission" on the early history and missionary activities of the Christian Church that for diction, range of knowledge, and Scriptural allusion would have put to shame most ministers or priests.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Constance L. Skinner: *Adventurers of Oregon* (New Haven, 1920), Vol. XXII, p. 243.

⁴⁵ LeRoy R. Hafen: "Mountain Men," *Colorado Magazine*, January 1933, p. 17.

⁴⁶ There are many baffling aspects of this address. I cannot explain its style and phraseology, which differ radically from the rest of Rogers's diary, or account for Rogers's amazing knowledge of the subject. The subsequent history of the diary makes it virtually impossible that the address was added by a later writer.

Months later, in the midst of the trackless wilderness, perhaps with the premonition of death before him, Rogers wrote in his revealing diary, "Oh! God, may it please thee, in thy divine providence, to still guide and protect us through this wilderness of doubt and fear, as thou hast done heretofore, and be with us in the hour of danger and difficulty, as all praise is due to thee and not to man, oh! do not forsake us Lord, but be with us and direct us through."⁴⁷

By direct reference or casual allusion many another fur trader's diary shows clearly enough that the writer enjoyed a superior educational and cultural background. Describing his camp in the Yellowstone, Osborne Russell wrote that during the long winter evenings the men collected in the larger buffalo-skin lodges and entered into debates and arguments in what they called the "Rocky Mountain College."⁴⁸ Elsewhere Russell added: "There were four of us in the mess. One was from Missouri, one from Massachusetts, one from Vermont, and myself from Maine. We passed an agreeable winter. We had nothing to do but to eat, attend to the horses and procure firewood. We had some few books to read, such as Byron, Shakespeare and Scott's works, the Bible and Clark's Commentary on it, and other small works on geology, chemistry and philosophy. . . ."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Reprinted by permission of the publishers, The Arthur H. Clark Company, from *The Ashley-Smith Explorations and the Discovery of a Central Route to the Pacific, 1822-1829*, by Harrison C. Dale (Glendale, California, 1941), pp. 210-12, 249-50.

⁴⁸ *Journal of a Trapper*, p. 55.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

"I found the Scotchman and Kentuckian well educated men," wrote another trapper. "The latter presented me with a copy of Shakespeare and an ancient and modern history which he had in his pack. We had an abundance of reading matter with us; old mountain men were all great readers. It was always amusing to me to hear people from the East speak of old mountaineers as semi-barbarians, when as a general rule they were the peers of the Easterners in general knowledge."⁵⁰

Thomas Jefferson Farnham, traveler, propagandist, and popular writer, spoke of a trapper from New Hampshire, whom he encountered in the heart of the Rocky Mountains, as one of the most remarkable men of his acquaintance. The trapper was a graduate of Dartmouth College, a gentleman in manners and bearing, "a finished scholar, a critic on English and Roman literature . . . an Indian."⁵¹

"The trapper in his solitude seldom wasted his time," said Frederic E. Voelker, of St. Louis.

Time left over from physical activity necessary to his business and his subsistence was mostly devoted to reading and thought. Many of them carried on their solitary travels newspapers, magazines, and books — chiefly the Bible and Shakespeare. Their tastes ran, also, to history, biography, science and (hold your hat!) — poetry. They read little or no fiction. Being men of thought, it is not surprising that many of their favorites in their chosen fields of literature were or have become classics. Their reading matter was passed from hand to hand until it became so worn and filthy

⁵⁰ W. T. Hamilton: *My Sixty Years on the Plains* (New York, 1905), p. 68.

⁵¹ *Travels in the Great Western Prairies*, p. 38.

it fell apart. Many a good book was carried through storm, flood, fire and blood bath.⁵²

But whether religious or pagan, cultured or illiterate, the fur trader had certain fundamental traits that were the common heritage of all who wore the badge and livery of his calling. "To me," wrote Timothy Flint, who aspired to be the Richard Hakluyt of the fur traders, "there is a kind of moral sublimity in the contemplation of the adventures and daring of such men. They read a lesson to shrinking and effeminate spirits, the men of soft hands and fashionable life, whose frames the winds of heaven are not allowed to visit too roughly. They tend to re-inspire something of that simplicity of manners, manly hardihood, and Spartan energy and force of character which formed so conspicuous a part of the nature of the settlers of the western wilderness."⁵³

Even the rudest and most boisterous of the mountain men were fundamentally honest, just, and kind. They dealt fairly and generously with each other, never "lifted" another's cache unless the mountain code recognized the act as necessary, rarely violated their word or suffered from an associate's dishonesty, protected their own rights, and enforced a few simple, self-made laws.

The nature of his life and calling left its stamp, deep, permanent, and unmistakable, upon the trapper's face, movements, reactions, and entire personality. "He was or-

⁵² "The Mountain Men and Their Part in the Opening of the West," *Bulletin of the Missouri Historical Society*, Vol. III, No. 4, p. 158.

⁵³ *The Personal Narrative of James Ohio Pattie of Kentucky* (Cincinnati, 1831), p. v.

dinarily gaunt and spare," wrote Chittenden, "browned with exposure, his hair long and unkempt, while his general makeup, with the queer dress which he wore, made it often difficult to distinguish him from an Indian. The constant peril of his life and the necessity of unremitting vigilance gave him a kind of piercing look, his head slightly bent forward and his deep eyes peering from under a slouch hat, or whatever head-gear he might possess, as if studying the face of the stranger to learn whether friend or foe."⁵⁴ His life was indeed one of "enigmas, contrasts, and contradictions." According to his scale of values, freedom of life and action was the greatest of the virtues. He was at ease only in the "atmosphere of elevated, unembarrassed regions."

Farnham observed that the typical mountain man had the same manners as the Indians, the same "wild, unsettled, watchful expression in the eyes; the same unnatural gesticulation in conversation, the same unwillingness to use words when a sign, a contortion of the face or body or movement of the hand," would serve. He stood, walked, rode, dressed, and wore his hair after the same pattern, and Washington Irving even went so far as to say: "You can not pay a free trapper a greater compliment than to persuade him that you have mistaken him for an Indian."

In his tribute to James Clyman, companion of Smith, Bridger, Sublette, and other great figures of the trapping era, Charles L. Camp wrote an appropriate epitaph not only for his particular hero but for all the notable company of mountain men:

⁵⁴ *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, Vol. I, pp. 59-60.

The moving force in his career was an intense love of the freedom of the wilderness. He, and probably his father before him, typified that class of borderers who were never satisfied with a patch of land if there was a chance of finding something better a thousand or three thousand miles farther on. He wandered restlessly for forty-one years over the breadth of the continent and into the farthest recesses of the mountains, carrying with him an intimate knowledge of the geography of the regions he explored. . . . He outlived his times completely. Scarcely one of his mountain comrades survived him. Trails that he found across the mountains were now traversed by highways and steel rails. Cities had grown up on his camp grounds, farms had invaded the old cattle ranges of the California valleys, and the beaver and the buffalo had gone from the land that knew them, forever.⁵⁵

Such was the American beaver-hunter or mountain man, the reckless, daring, hawk-eyed wanderer who roamed through half a continent and vanished from the earth a long, long century ago. He was the product of the wilderness, its deserts, mountains, forests, winds, and streams. He was the first to take seizin of the vast and lonely spaces of the West, to explore its mysteries, discover its hidden trails, and "march with the sun to the last frontiers."

⁵⁵ *James Clyman, American Frontiersman*, ed. by Charles L. Camp (San Francisco, 1928), p. 10.