

# Mountain men and merchants



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Mountain Men and Merchants; How the West was Explored and Tamed Chad D. Ramsey Student #4101887 History 300 Professor Tracy Derks December 15th 2011 During the beginning and throughout the 19th century, mountain men, trappers and merchants of the fur trade made a vital impact on the development of the previously uncharted West. These men came primarily from the East coast of the United States with a desire for adventure and the calling of a better life.

Men like James Bridger, Jedediah Smith, Osborne Russell, Warren Ferris and numerous others left with expedition teams with what they could carry on their backs and on pack animals to explore the Western frontier. While these men appeared to be brave, and experienced some of the harshest conditions that the West had to offer, they were not alone, nor without help in the frontier. The mountain man had to forge relationships over the years with a key ally he would need to survive, the American Indian.

Many members of these tribes, most notably, the Crow, Flathead, Cheyenne, and Shoshone helped these mountain men in their education and understanding of the complexities of the relatively unexplored area. These adventurers, frontiersmen, and trappers were also an industrious cross section of society, who played a vital part in the history of the United States. While American Indians helped Mountain Men to explore the rugged West and were a vital link to route exploration and survival techniques, it was the trappers' writings, maps and fur trading that played a more important role in the development and exploration of the West.

One of the most important roles that these Mountain Men played initially, was that of cartographers. The rough sketching, and understanding of the layout of the land and of cardinal direction, were key ingredients for the success of the Mountain Man. Utley described these talents in Mountain Man Warren Ferris when he observed, " By Ferris's time, most trappers could visualize a map of the American West more accurate and comprehensive than existed anywhere on a paper. Some of what they saw, and knew, leaked out through St. Louis newspapers or spread by word of mouth. Most, however, remained locked in their minds, awaiting the intermediary equipped by training and skill to lay it before the literate world. " 1 During the summer of 1847, proclaimed Mountain Man Jim Bridger had already been assisting the early Mormon pioneers who had been crossing the vast stretches of the plains in search of their Zion.

Bridger had conferred with Mormon leader Brigham Young about the accuracy of his on hand maps, and even spent time drawing a map of the region for him in the dirt. Stanley Vestal described this situation when he wrote, " All that Brigham had to go by were the maps prepared by Colonel John C. Fremont- and divine guidance. Old Jim had not heard of divine guidance, and said he was " ashamed of the maps of Fremont, who knew nothing about the country, only the plain travelled road, and that he (Bridger) could correct all the maps published of the western world. 2 These invaluable resources also included the ability to disseminate the information and details of the drawings and maps onto other pieces of parchment, or to communicate them verbally into written form within the pages of a journal or other medium. Within the pages of Osborne Russell's book titled, Journal of a

Trapper are some nine highly detailed maps and routes that take the reader along the many legs of his journeys from 1834-1843. His maps and drawings are an example of a man who was dedicated to the work he was undertaking, and for the detail and chronology that went into it.

One such excerpt concerning these details was from Osborne's journal from June 19, 1835 when he stated, " This country affords no timber except the quaking Asp which grows in small scrubby groves in the nooks and ravines among the hills 20th we left the waters of Gray's Creek and crossed a low place in the mountain in an east direction fell on to a small stream running into Lewis' fork-distance 10 mls. 21st travelled East following this stream to the mouth about 15 mls which [was] about 30 mls.

Below the mouth of Salt River. " 3 The techniques of hunting and survival were both crucial skills for the mountain men and the trapper. They each had unspoken rules and guidelines that they lived by on a daily basis, and were the ethos they lived by. They trusted their lives to those that they knew, and who with they had fought, and were highly skeptical of any outsiders. The mountain man rarely asked anyone for any kind of assistance, while he held his own standards and earned his daily keep.

These men were richly versed in the art of setting up and breaking down a campsite, and could build survival shelters and out buildings that could easily withstand the harshest of winters. Mountain men were also skilled and versed in the field craft of hunting game, and known for not wasting any part of a kill. Weber described one of these situations when he noted, " His companions on that trip long remember how Huddart, crazed by thirst, stuck

his head inside a freshly killed buffalo to drink its blood; the story continued to be told on the trail for at least another decade. 4 Some of the essentials that every frontiersman, hunter, and trapper would have on their body or near them at all times included the following: Moccasins and buckskins, a Russell Green River knife found at most trading posts or rendezvous, a trusty horse, a good, comfortable hat to keep the sun off of the face, a “possibles bag” that carried in it everything to care for and fire a rifle, and lastly, a reliable hunting rifle.

Osborne describes his personal kit he carried with him, when he declared, “A trapper’s equipment in such cases is generally one animal upon which is placed one or two epishemores, (rectangles of buffalo robe which served as padding under the saddle, and as mattresses to sleep on), a riding saddle and bridle, a sack containing six beaver traps, a blanket with an extra pair of moccasins, his powder horn and bullet pouch, with a belt to which is attached a butcher knife, a wooden box containing bait for beaver, a tobacco sack with a pipe and implements for making fire, with sometimes a hatchet fastened to the pommel of the saddle.

His personal dress is a flannel or cotton shirt (if he is fortunate enough to obtain one, if not antelope skin answers the purpose of over and undershirt), a pair of leather breeches with blanket or smoked buffalo skin leggings, a coat made of blanket or buffalo robe, a hat or cap of wool, buffalo or otter skin, his hose (socks) are pieces of blanket wrapped around his feet, which are covered with a pair of moccasins made of dressed deer, elk, or buffalo skins, with his long hair falling loosely over his shoulders, completes his uniform.

He then mounts and places his rifle before him on his saddle. ” 5 In addition to the American Indian helping the mountain men and trappers with survival and hunting knowledge, mountain men also did the same for the Indian in return. Trappers and hunters were the first to introduce to the Indians the use of forged metals for hunting and survival. Large and small game traps were a valuable asset that could be used in multiple areas, and hunting rifles and knives were routinely traded and purchased by the American Indian to enhance and improve their way of life. Notes . Robert Utley, *A Life Wild and Perilous: Mountain Men and the Paths to the Pacific* (New York: Henry Holt and Co. , 1998), 155. 2. Stanley Vestal, *Jim Bridger Mountain Man a Biography* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), 160. 3. Osborne Russell, *Journal of a Trapper: In the Rocky Mountains Between 1834 & 1843*, ed. Aubrey L. Haines (Santa Barbara: The Narrative Press, 2001), 14. 4. Weber, David J. *The Taos Trappers* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 73. 5. Russell, Osborne. *Voices from the Wilderness: the Frontiersman’s Own Story*, ed.

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