

CHAPTER FOUR

FUR TRAPPERS AND TRADERS

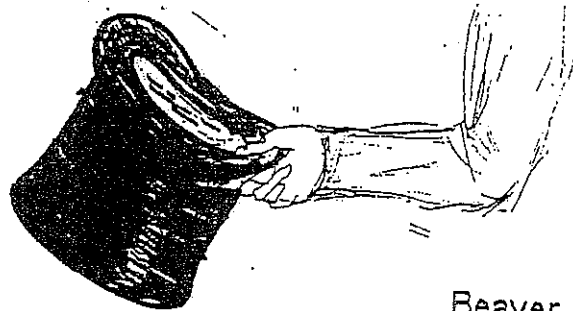
One of the most important results of the Lewis and Clark Expedition to Montana history is that when they returned to the East they told of the abundance of beavers and other fur-bearing animals in the Rocky Mountains. Trappers and traders began to move into the unexplored West in significant numbers looking for more furs.

Vocabulary

felt (n)	independent	hostile
characteristics	rendezvous	plew
solitude	scent	foofaraw
survival	castor	scarce

Beaver

Beaver was the most important fur of the the trade in the early 1800's. Because men's high fancy hats made out of beaver felt were very fashionable at that time in Europe, trapping beaver was a very profitable business.



Beaver Felt Top Hat

Mountain Men

The men who became fur trappers were also known as mountain men. They had certain **characteristics** that made them different from the average man of that time. They were mostly young men looking for adventure. They were very independent, and did not like having other people telling them what to do. They liked solitude, preferring to be alone than in the company of other people. They liked seeing new territory that no

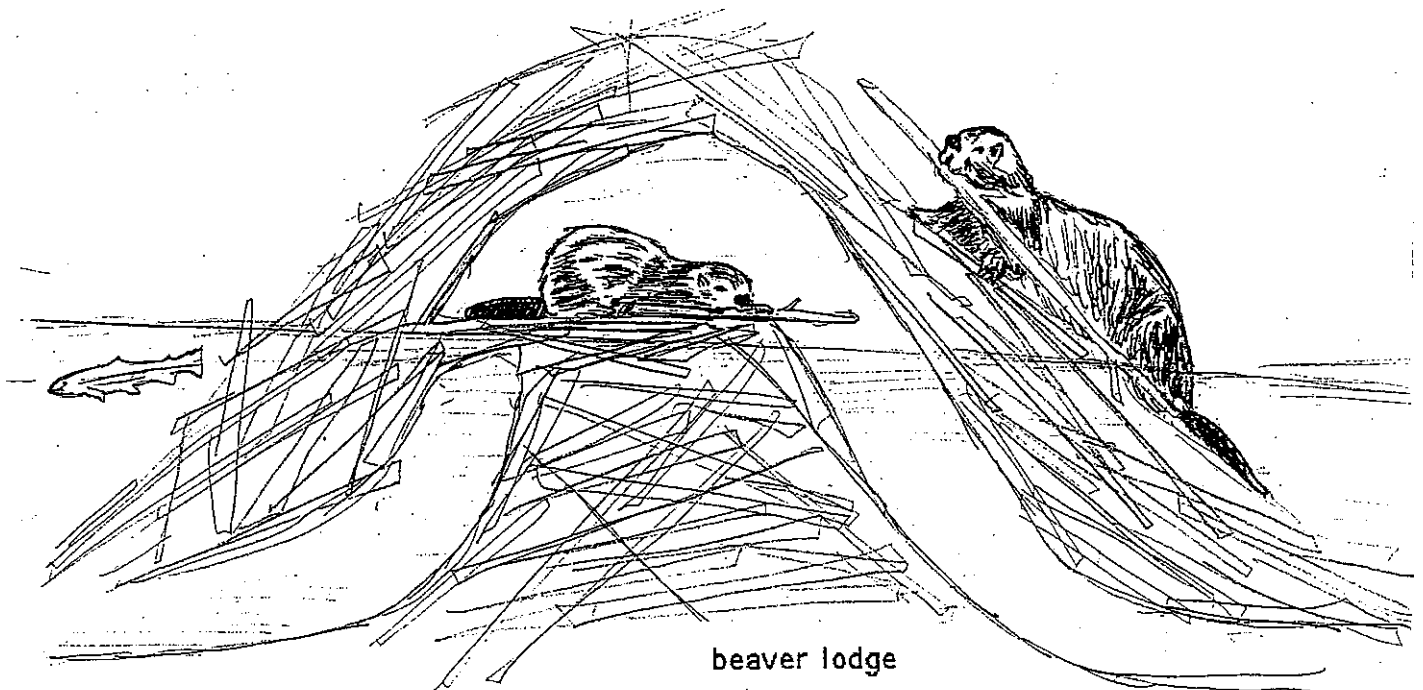
other white man had seen before. They preferred living in nature to the comforts of civilization.

Skills of the Trappers

These mountain men quickly became experts in survival skills. Almost everyone those days knew how to use guns and axes, but these men had to become experts because their survival depended on it. They had to know how to build a fire without matches, even in a terrible storm, which kinds of wood made the quickest fire, and which wood to burn when they did not want any smoke to show for the Indians to see.

The trappers had to especially know winter survival skills because they trapped in the cold weather when the beaver fur was the thickest. They had to know how to dress so they could work the trap lines in the cold. They had to know how to make snowshoes so they could travel in deep snow. They had to know how to live in crude shelters even in the coldest winter weather.

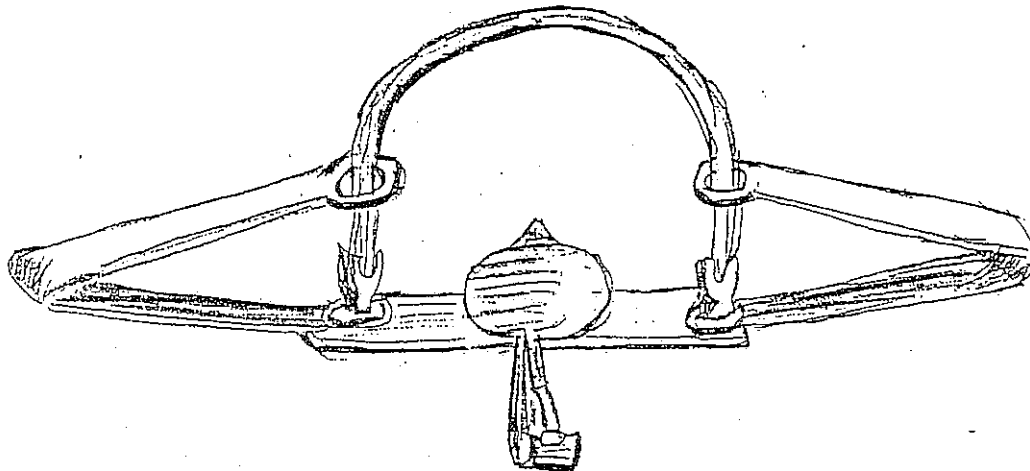
The trappers had to study the animals very carefully in order to become expert trappers. They learned what food each animal ate, how it built its home, how it spent the winter, what time of the year the fur was best, and the best traps to use.



The Trapper's Year

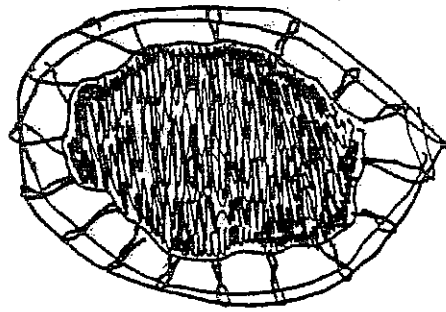
The summer was an important part of the trapper's year. During this time, they had to prepare for the upcoming trapping season while they could still travel easily. They would first outfit themselves at the nearest fort or at the rendezvous. Then they would go into the mountains to locate trapping grounds where there were plenty of beaver but no other trappers. They would build their shelters and "lay in" a supply of meat and wood before the first snow came.

In the late fall and early spring the trappers would be busy. This was when they did the actual trapping while the snow was not too deep but the fur was thick because of the cold weather. First, they would set their traps in the shallow water of the streams where the beaver would come to cut trees for food and homes. Second, they would fasten the trap to some heavy object under the water like a log or huge stone so that when the beaver was caught it could not drag the trap to where the trapper could not find it. Third, beaver scent called castor was put on the trap to attract the animal. Every day after that, the trapper had to go to the stream to empty the traps and reset them.



beaver trap

The trappers would prepare the hide as soon as the beaver was removed from the trap. First, they would skin the animal. Then, they would stretch the skin perfectly round by sewing it onto a frame made out of sticks bent into a circular shape. They would then dry the skins in their shelters, and when they were dry they packed them into "bales" or bundles.



stretched
beaver pelt

In the winter, when the streams were frozen, the trappers could no longer trap. They would find a sheltered valley where there were many buffalo and other game animals. Often they lived with a band of Indians. Here they would live in a shelter, often with other mountain men, spending the time caring for their horses, hunting, reading if they were able, and talking.

Dangers of Trapping

Freezing to death was one of the greatest dangers the trappers faced, because trapping had to be done in the cold weather when the fur was best. The trappers worked in knee-deep water which was just above freezing temperature. The fact that they often traveled alone was another danger and were killed or wounded by animals such as the grizzly bear.

Indians and Trappers

Indians were a big part of the trapper's life. Some of the tribes were hostile. The Blackfeet, for example, resented the trappers taking the furs in their territory and did not want the trappers supplying their enemies with guns. It is thought that at least one trapper was killed by Indians every ten days. Many tribes, however, such as the Crow and the Flathead, were friendly to the trappers and were eager to trade and socialize

with them. Often the trappers married Indian women and lived with a tribe, especially during the winter when the weather was too cold and snowy to trap or to travel.

The Rendezvous

In the early days of the fur trade, the big fur trading companies built forts, which were permanent structures out of logs where the trappers and the Indians could trade furs for supplies. Hostile Indians, however, often burned these forts down, especially during the winter when the traders had left. It became too expensive to rebuild the forts each year.

Finally, one of the fur companies began something which became known as a rendezvous. The company would decide on a place somewhere in the trapping territory, and word would get around to the trappers through word of mouth. At a certain time during the summer, the trappers would all come from their trapping grounds and meet a caravan of supplies sent out from St. Louis by the trading company at a wide, open area in the mountains. The trappers brought their plews, or pelts, to the rendezvous and exchanged them for the supplies they needed, such as new traps, guns, powder, lead, and knives. They also stocked up on foofaraw, which was beads, mirrors, ribbons and bright things to trade with the Indians. As soon as the rendezvous was over, the company took the furs back East and the trappers went back to their trapping grounds.

The rendezvous became an important to the trappers not only because they were able to trade their furs, but as a social event. They could see which of their friends had made it through another winter. Storytelling was a favorite activity as they sat around the campfire telling about their adventures, many of which were "tall tales." They competed in contests, showing off their skills with guns, axes, and knives. Horse racing was a also popular activity at the rendezvous.

End of the Fur Trade

The fur trade began to end in about 1840. In Europe, men's hats made out of silk became the fashion. These hats looked just as good as beaver felt hats but were not nearly so heavy or expensive. When hatmakers stopped buying beaver, trapping was

no longer as profitable. Also, because of the heavy trapping, beavers were now much more scarce.

The fur trappers who stayed in the West had to find other ways to make a living. Some of them became buffalo hunters, since buffalo robes were now replacing beaver pelts in value. Some became guides for the settlers who were going to California and Oregon, or became guides for the Army. Others built forts to do business with the settlers along the Oregon Trail.

Importance of the Mountain Men

Although some of these "mountain men" became very famous, most died without leaving any record of their travels or their adventures. Therefore, we know very little about them. They were important to the history of Montana, however, because they were the only white men who knew the mountain passes and the navigable rivers, and who were familiar with the Indians. As more and more white people wanted to come to Montana, the trappers were the ones who guided them there.