BUFFALO BILL CENTER OF THE WEST

# Trappers, Traders, and Trailblazers:
## Mountain Men in the Rocky Mountain West

### Lending Trunk Curriculum

Image 1: 19.98.1


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# Digital Resources on Mountain Men!

**Kids Ask WhY podcast**, Season 2, Episode 4: *Why Are Beavers And Mountain Men Linked in History?* The Kids Ask WhY podcast is jointly produced by the Center of the West and Wyoming Public Media. In this episode, kids interview experts to uncover stories of mountain men and beavers!


Image 2

**"Explore More" resources from Kids Ask WhY.** This page is full of activities about mountain men to accompany the podcast or enrich any lesson! Scan below for videos, games, printable worksheets, vocabulary, maps, and more!

Scan the code on the left for an **interactive online presentation** that offers some quick background on all the objects and art in this trunk, and scan the code on the right for **a slide deck** that summarizes this information!

# Digital Resources on Beavers!

This **one-minute video** gives a fantastic overview on how beavers shape the landscape, plus it has lots of great footage of beavers! Scan below to see beavers in action.

**Lunchtime Expedition: *Ecosystem Engineers* with Jerry Altermatt.** For a deep dive, the Center of the West hosted Jerry Altermatt to talk about beavers as ecosystem engineers. Altermatt is a Terrestrial Habitat Biologist with Wyoming Game and Fish. In this talk, he also discusses the mountain men's impact. This fascinating lecture would be suitable for high school or advanced middle school students. Scan below to share!

Image 3

***Museum Minute: The Beaver's Role on the Landscape***. *Museum Minute* is produced by Wyoming Public Media and the Center of the West. In this episode, listen to curator Corey Anco explain how beavers shape the landscape! Scan below!

# Digital Resources on Fur Trade Art!

***Museum Minute: Heyday of the Fur Trade*.** In this Museum Minute, listen to curator Karen McWhorter describe the rendezvous system from the height of the fur trade and how eyewitness Alfred Jacob Miller depicted the rendezvous in his painting "Our Camp"--a copy of which is included in your trunk! All in under one minute, scan below to listen!

***Fur Traders & Rendezvous: The Alred Jacob Miller Online Catalogue*,** produced jointly by the Center of the West and other art institutions. This website features paintings by Alfred Jacob Miller, the only artist of European descent to record the fur trade from personal experience, plus detailed articles exploring every aspect of the fur trade! Scan here!

**"A Rendezvous Revisited" from *Points West*,** the Center of the West's magazine. This article explores Alfred Jacob Miller's paintings of the rendezvous he attended--including many of the prints in your trunk! Scan below!

# Children's Books

Allen, John Logan. *Jedediah Smith and the Mountain Men of the American West*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1991.

*The mountain men were the first explorers to see the rugged Rocky Mountains of the American West. Their experiences trapping beaver were valuable when American settlers began moving in to the West.*

Beaver, Henry and Mindy Willet with Eileen Beaver. *Sharing Our Truths/Tapwe*. Fifth House: 2019.

*This Canadian book provides an indigenous perspective on beaver trapping. Co-authored by Cree elder Henry Beaver, the book—illustrated by photographs—depicts Henry trapping beaver with his grandchildren, followed by his wife Eileen preparing hides.*

Berry, Don. *Mountain Men: The Trappers of the Great Fur-Trading Era, 1822-1843*. New York: Macmillan, 1966.

*The mountain man's life was a hard one, with danger always present. Yet, they learned to survive and grew to love the untamed country they called home.*

Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. *Beaver Steals Fire: A Salish Coyote Story*. University of Nebraska Press: 2019.

*This story, written and officially sanctioned by the Salish and Kootenai tribal nations of Montana, offers cultural context with a traditional story about beaver.*

Glass, Allen. *Mountain Men: True Grit and Tall Tales*. Doubleday: 2001.

*From Kirkus Book Reviews: "[T]his rousing mix of fact and fancy [includes] the Lewis and Clark Expedition, the growth and decline of the fur trade, and selected individual exploits ... [T]he author downplays but doesn't ignore the ... 'less than tender sensibilities' of these men toward animals, native peoples, and each other"*

Kherdian, David. *Bridger: The Story of a Mountain Man*. New York: Greenwillow Books, 1987.

*This historical novel presents Jim Bridger's first two years as a mountain man. However, it does not mention Hugh Glass. The short glossary is inadequate with some errors.*

McClung, Robert M. *Hugh Glass, Mountain Man*. New York: Morrow Junior Books, 1990.

*A grizzly bear mauled and nearly killed Hugh Glass. His comrades left him alone to die. Glass survived, and went on to more adventures.*

Patent, Dorothy Hinshaw. *At Home with the Beaver: The Story of a Keystone Species*. Web of Life: 2019.

*An accessible, detailed book on beavers for young readers, well-illustrated by photographs; this book explains how beavers impact the landscape and other animals.*

# How to use these objects

Many teachers will pass the trunk objects around the classroom while discussing them. Although this is a simple approach, we wanted to offer additional ideas for activities to engage your students with these objects.

**Host a rendezvous!**

Rendezvous were the annual meetings where mountain men, indigenous groups, and suppliers would convene to trade. With the objects in this trunk, you can create your own rendezvous! First, divide the class into trappers and suppliers. Depending on the size of the class, each of the suppliers gets one or more of the manufactured goods—the firearm, ladle, knife, tomahawk, trade items, powder horns, trap, capote, felt hat, and tinderbox. The trappers need to acquire these items, but they are rich in beaver pelts to sell! Because our trunk only has one beaver pelt, you can make copies of and then cut out the tokens on page 19 to represent beaver pelts. Distribute the tokens to the trappers, and let the rendezvous begin!

The goal of the game for each of the suppliers is to acquire as many pelts as possible, and the goal of the game for the trappers is to get the best price possible on supplies they need. Each of the trappers can decide what they need to resupply on; for instance, one may need a new gun and another one may be aiming to restock on trade items. Students can barter with each other freely to get the best deal they can.

**Make your own mountain men art!**

The trunk includes prints of artwork depicting mountain men, from eyewitness artist Alfred Jacob Miller and from later artists imaging the fur trade, including Frederic Remington and 20th-century artists. With the trunk objects, students can make their own art depicting the fur trade!

One student, or the teacher, can use the trunk objects to dress up and model a mountain man for the rest of the class to draw. Or, students can make still life pictures of their favorite trunk objects, or even sculpt their own versions out of modelling clay!

Alfred Jacob Miller documented the fur trade through journal entries as well as art, so for a fun creative writing twist, students can add a few sentences in the first-person perspective describing the events that their art “records.”

## Object Analysis

Teach students to use objects as evidence in understanding history! The possibilities here are truly endless. Here are a few suggestions to get you started:

- **Trunk overview worksheet** To help students explore the trunk's objects, we've included a worksheet below for students to record their thoughts on all the trunk objects. The questions range from basic observations ("What is the object made of?") to more complex historical questions. The final question, "Did the object affect others—indigenous communities, Europeans, the landscape, etc? If so, how?" encourages students to think about the big picture cause-and-effect. Possible answers include trade items changing indigenous economies, the trap and top hat eliminating beaver and wetlands from the West, etc. Make copies from page 20 for students to fill out!
- **Object deep dive worksheet** If you or your students want to spend more time analyzing a particular object, we also have a longer worksheet (pages 21 and 22) that can be used to focus on any of the individual trunk objects.
- **Guess and check** To do a guess and check, present objects to students without background information and see what they can deduce about the objects, then correct and expand on their guesses using the information in this binder. This activity gets students engaged in using their observational skills, rather than passively receiving information about the objects, and they may remember information more strongly after a wrong guess. This strategy can be combined well with the worksheets, where students can cross out wrong guesses.
- **Show and tell** Every student can be assigned to become an "expert" on one object, perhaps by reading the relevant page(s) of this binder or by filling out a worksheet on the object. Then, each student gets to teach the rest of the class about their object! With a larger class, pairs of students or small teams can work together.
- **Group work** The worksheets, guess and check activities, etc can be completed by individual students, but they are also perfect for small groups to work together. For example, students can complete the worksheet by discussing each question as a group, or they can divide up sections of the worksheet jigsaw-style

- **Make a mini museum!** With a trunk full of museum objects, students can create their own museum display, perhaps in a corner of the classroom. Each student can write a label for one of the objects (museum labels should include the object's name, the time and place where it was made, the maker if known, the materials, and a few sentences contextualizing its use) on an index card or something similar. They can add to the exhibit by making their own dioramas and posters. Invite parents and friends to check out the exhibit once it's done!

**Mountain Men Math!**

This activity asks students to choose what supplies they would purchase with $100, from a list with period prices. For any age, this can be a fun activity that provides insight into the realities of mountain men's lives, but for elementary students it also helps build their addition skills. The prices on the supplies list can also offer context if students have a mock rendezvous using the trunk items. Make copies of the worksheets and the supplies list from page 17 and 18.

**Debate (or essay)--Trappers: Hero or Villain?**

People have conflicting views on the legacy of trappers. Some see them as heroic figures because of their courage, resilience, and adventurous spirit. Others question whether their impact was positive, pointing to the ecological damage of wiping out beaver and to the harms trappers inflicted on indigenous communities.

One exciting way of engaging students, especially middle school or secondary students, with this historical complexity is to host a debate. Divide the class into sections assigned to defend or question trappers. One simple format for a debate is to have each side offer brief opening statements, followed by each side offering a round (or two) of arguments with the other side having a few minutes for rebuttals, and ending with brief closing statements. Each of these segments can be timed to keep the class on track.

For a fun twist (or for extra points on a debate rubric), students can use objects as evidence in their arguments. For example, "The possibles bag shows the mountain men's self-sufficiency and daring. With just these minimal supplies, they had to find a way to survive in the wilderness" or "The beaver pelt shows the harm trappers did, by turning a keystone species into fur for a fashion fad."

Another possibility for evaluating the trappers' legacy is for students to complete an essay on this topic.

**Mountain Men Maps!**

Many mountain men were travelling through territory that they were unfamiliar with. However, indigenous nations in this area had intimate knowledge of the region. On page 16, we have provided a blank map of the region, labelled with modern state and reservation borders. Make copies, and engage students in these fun and helpful geography activities:

- What indigenous nations did mountain men interact with? Use this tool showing the historic boundaries of tribal nations to find out! Go to https://native-land.ca/ or scan this QR code. Have students use a different color pencil or crayon to shade the historic territories of these indigenous nations: Arapaho, Apsaalooke (Crow), Shoshone, Bannock, Salish, Metis, Cree, Ojibwe, Blackfoot, Cheyenne, Nez Perce, and more. Bonus points if students can add other nations in the area!
- A remarkable map was made in 1801 by Blackfoot chief Ako Mic Mi at the request of trapper Peter Fidler; the map covers 200,000 acres and includes the continental divide, 14 major tributaries of the Missouri River, estimated travel times, and detailed ethnographic information on 32 indigenous nations (including their populations and the names of their current leaders). You can see the map and read more about it in an article by Dr. Shayne Doyle (Apsaalooke) by going to https://www.distinctlymontana.com/brilliance-and-beauty-celebrating-gift-blackfoot-map or by scanning this QR code to access. Ask students to copy as much information as they can from Ako Mic Mi's map onto a blank one (and note what information gets lost in the process), or simply use the map as a starting point for class discussion!

- Fidler's map can't be superimposed on a modern map, because it records landmarks that would be useful for a traveler rather than scaled topography with cardinal directions. Students can imitate this process by drawing their own maps of how to get from their home to school, recording landmarks they pass by. Likely, their maps won't fit with exact scale maps, but they might guide someone on that specific path!
- Add rendezvous sites to a modern map! Here is a list of where rendezvous were held:
    - 1825: Green River near present-day McKinnon, WY
    - 1826: Cache Valley near present-day Hyrum, UT
    - 1827, 1828: Bear Lake, UT (historically called Sweet Lake)
    - 1829: Upper Popo Agie, near present-day Lander, WY
    - 1830, 1838: Wind River headwaters near present-day Riverton, WY
    - 1831: rendezvous planned at Cache Valley but not actually held
    - 1832: Pierre's Hole in present-day Driggs, ID
    - 1833, 1835, 1836, 1837, 1839, 1840: Green River near present-day Daniel, WY

**Trapper Trivia!**

This trunk includes a trivial-pursuit style game mat with red, green, and blue squares. On the next page, we have included a series of trivia questions in three categories: red is for mountain man history, green is for mountain men and beaver facts, and blue is for mountain man objects. The questions are all based on information in this binder.

Students can play in teams. Each team can use a simple object like a paperclip or button as a game token, or students can get creative and make their own tokens (e.g. by drawing a mountain man or a tool on cardstock). To play, each team starts in the center of the matt, rolls a dice (supplied by the teacher) and moves. When they land on a colored square, the teacher asks a question from the trivia list. If the team answers correctly, they can roll again; if not, another team rolls. The first team to make it all the way around the board and back to the center wins!

These questions could also be used to make a KaHoot or a similar online quiz.

Trapper Trivia—Red—Mountain Man History:

- When did John Colter leave the Lewis and Clark expedition to trap beaver in the Rockies?
    - 1806
- What was Yellowstone National Park nicknamed?
    - Colter's Hell
- Where did the French and British trap beaver?
    - Across the northern US and southern Canada
- When was the first rendezvous?
    - 1825
- When was the last rendezvous?
    - 1840
- Who brought a hundred mountain men into the region?
    - William Ashley and Henry Andrew
- What was the "fur desert" policy of the Hudson's Bay Company?
    - HBC tried to wipe out all beaver from the Snake River country to discourage rival trappers.
- What was a rendezvous?
    - A summer meeting of trappers, suppliers, and indigenous nations to trade.
- What led to the end of the fur trade?
    - Silk hats replaced beaver hats in fashion, and beaver were nearly extinct.
- Who are the Metis?
    - Metis are nations that started when the children of trappers and indigenous women formed their own distinct culture and communities.
- How were Native women involved in the fur trade?
    - Mountain men often married Native women. Their labor (dressing pelts, finding food, making supplies) was essential to the fur trade, and they also served as translators and deal brokers.
- Did mountain men ever attack indigenous nations?
    - Yes, there are several records of mountain men trying to attack indigenous nations, including women and children.
- What did mountain men do after the end of the fur trade?

    - They hunted buffalo, worked as guides for expeditions, established forts, or became ranchers.
- How did mountain men contribute to the loss of Native nations' land?
    - They mapped the area, and they guided and encouraged incursions by settlers and the U.S. military.

Trappers' Trivia—Green—Mountain Men and Beaver Facts:

- Why were beaver furs so valuable in the early nineteenth century?
    - Because beaver fur was used to make felt for men's top hats.
- How did beaver traps function?
    - They held the beaver underwater until the beaver drowned.
- What season did mountain men prefer to trap beaver?
    - In the winter, because beaver coats are thickest then.
- What do beavers eat?
    - They mainly eat willow bark.
- What kind of landscapes do beavers make?
    - Wetlands
- When were beaver considered extinct in Wyoming?
    - 1860
- Why does Game & Fish restock beavers today?
    - To improve the health of rivers
- How do present-day beaver populations in the Rockies compare to populations before the mountain men?
    - Beaver have rebounded from near extinction, but they still only occupy 1/3 of their previous habitat.
- What three effects do beavers have on water?
    - They slow, spread, and store water.
- How do beavers help groundwater recharge?
    - Beavers hold water in one place long enough for it to seep into the groundwater.
- How do beavers help with droughts and wildfires?
    - Areas near a beaver wetlands still have water during dry periods, so they are less likely to burn.
- How do beavers filter water?

    - Beaver dams trap dirt, sediment and other particles, so water downstream of a beaver dam is cleaner!
- How do beavers prevent flooding and erosion?
    - Beavers spread out and slow down water; without beaver dams, water flows into narrow river channels that erode rapidly and become dangerous when flooded.
- How do beavers help plantlife?
    - Beavers store water so that plants can absorb it, they prune willows, and their dams collect good soil.
- How do beavers help other herbivores?
    - By making the right conditions for plants and trees to thrive, beavers ensure that there is more food for other plant-eating animals.
- How do beavers help fish?
    - By encouraging willows to grow and shade the water, beavers help keep the cool temperatures that fish like trout and salmon need to survive.

Trapper's Trivia—Blue—Mountain Man Objects:

- What did a mountain man hold his gunpowder in?
    - A powder horn
- What did mountain men call a beaver pelt?
    - A plew
- What is the name for a mountain man's coat made from a blanket?
    - A capote
- What tools did a mountain man use to start a fire?
    - A flint and striker, tinderbox, and charcloth
- What did a mountain man use to carry essential supplies?
    - A possible bag
- How did a mountain man bait his traps?
    - With castoreum, a strong-smelling oil from beavers.
- What items did mountain men trade with indigenous nations?
    - Glass beads, brass bells, wool blankets, metal knives and tomahawks, cast iron cooking pots and pans
- What kinds of rifles did mountain men use?
    - Flintlock and percussion muzzle-loaders

- What did the small stripes (called points) on a Hudson's Bay blanket mean?
    - The points indicated the size of the blanket; a 1-point blanket was the smallest and a 6-point blanket was the largest.
- What would a mountain man do when their clothing and hats wore out?
    - They would trade for new ones, have them made by a Native woman (especially if they were married), or make them themselves out of animal skins.
- What did mountain men use knives and tomahawks for?
    - Chopping fuel, skinning animals, pounding stakes, cutting meat, and defense.

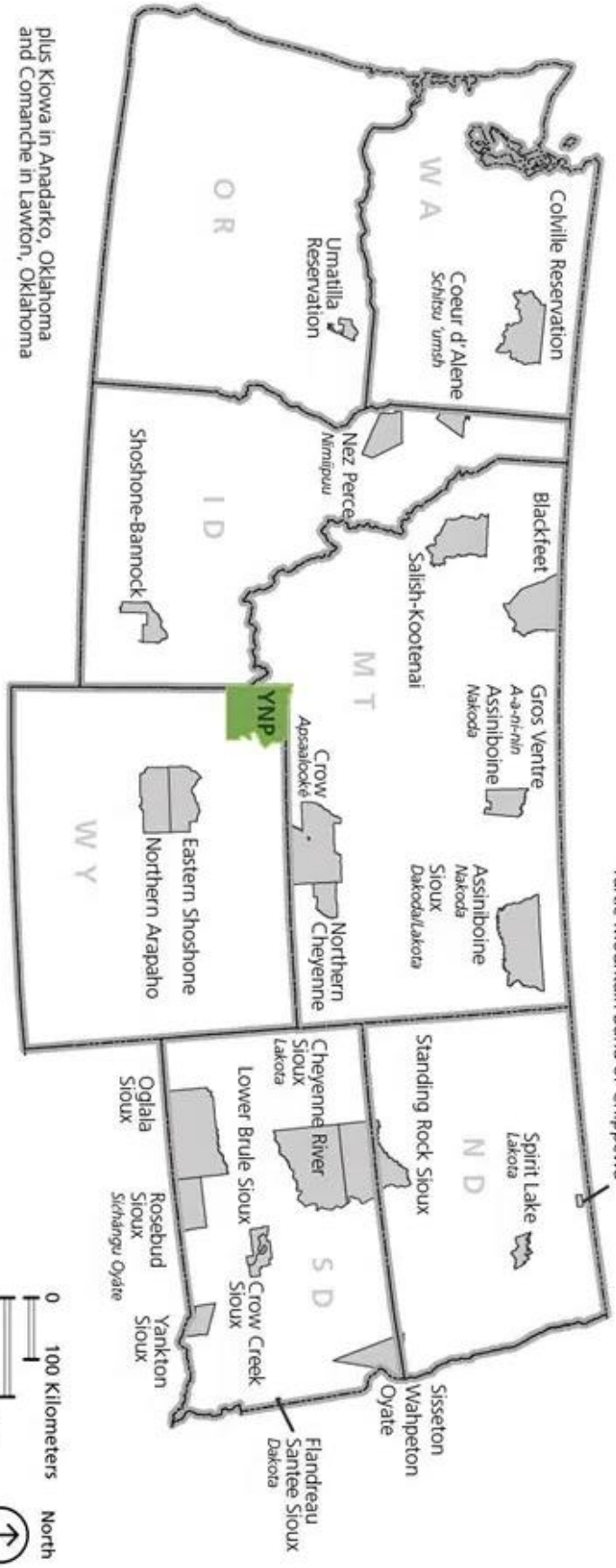


Image 5: Map showing modern state and reservation boundaries created by the National Park Service, Yellowstone National Park: https://www.nps.gov/yell/learn/historyculture/historic-tribes.htm

# Mountain Man—What Would You Buy?

Hello young Greenhorn! In order to prepare for your upcoming trapping season in the Rocky Mountains, you will need to outfit yourself with proper supplies and clothing.

Look at the items on the supply list and decide what you need for your journey. Record what you would like to purchase on this sheet.

**You only have $100 to spend, so choose wisely.**

| AMT | Item | Cost | Total Cost |
|---|---|---|---|
| Ex) 1 | steel trap | $5 | $5.00 |
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
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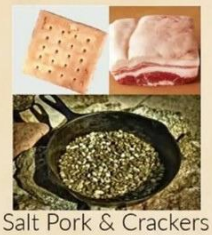
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |

**Total Cost:** _____

# Mountain Man Supply List

## Food & Cooking Supplies


Salt Pork & Crackers

100 lbs crackers $11.00

200 lbs jerky/ salt pork $25.00

Coffee 50 lbs $10.00

Brass kettle $5.00

2 frying pans $1.00

## Firearms


Hawken Rifle

Rifle $20.00

Hawken Rifle $25.00

Pistol $10.00

## Firearm Supplies

Powder horn $3.00

1 lb. lead $3.00

Powder / lb. $2.00


Powder Horn

## Tools

Knives $2.00

Hatchet $3.00

Tinder Box $3.00

Flint & Steel $3.00

Beaver trap $5.00

## Clothing

2 pairs of shoes $8.00

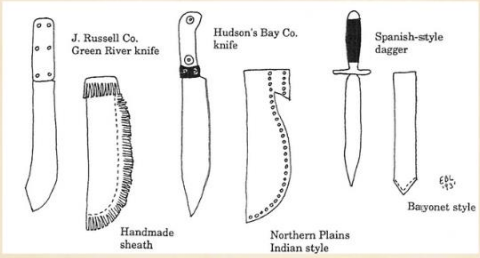
Capote $15.00

Shirt $3.00

Felt hat $10.00

Beads 1 lb. $3.00

Knives





Tinder Box


Flint & Steel


Hatchet


Beaver Trap


Capote

## Beaver Pelt Tokens for Rendezvous Game!

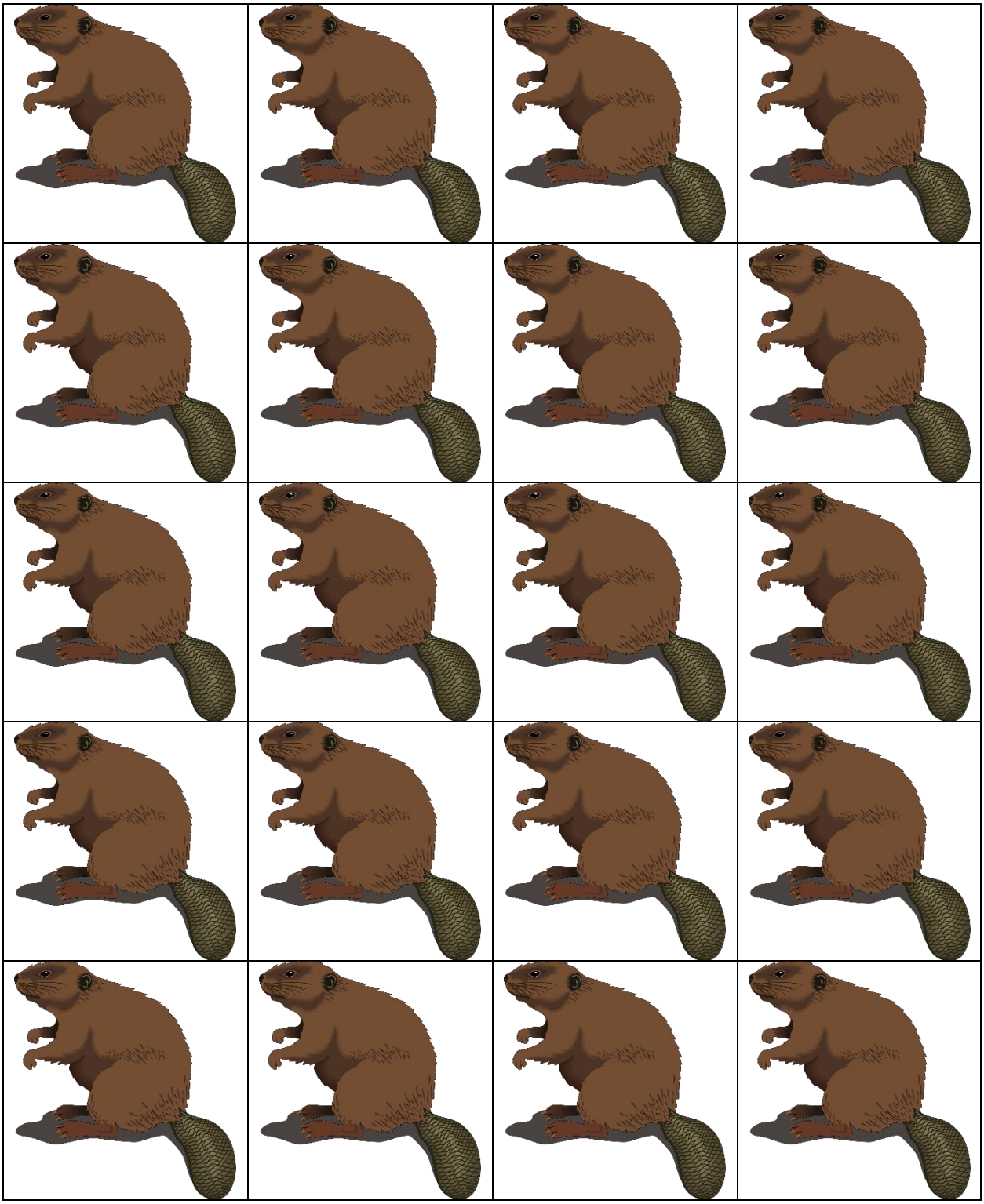


Image 6

**Mountain Man Object Analysis Worksheet**

| **Name of object** | **What is the object made of?** | **What was the object used for?** | **What does the object teach you about mountain men?** | **Did the object affect others—indigenous communities, Europeans, the landscape, etc? If so, how?** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Top hat | | | | |
| Capote, shirt, and felt hat | | | | |
| Beaver pelt | | | | |
| Beaver trap | | | | |
| Trade items | | | | |
| Powder horns, ladle, and firearm | | | | |
| Possible bag and supplies | | | | |
| Knife and tomahawk | | | | |

**Mountain Men Object Deep Dive Worksheet**

**FIRST - Object Description**

1. How big is the object? Compare it to something of similar size.

2. What is it made of?

3. Special markings

4. Signs of damage or repair

5. What can you infer about the object from your observation?

**SECOND - Object Use**

1. Who do you think created the object?

2. How and where do you think it was created?

3. What do you think it was it used for? And how do you think it was used?

4. Who do you think used it?

5. Where and when do you think it was used?

6. How common do you think this object is?

7. Have you seen or used anything that you think is like this object?

8. How might the object have impacted the community where it was used?

**THIRD - Questions**

What do you wonder about the object?

# Introduction to the Mountain Men

The words mountain men recall adventurers in the vast Rocky Mountain wilderness. Mountain men have become American legends. But who were they in reality?

Mountain men faced many dangers: grizzly bears, the elements, and the rugged terrain. As many as one-fourth of the men who went into the mountains did not come out. Mountain men risked this for valuable furs, especially beaver. Beaver fur sold for top prices because hats made from this fur were highly fashionable.

When Old World supplies of fur depleted, Europeans looked to North America. Starting in the 1600s, the French and the British trapped beaver across the northern United States and southern Canada. The abundance of furs in these areas left the less accessible center of the continent untapped until the mountain men arrived.

Image 7: 3.82

John Colter, one of the first mountain men, came to the region with Lewis and Clark in 1806. He trapped beaver in the Rocky Mountains for four years and brought back stories of steamy geysers and boiling mud, dubbed "Colter's Hell." Later, mountain man Jim Bridger also described this region, but many thought both were telling tales.

Early mountain men were hardy: They took only what they could carry, sometimes with a packhorse or mule. They had to hunt for their food, build shelter, and mend their own clothes. They had to check their traps, prepare pelts daily, and haul the pelts out of the mountains.

Mountain men also relied on local indigenous nations; they would spend the winters with indigenous communities, trade with them for supplies they needed, and marry indigenous women. Some mountain men were indigenous themselves! Yet, despite their dependence on Native nations, there are also records of mountain men attacking these nations.

At first, mountain men brought their pelts to St. Louis or a trading post along the Missouri River. In 1822, the American fur trade changed drastically when William Ashley and Andrew Henry advertised for and hired a hundred "enterprising young men" as trappers in the Rocky Mountains. Ashley and Henry established forts for mountain men to spend the winter, pick up supplies for each season's trapping and sell the previous season's pelts. In 1825, Ashley and Henry revolutionized the fur trade by bringing the market to the mountain men. That July, mountain men attended the first ***rendezvous*** on the Green River (Wyoming). Trappers sold their furs, stocked up on the clothing, and traded stories. American Indians also came to the rendezvous to trade.

Image 8: 2.81

By the mid-1830s, the fur trade declined. Silk top hats were replacing beaver felt top hats. Moreover, mountain men had killed so many beavers that there were almost none left. The last rendezvous was in 1840. Mountain men found new ways to earn a living by hunting bigger game as such buffalo, working as guides for settlers, or becoming farmers and ranchers.

The era of the mountain men lasted thirty-four years, with John Colter leading the way. But their legacy still affects the West today.

- Beaver populations—living today in 1/3 of their pre-1820's habitat—still have not recovered from the mountain man era. Beavers make wetlands which are important for a healthy environment. The lack of beaver changed Western landscapes.
- Mountain men often married indigenous women. Some of these biracial children created their own communities, called Metis, which are still thriving today.
- Mountain men explored Native American land in the Rocky Mountains and led settlers here. Eventually, the United States took this land from Native nations through warfare.
- Mountain men have become legends of Western history!

# Mountain Men and Indigenous Nations

**How did mountain men interact with Native nations?**

Mountain men interacted with Native nations in different ways. Many mountain men married women from Native nations. Some mountain men, even if they didn't marry Native women, would spend the winters living in Native villages. Mountain men engaged in intensive economic activity with Native nations, trading European-style goods for much-needed supplies. Thousands of Native people attended the annual rendezvous.

However, sometimes mountain men also attacked Native nations. Mountain man James Beckworth, of Ashley's company, described slaughtering Bannocks, including women and children, at a rendezvous near Green River:

> "Two hundred and fifteen [mountain men] started to inflict vengeance [and] continued until there was not one [Bannock] left of either sex or any age. We carried back four hundred eighty-eight scalps, and, as we then supposed, annihilated the Pun-nak [Bannock] band."

This is not the only time mountain men wanted to commit genocide against Native nations. Canadian trapper Peter Ogden wrote in his journal, "The Americans appear and are most willing to declare war against [the Shoshone], and . . . I would most willingly sacrifice a year and even two to exterminate the whole Snake [Shoshone] tribe." (Nevertheless, the Shoshone traded with the American Fur Company and allowed rendezvous on their land near the Green River.) Unsurprisingly, some indigenous nations, especially the Blackfeet Confederacy, saw mountain men as a threat.

**How were Native women involved in the fur trade?**

Native women were a vital part of the fur trade. Many mountain men often brought their indigenous wives with them on trapping expeditions; sometimes trapping expeditions included more women and children than mountain men (for example, one trapping expedition in 1823 included 55 men, 25 women, and 64 children)! Women prepared beaver hides, which was an essential step in the fur trade. They also made moccasins, snowshoes, and pemmican (dried buffalo meat); caught and cooked fish; gathered and dried berries; and set up tents.

Moreover, they played key roles as translators and deal brokers between mountain men and the indigenous nations they relied on.

**How did mountain men change indigenous ways of life?**

Mountain men caused many disruptions to traditional indigenous ways of life.

- They sometimes waged battles against indigenous nations.
- The fur trade introduced a new economic system, replacing subsistence economies (taking only what you needed to survive) with extraction economies (taking as much of a natural resource as you can for profit).
- Mountain men brought European goods to the region, including guns, which had a dramatic impact on indigenous societies.
- In some cases, through hunting, mountain men killed off game that Native nations relied on for food.
- Mountain men paved the way for later waves of settlers who would invade Native lands and dispossess Native nations. Mountain blazed trails that settlers used and sometimes guided wagon trains.

Dr. Ned Blackhawk, a historian at Yale University and an enrolled member of the Western Shoshone, summarized the mountain men's impact: "Fur trappers, traders, and explorers either wrought the initial traumas or laid the basis for subsequent ones."

**Who are the Metis?**

The Metis are a distinct cultural community that arose from intermarriages between fur trappers and indigenous women (metis means "mixed" in French). Over time, these families and their children formed their own distinct communities. During the fur trade era, many Metis children also became mountain men. Metis people speak many languages, including English, French, Cree, Ojibwe, Algonquin, and Mitchif; Mitchif is a language derived from Cree and French that is distinctive to Metis people. Today, there are several Metis nations that have a land base in Canada, and in the United States, the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians identifies as Metis and Ojibwe.

**Who were indigenous mountain men?**

We may think of "mountain men" and "Indians" as being separate groups, but this is not true! Many trappers were indigenous. Especially large numbers of

mountain men came from Metis communities or from the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Confederacy. The Haudenosaunee homelands are in the Northeast, but some Haudenosaunee citizens moved west to hunt beaver in the Rocky Mountains. At one point, almost *one-third* of mountain men employed by the Hudson's Bay Company, a British trapping company, were Haudenosaunee. In 1824, almost all these indigenous mountain men left the Hudson's Bay Company and began trapping for American fur trading companies instead because the Americans offered better pay. Indigenous mountain men worked with Jedediah Smith, Jim Bridger, Kit Carson and others.

# Mountain Men and Beaver Timeline:

Beaver populations have never fully recovered from the brief but impactful era of the trappers; today, beavers only occupy 1/3 of the Rocky Mountain habitat that they occupied before the fur trade.

**1809:** Trapping begins in the Big Horn Basin

**1822:** Ashley & Henry bring one hundred trappers into the region

**1825:** First rendezvous held (on the Green River)

**1840:** Last rendezvous held

**1860:** Beaver considered extinct in Wyoming

**1899:** Beaver trapping outlawed in Wyoming

**1905:** First beavers return to Wyoming

**1919:** Private landowners allowed to trap beavers damaging their property

**1947-1949:** Wyoming Game and Fish Department restocks beaver to improve rivers

**1958:** Beavers are no longer classified as a protected animal, trapping for fur is legalized again

**1993:** Wyoming Game and Fish resumes relocating beavers to restore the environment

# All About Mountain Men and Beavers!

**How did the mountain men reshape the landscape?**

At one time, beaver were abundant in the Rocky Mountain West. Beavers' dam-building activity was vital to the Western landscape in terms of storing water and supporting plants and wildlife. The mountain men practically eliminated beaver from many parts of the West, and the landscape has never been the same since. In fact, the Hudson's Bay Company deliberately tried to exterminate beaver from the Snake River Country, creating a "fur desert" that would discourage rival trappers from venturing through the area.

**What kind of landscapes do beavers make?**

By creating dams, ponds, and channels, beavers make wetlands: lush and marshy areas where an incredible array of plants, trees, fish, birds and other wildlife thrive. Eventually, sediment builds up in a beaver pond, grasses take root, and the beaver pond becomes a meadow. Most meadows you see in forests were once beaver ponds! When their pond fills with sediment or when they run out of edible plants, the beavers move and make a new wetland area.

**Why are beavers especially important in the West?**

By making dams, beavers have three impacts on water: they slow water, spread water, and store water. Most water in the West comes from snowmelts in the spring; without beavers, this water might run off the landscape quickly. When beavers slow, spread, and store water, more places get irrigated and we have more water accessible in the drier summer months.

**Why are beavers important for storing water?**

In the West, we get little rain, and drought and wildfires are becoming more common every year. Beaver dams hold water in one place for longer; this lets the water seep into the soil to be saved in groundwater storage.

**How do beavers help reduce wildfires in the West?**

Beaver dams create wetlands—ponds, marshes, and canals—that store water during wet periods. Plants near a beaver wetlands still have water during dry periods, so they are less likely to burn.

**How do beavers filter water?**

Beaver dams trap dirt, sediment and other particles, so water downstream of a beaver dam is cleaner!

**How do beavers prevent flooding and erosion?**

Beavers spread out water, making it more manageable and more evenly distributed. Without beavers, water becomes concentrated in narrow river channels that erode rapidly and become dangerous when flooded.

**How do beavers help plantlife?**

Beavers store water so that plants which need lots of water can absorb it and flourish! Even willow trees, whose bark beavers eat, benefit from beavers; beavers prune the willows so that they produce more stems and grow longer. In fact, where beavers have been re-introduced, willows increase by as much as 50%. Also, the soil that gets collected in beaver dams creates a great environment for more plants and trees to grow!

**How do beavers help other herbivores?**

By making the right conditions for plants and trees to thrive, beavers ensure that there is more food for other plant-eating animals.

**How do beavers help fish?**

By encouraging willows to grow and shade the water, beavers help keep the cool temperatures that fish like trout and salmon need to survive.

# Art of the Mountain Man

Artists have recorded the fascinating persona of the mountain man for years. Artist Alfred Jacob Miller attended a rendezvous and painted what he saw, while later artists used their imagination. How do you think these paintings shaped the public image of mountain men?

## Image 1

Frederic Remington completed this pen drawing, *French Trapper,* in 1891. What do you notice about the mountain man's clothing and gear? Do you see any Native American influences in his outfit and shoes? Can you identify any items he carries that are in your trunk?

Image 9: 61.72

## Image 2

The *Free Trapper*, painted by John Clymer in 1967, is a more modern painting looking back at the romantic image of the mountain man. The painting's title carries two messages: 1) this trapper was a free spirit and 2) a "free trapper" was a trapper who was self-employed instead of working for a fur company. What do you notice about the mountain man's pose? Where do the lines in this painting lead your eye?

Image 10: 6.74

## Image 3

Image 11: 11.70

Alfred Jacob Miller's painting, *Our Camp*, depicts the 1837 rendezvous at the Green River. The man in the foreground of the painting riding the white horse is Captain William Drummond Steward, a Scottish nobleman and adventurer who journeyed west in 1837. He brought Miller with him to document the trip. A mountain man could make anywhere from $66 to over $2,000 at a rendezvous. If they still lived back East they hoped to earn little more than $1.50 a day.

## Image 4

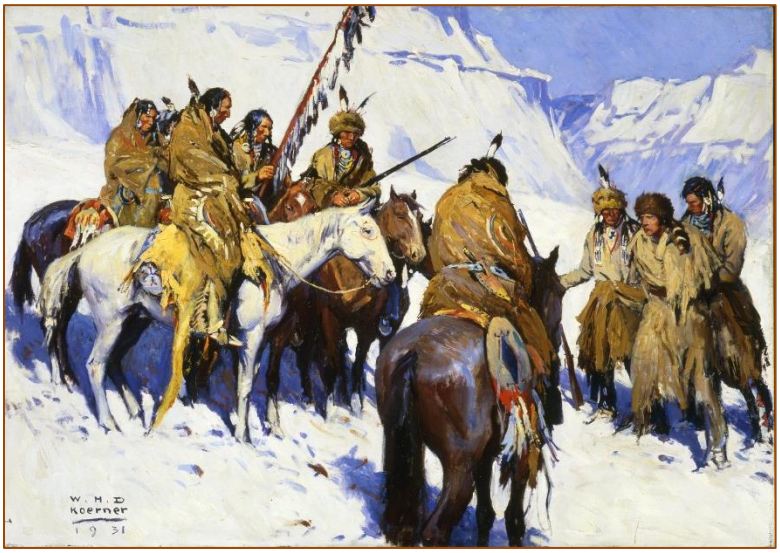
Image 12: 36.64

Alfred Jacob Miller most likely completed *Louis—Rocky Mountain Trapper* in the 1850s. Louis was one of the personal hunters that Captain William Drummond Stewart brought with him on his trip out West to feed the caravan. Here, Miller portrays Louis as a mountain man. Mountain men also typically relied on wild meat for food. What do you notice about Louis's outfit and pose?

## Image 5

Alfred Jacob Miller painted *Trapper Saluting the Rocky Mountains* in 1864, presenting a mountain man encountering the grandeur of the Rocky Mountains. What do you notice about the scale of the painting and its lighting?

Image 13: 10.70




## Image 6

Image 14: 18.77

W.H.D. Koerner created this painting, *Blackfoot Captive*, in 1931, or about a hundred years after the mountain man era. The Blackfeet Confederacy did capture some mountain men including Jim Bridger and John Colter, both of whom escaped. Some Native nations saw the mountain men as a threat because mountain men entered their land, killed off their game, and sometimes attacked Native nations. Yet, mountain men also relied on, traded with, and married into other indigenous nations. You can read more in the section "Mountain Men and Indigenous Nations" earlier in this binder. What perspective do you think Koerner is portraying in this painting? Why do you think he chose to portray a Native nation as the aggressor?

# Beaver Trap

Blacksmiths in the eastern United States made ***beaver traps*** by hand. Traps were inexpensive to make, but in the mountains, they were worth as much as ten times their original cost. The mountain man took very good care of his traps, because they were expensive and vital to his livelihood. A mountain man usually owned six to eight traps, with each trap weighing up to ten pounds.

When a mountain man found a stream occupied by beavers, he took the following steps to set the trap.

1. Prepared the trap by pressing or stepping on the side springs and opening the jaws of the trap.
2. Placed the trap in shallow water.
3. Waded into deeper water with a stake and attached it to the trap by a chain.
4. Secured the stake in the deeper water.
5. Baited the trap with a willow twig coated with castoreum, a strong scented oil from beaver glands.
6. Waited for a beaver to smell and investigate the twig.
7. When the beaver stepped in the trap, it closed on his foot.
8. The chain kept the beaver from getting away, causing it to drown.

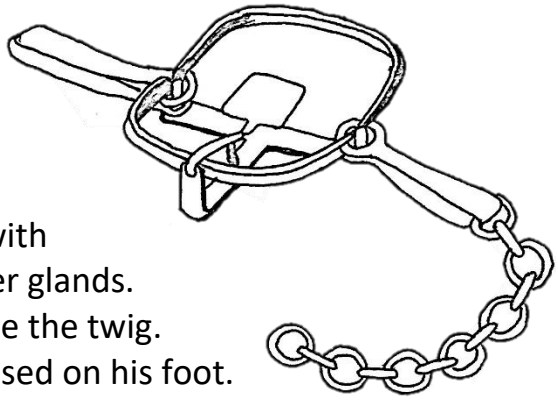


Image 15: This is an open beaver trap. Do **NOT** open your trap!

The mountain men trapped beaver in the fall and spring months, when their pelts were at their finest. Mountain men spent a lot of time wading in ice-cold water, and often complained of rheumatism in their legs and feet.

**CAUTION! Do not try or allow students to try opening the trap. Injury and broken bones can result if an open or partially open trap slips.**

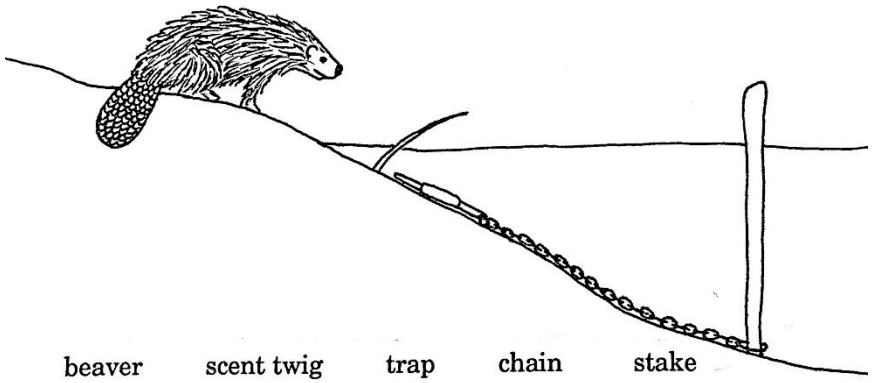



Image 16

# Beaver Pelt and Top Hat

The beaver skin, often referred to as a ***plew*** (/ploo/) by the mountain men, was the money of the Rocky Mountains.

A mountain man checked his traps every day. When a trap had a beaver in it, he pulled it to shore to retrieve the beaver and reset his trap. He or his wife took the following steps to prepare the fur.

1. Removing the skin and scraping off any flesh and fat.
2. Tying the fur along the edges of a willow branch bent into a circle. This stretched the hides while they dried and kept pelts round.
3. When the pelt was dry, folding and packing it into a bundle with 50 to 100 other plews.
4. Wrapping the bundle with deerskin to keep the pelts clean and sometimes storing the completed bundle in a hole in the ground until the rendezvous.

A pack of pelts could weigh up to 100 pounds and was worth up to $600!

Manufacturers generally used the beaver pelts to make fashionable men's beaver felt top hats. The steps manufacturers followed during this process include

1. Cutting the hair off the skin.
2. Mixing and compacting the fur into a felt.
3. Steaming and forming it into a hat of the desired shape.

Some manufactures tanned the pelts and used the whole pelt for coats and trim on clothing.

Image 17: 3.78.19A

**Note: the replica top hat in the trunk is not made from beaver fur.**

Image 18

# Possible Bag and Trade Goods

The mountain man carried a leather pouch called a possible bag for his essential supplies, including a tinderbox with a glass disk (started fires on a sunny day), his flint and steel, a crude fork, and maybe a spoon made of horn.

To start a fire with a flint and striker, the mountain man first prepared a nest of dry grass or other dry materials. He placed a piece of ***charcloth*** (partially burned or charred cloth) in an angle of the flint to catch the spark. He then hit the edge of the flint with the striker to make sparks. Finally, he blew lightly on the charcloth until the added tinder caught fire.

**CAUTION! Flint flakes easily and flying chips can cause injury. Anyone attempting to strike flint with steel should wear glasses or safety goggles. Observers should stand 15 feet away.**

The possible bag also contains beads and bells for trade; mountain men depended on trade with indigenous nations. Mountain men brought goods including glass beads for artwork, brass bells for decorating regalia, wool blankets, metal knives and tomahawks, and cast iron pots and pans. In return, the mountain men needed items, such as fur and new clothing, that the Native Americans had available.

Image 19: a possible bag with scraps of cloth, a tinderbox, a flint and striker, a fork, green glass beads, bells, rifle balls, a mold for making rifle balls, and additional smaller bags

# Blanket Capote

The Hudson's Bay or Whitney blanket, both made in England for the fur trade, were some of the more popular and functional trade items. Mountain men traded them with indigenous nations and used blankets for rifle covers, hats, and sometimes pants legs. The short black stripes, called points, on the edge of the blanket indicated the size of the blanket, which ranged in size from small 1-point blankets to large 6-point blankets. There is a myth that the points indicated the number of beaver pelts the blanket cost, but that is not true as prices fluctuated.

When a mountain man's store-bought coat wore out, he or an American Indian made a new coat, called a ***capote*** (pronounced ka-poat), out of a blanket. The mountain man used the "tails" on the hood for decoration and to secure the hood under his chin. The capote was also the mountain man's blanket when he slept.

Image 17: NA.202.449

Image 21: NA.202.481

# Clothing and Hats

The mountain man wore clothing similar to what men wore in the United States at that time. For example, they wore cloth shirts of muslin, calico, or homespun materials; cloth pants; and leather shoes or boots. They brought straw or felt hats with wide brims to protect their faces. When these clothes and hats wore out, he or his wife made new ones from animal hide. Sometimes a mountain man adopted the loose buckskin shirt, leggings, and breechcloth of the American Indians. Boots were impossible to duplicate so the mountain man adopted the soft buckskin ***moccasins*** of the American Indians. Moccasins were easy to make, comfortable to wear, and lightweight to carry. Often, a mountain man packed a spare pair to change into after setting his traps in the cold streams.

Image 22: 9.70

# Knives and Tomahawks

Knives were a vital part of the mountain man's gear. He used his knives for skinning beavers, cutting meat, and defending himself. Tomahawks were also essential; mountain men used the blade for chopping wood for fires and shelter, and for defense. The back of the head served as a hammer for pounding a stake that secured the chain on the beaver trap.

Both knives and tomahawks had been popular trade items with indigenous nations for centuries, and a mountain man might have brought them from home, picked up new ones at forts and rendezvous, or traded with Native Americans for them.

Image 23

Knife and sheath styles varied; popular manufacturers included the Hudson's Bay Company (a fur trading business in Canada) and John Russell's Green River knife factory in Massachusetts. Sheaths could be factory-made, hand-made by mountain men, or crafted by Native Americans with beadwork and brass tacks.

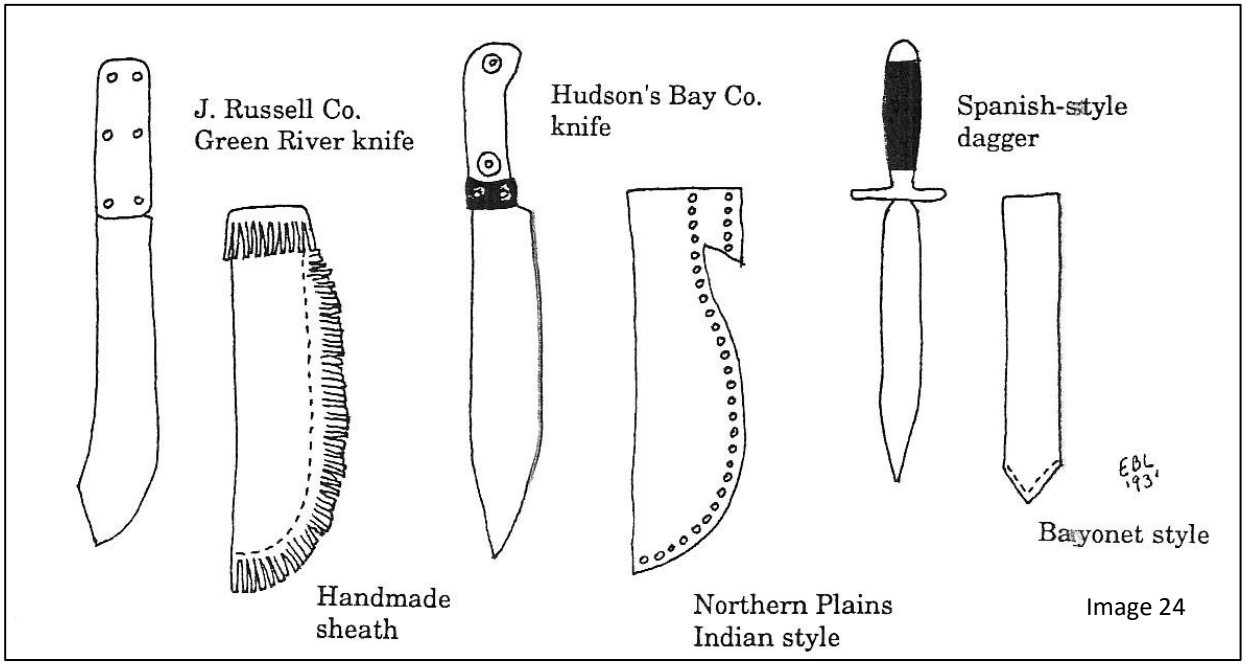



Image 24

# Rifle, Powder Horn, Ladle, and Mold

Many mountain men used both flintlock and percussion muzzle-loading rifles, which only allowed one shot at a time. The process of using these rifles included the following steps:

1. The mountain man poured gunpowder down the rifle's barrel.
2. He pushed a cloth patch and lead ball down the barrel with his ramrod.
3. For a flintlock, he poured a small amount of powder into the priming pan.
4. He lowered the steel striking plate over the pan.
5. He pulled the hammer back, sighted his target, and squeezed the trigger.

The piece of flint in the hammer's jaws created sparks as it hit the steel plate over the pan.* These sparks ignited the powder in the pan, and the fire travelling through a small hole in the barrel lit the gunpowder. This exploded and fired the ball out of the barrel.

By the 1830's, some mountain men were switching to percussion rifles, which fired faster and more reliably. These guns used percussion caps to ignite, instead of the flintlock and priming pan system.

The mountain man also carried the supplies to keep his rifle working. ***Powder horns*** held gunpowder and kept it dry—essential because wet gunpowder does not ignite. Mountain men melted bars of lead over a fire in a special **ladle** (included in your trunk!). They then poured it into a small **mold** to make their rifle's balls (note: the balls provided are smaller than the actual size, which would have been a tight fit). They kept **extra flints** handy if one broke or wore down.

***CAUTION! We have deactivated this flintlock rifle, but if you cock the hammer and squeeze the trigger, the flint will strike the frizzen and create a spark. We suggest you do this only as a demonstration with your students seated at least three feet away. Sparks can fly some distance and lightly burn clothing or skin. Do not allow students to handle this rifle without direct supervision.**

Image 25

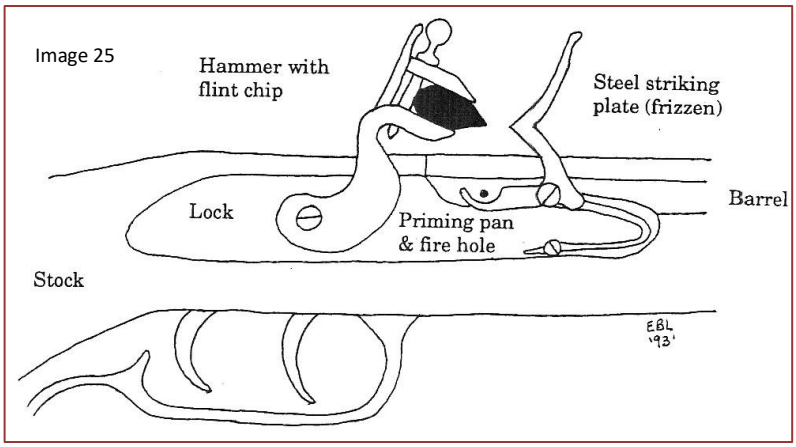



Image 26: 1.69.400.19

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# Image Descriptions

**Image 1: 19.98 –** *Timber Jack Joe and His Fox* by James Bama

**Image 2:** Kids Ask WhY logo

**Image 3:** Beaver graphic, licensed under Canva Pro

**Image 4: 36.64** detail from *Louis—Rocky Mountain Trapper* by Alfred Jacob Miller

**Image 5:** Map created by the National Park Service, showing tribal nations connected to Yellowstone National Park, https://www.nps.gov/yell/learn/historyculture/historic-tribes.htm

**Image 6:** Beaver graphic, licensed by Pixabay under Creative Commons

**Image 7: 3.82** *Mountain Man in Capote* by James Bama

**Image 8: 2.81** *Mountain Man* by James Bama

**Image 9: 61.72 –** *French Trapper* by Frederic Remington

**Image 10: 6.74 –** *The Free Trapper* by John Clymer

**Image 11: 11.70 –** *Our Camp* by Alfred Jacob Miller

**Image 12: 36.64 –** *Louis—Rocky Mountain Trapper* by Alfred Jacob Miller

**Image 13: 10.70 –** *Trapper Saluting the Rocky Mountains* by Alfred Jacob Miller

**Image 14: 18.77 –** *Blackfoot Captive* by W.H.D. Koerner

**Image 15:** Illustration of an open beaver trap by Elizabeth Brink Latrop

**Image 16:** Illustration of a beaver walking into a trap by Elizabeth Brink Latrop

**Image 17: 3.78.19A Beaver felt hat, owned by W.H.D. Koerner**

**Image 18:** Beaver pelt or plew on willow branches bent in circle

**Image 19:** Possibles bag along with contents

**Image 20: NA.202.449 –** Hudson Bay Four Point Blanket

**Image 21: NA.202.481 –** Capote

**Image 22: 9.70** detail from *The Lost Greenhorn* by Alfred Jacob Miller

**Image 23:** Tomahawk

**Image 24:** Illustrations of mountain men's knives by Elizabeth Brink Latrop

**Image 25:** Illustration of flintlock rifle's mechanism by Elizabeth Brink Latrop

**Image 26: 1.69.400.19 –** Powder horn