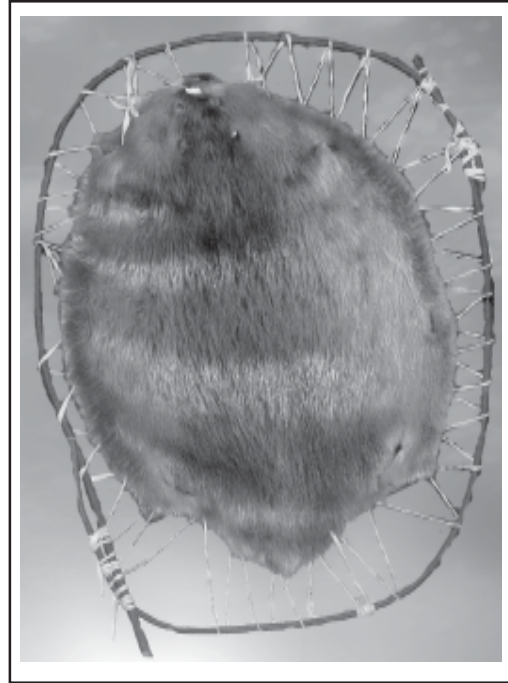




Mountain Men

Suggested Pre-visit Activities

These activities are tied into the Missouri, Illinois, and national standards for Social Studies and Language Arts.



Lesson Overview

Students will roleplay a “rendezvous” activity depicting the trading activities of mountain men during the mid-1800s.

Objectives

Students will learn about the economic, cultural and material aspects of the Mountain Men’s lives and the historical significance of Mountain Men in developing the American West.

Description

This program is designed to help students learn about the historical significance of Mountain Men in developing the American West. The NPS ranger will use park resources and educational activities to interpret the economic, cultural, and material aspects of life in the Rocky Mountains during the nineteenth century.

Historical Background

The North American fur trade began during the late-1600s with France and Britain vying for control over the abundant resources afforded by the pristine continent. By the mid-1700s, France claimed the Mississippi River and all land drained by its tributaries including the port of New Orleans and the Louisiana Territory. However, Napoleon Bonaparte's war debt forced France to sell the Louisiana Territory to the newly-formed United States of America in 1804.

Prior to losing possession of Louisiana Territory, France established trading posts to exchange manufactured goods for furs with the American Indians. Of these posts, one named after France's King Louis IX, prospered and grew to become the fourth-largest city and the Gateway to the West during the 1800s.

As a European colony on the edge of the frontier, St. Louis was a colorful place. Its founders were merchants intent on increasing their wealth through trade, at times to the neglect of farming. The result was occasional shortages of food, earning St. Louis the nickname, "Pain Court," or "Short of Bread." Members of the Osage, Saux and other tribes frequently visited St. Louis to exchange furs for tools, cookware, blankets and other items manufactured in Europe. These peaceful exchanges were one of the hallmarks of the early fur trade era.

After the Louisiana Purchase, St. Louis merchants formed companies to trap furs in the western territories. In 1822, William Ashley advertised for "ONE HUNDRED MEN, to ascend the river Missouri to its source, there to be employed for one, two, or three years." Those who answered, traveled to the Rocky Mountains to open one of the most storied chapters of American history. The "Mountainmen" are often characterized as rugged, individualistic and resourceful. Spending months at a time among the isolated Rocky Mountains, they capitalized on the demand for beaver pelts by trapping and preparing pelts for exchange.

The highlight of the trappers' year was the rendezvous. Intended as a business meeting, the rendezvous grew into a "trappers holiday" where trappers gamed and gaffed for days on end before another solitary season in the mountains.

As fashion changed, furs lost favor to silk and other materials. Reduced demand led to a decline in the fur industry, but America was still expanding westward. Many trappers adapted to the change by serving as guides through the Rocky Mountains for westward pioneers.

Although their time in the American West was brief, the influence of the mountain man era created a lasting legacy in history. Their search for untapped resources of beaver opened the Rocky Mountain region for settlers traveling through on their way to settle in Washington and Oregon. The Mountain Men Museum Education Program at Jefferson National Expansion Memorial looks back at the early American fur trade and its influence on America's expansion during the 1800s.

Vocabulary

barter – To trade goods or services without the exchange of money.

bison—a wild animal with a shaggy mane and curved horns; another name for the American buffalo

cache– A place for hiding or storing provisions or equipment.

castoreum– The oily substance produced by castor gland inside beaver.

confluence– A place where two or more streams or rivers flow together.

felt– An unwoven fabric made by matting together fibers of wool, fur, or hair using heat, pressure, and/or chemicals.

gaff–rowdy fun; also, to hook fish with a gaff hook

Great Plains—the level stretch of land located between the Rocky Mountains and the Mississippi River

habitat– The part of the physical environment in which a plant or animal lives.

pelt– The skin of an animal with the fur left on.

pioneer—a person who goes before others. Pioneers led the way in settling the West.

rawhide—a piece of animal skin that has not been treated in any way, but dries hard and stiff

rendezvous– A French word meaning “the place where we meet;” used by mountain men when referring to an annual gathering for meeting and trading.

resource—something that meets the needs of a community. Resources can come from nature or be man-made.

season—a period of time marked by weather or special events. Winter, spring, summer, and fall are the seasons of the year.

settler—a person who makes a permanent home in a place.

sinew—a stringy fiber connecting muscle tissues to bone; used by American Indians for sewing, bowstrings, etc.

Rendezvous Activity

Summary

Students work in small groups to assume the identity of individual Mountain Men. The groups meet with a supplier to trade their beaver pelts for the necessities of life in the Mountains.

Objective

To learn about the system of barter used by mountain men during the Rocky Mountain era of the American fur trade in the 1800s.

Steps

1. Divide class into 8 groups. Assign each group a character from the “Activity Roles” on the following pages.
2. Students read and discuss role.
3. Copy “Pelts” from page 9 and “Trade Items” from page 10. Give each group the number of pelts or items described in its character’s role.

James “Jim” Beckwourth	20 pelts
James “Jim” Bridger	19 pelts
Christopher “Kit” Carson	18 pelts
Thomas Fitzpatrick	17 pelts
Jean Baptiste Gervais	16 pelts
Hugh Glass	15 pelts
Representative of Rocky Mountain Fur Company	Trade Items
Representative of American Fur Trade Company	Trade Items

5. Students negotiate for supplies based on needs of character. Supplier may bargain back and forth until agreement is reached.
7. After negotiating with each group, review how much each paid for their supplies.

Suggested questions for discussion

- “Did everyone get what he needed?”
- “Why did your group trade the way it did?”
- “Was the trading fair?” “What is a fair price?”
- “Who benefited?” “Who got the best deal?”
- “Have you ever traded for anything?”

Activity Roles

James "Jim" Beckwourth

Jim Beckwourth was born in Fredricksburg, Virginia, in 1798. His father, Jennings Beckwith, was an overseer for a plantation. His mother was probably a slave.

Jim answered William Ashley's advertisement for 100 men to ascend the Missouri to trap and trade beaver pelts. After working with Ashley's company, Jim joined the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. He helped William Sublette, one of the partners of the Rocky Mountain Company, to locate new trapping areas near the headwaters of the Columbia and Missouri Rivers. They would also trap in the area that later became Yellowstone National Park. In the fall of 1829, Jim was adopted by a tribe of Crow Indians. A fellow trapper convinced the Chief of the tribe that Jim was his long lost son who had been captured by the Cheyennes as a child and sold to Europeans. For six years Jim lived among the Crow Indians. Jim discovered that he could make more money by trading with the Indians of the area than he had trapping with the fur companies.

Jim arrived at this rendezvous with 20 pelts. Jim owes the Rocky Mountain Fur Company 5 pelts for equipment. As far as supplies go, Jim will need as many tobacco twists, trade beads, blankets and hatchets as he can afford.

Christopher "Kit" Carson

Kit Carson was born in Richmond, Kentucky in 1809. At the age of 14, he was apprenticed to a saddlemaker, but ran away to work on a wagon train going from St. Louis to Santa Fe, New Mexico. In 1831, Kit signed up to trap beaver for Thomas Fitzpatrick. During the summer of 1834, Kit was chased by two grizzly bears. To escape, he climbed a tree. For several hours, Kit held on for dear life while the bears tried to shake him from the tree. Later that year, Kit joined Jim Bridger's trapping party near the three forks of the Missouri River. They had so many problems with the Blackfeet Indians, the party had to retreat to the Snake River where they camped until February. Kit attended the summer rendezvous, where he had his notorious duel with a man called "Shunar." During the duel, Kit was grazed by a bullet in the head and neck. Shunar got hit in the forearm and begged Kit for his life.

Kit arrived at this year's rendezvous with 18 prime beaver pelts. He owes the American Fur Company 3 pelts to cover the costs of replacing the supplies he lost while fighting with Blackfeet Indians. The supplies Kit needs include a knife, lead, trade beads, a blanket and a bucket.

James "Jim" Bridger

Jim Bridger was born in Richmond, Virginia, on March 17, 1804. While growing up, Jim learned how to handle horses, guns and boats.

In March, 1822, Jim answered William Ashley's advertisement for 100 men to ascend the Missouri River to its source. During their first year in the mountains, fellow trapper, Hugh Glass, was attacked by a grizzly bear. Hugh was injured so badly, Jim and another trapper volunteered to care for Hugh until he died. After a few days, thinking that Hugh would soon take his last breathe, Jim abandoned Hugh, taking his gun and some other items. Imagine his surprise when, several weeks later, Hugh crawled into Fort Atkinson alive and vengeful. Fortunately, because Bridger was so young, Hugh forgave him.

Some of Bridger's accomplishments include encountering the Great Salt Lake in Utah, which he believed to be part of the Pacific Ocean. He and several partners formed the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, which dissolved several years before the end of the fur trade era. One of Bridger's last business ventures was establishing a trading post, Fort Bridger, on the Black's Fork of the Green River in Wyoming.

Jim brings with him 19 beaver pelts. However while exploring the area around the Great Salt Lake, he lost a mule that had a pack of 2 pelts and some supplies. Jim will have to get what he needs for the next year with his remaining pelts. He will need a new blanket, some lead and a knife to replace one he lost. He also enjoys an occasional cup of tea around the fire.

Hugh Glass

Little is known about where Hugh Glass was born or his early life, but in his stories he paints himself to be a colorful character. He claims to have been a sailor whose ship was captured by pirates. To save his life, Hugh joined the pirates, only to escape by swimming to shore one night. He also claims to have been captured by Pawnee Indians; escaping after presenting a gift of vermillion to the chief.

Hugh answered William Ashley's advertisement for 100 men to ascend the Missouri River to trap and trade for beaver pelts. Shortly after joining Ashley's group, Hugh was attacked by a grizzly bear. The company left Hugh for dead, but John Fitzgerald stayed with Hugh for several days. Fitzgerald eventually left Hugh, taking his gun and gear. Hugh recovered and was determined to seek revenge. Crawling along the Grand River, he ate berries and bison carcasses. Eventually, Hugh reached Fort Atkinson, confronted Fitzgerald and forgave him, but took back his rifle. After recuperating, Hugh continued to trap.

This year has been better for Hugh. He brings with him 15 beaver pelts to trade for supplies. He must have a new bucket in which to soak pelts and 2 bars of lead to make bullets for his rifle. He also likes to have enough trade beads handy for encounters with Indians.

Thomas Fitzpatrick

Thomas Fitzpatrick was born in 1799 in County Cavan, Ireland. He came to America before he was 17. In 1823, he accompanied Ashley's expedition up the Missouri River and found good trapping country in the Green River Valley.

In 1825, Ashley's books credit Fitzpatrick with having produced 140 beaver pelts. At the 1826 rendezvous, the hostile Blackfoot Indians attacked the trappers and traders. During the battle, Fitzpatrick's gun exploded tearing off two fingers. The Indians who fought beside him gave him the nickname "Broken Hand" Fitzpatrick. In 1830, Fitzpatrick, James Bridger, Milton Sublette, Henry Fraeb and Jean Gervais bought the fur interests from Jedediah Smith, David Jackson, and William Sublette. They called their new group, the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. They had heavy competition in the mountains from the American Fur Company. In 1835, Fitzpatrick bought Fort William on the Laramie River from William Sublette and Robert Cambell.

During the last year, Fitzpatrick secured 17 beaver pelts. He owes the American Fur Company 3 beaver pelts to pay off a debt. With the remaining pelts, Fitzpatrick must buy the supplies he will need for the next year. He will need some lead, a blanket, a knife and a hatchet. Fitzgerald likes to have plenty of tobacco and trade beads handy for trading with Indians.

Jean Baptiste Gervais

Jean Baptiste was born in 1790 in St. Phillips, Quebec, Canada. His life as a mountain man began with the Northwest Fur Company around the year 1811. In 1819, he signed with the Hudson's Bay Company and worked with them for two years. Prior to 1826 it is believed that he trapped with Canadian firms; however, at that point he joined the Americans in their ventures to trap and trade for beaver pelts. At the summer rendezvous of 1830 on the wind River, Jedediah Smith, William Sublette, and David Jackson sold their fur interests to Jean Baptiste Gervais, Milton Sublette, Thomas Fitzpatrick, Jim Bridger and Henry Fraeb for \$16,000. These men called themselves the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. This company lasted only four years before it dissolved.

The last year has been fair for trapping. Jean Baptiste has 16 beaver pelts. He owes the Rocky Mountain Fur Company 3 pelts, leaving him the remainder with which to buy supplies for next season. He has a hankering for tea and tobacco, and must make sure he has enough of both for the next twelve months.

Representative of Rocky Mountain Fur Company

You have traveled to Wyoming from St. Louis to exchange manufactured trade goods for beaver pelts. Your job is to get the most pelts for each item you trade. The trappers have spent all season trapping in the mountains and are needing supplies for another season. Some of them are rough characters. Some of them are in debt to you. In fact, Jim Beckwourth owes you 5 pelts and Jean Baptiste Gervais owes you 3 pelts.

In any case, following are some of the items you brought with you from St. Louis:

Lead	(5)
Knives	(2)
Beads	(8)
Hatchets	(3)
Tobacco	(7)
Blankets	(2)
Buckets	(1)
Bags of Tea	(2)

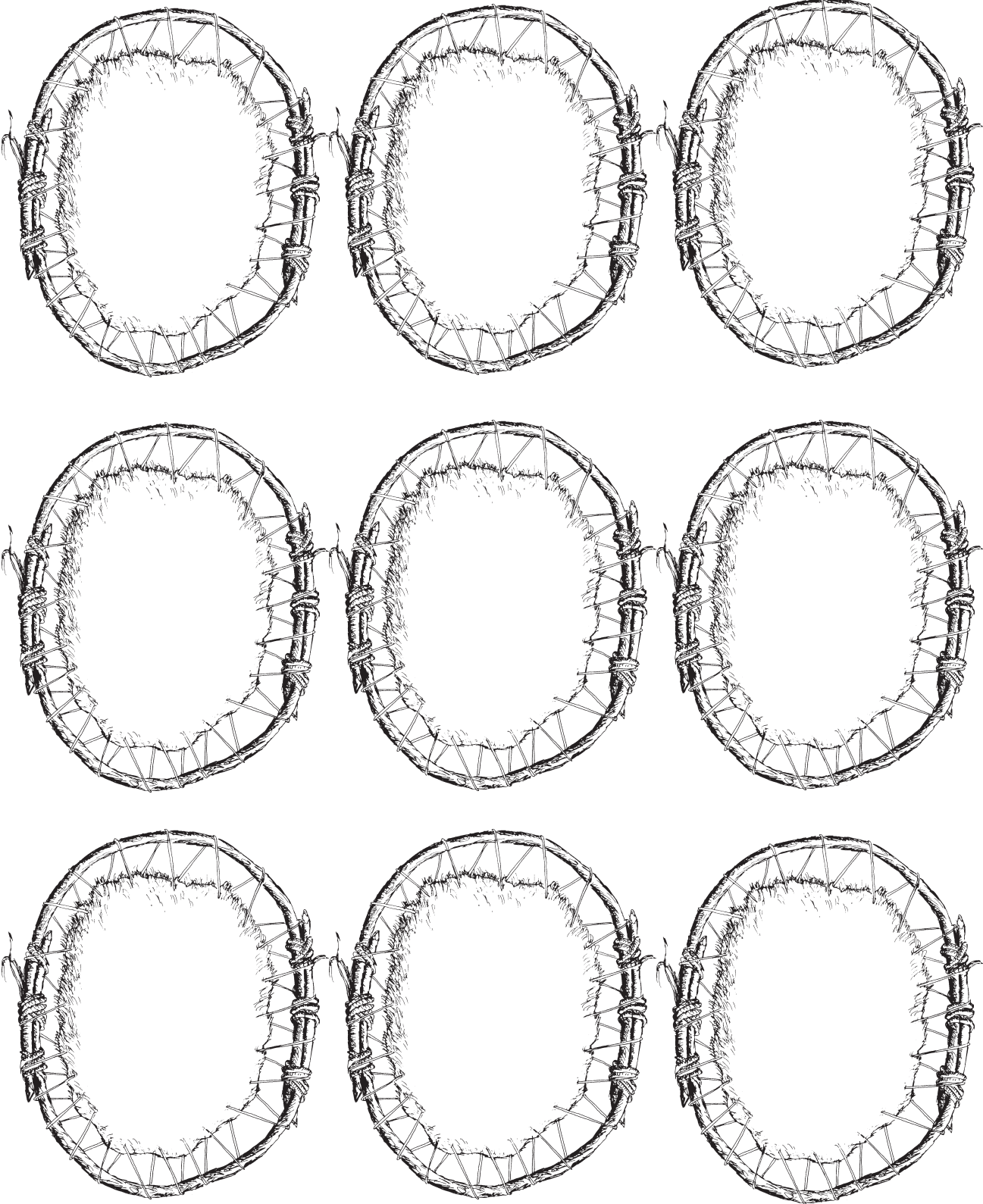
Representative of American Fur Company

You have traveled to Wyoming from St. Louis to exchange manufactured trade goods for beaver pelts. Your job is to get the most pelts for each item you trade. The trappers have spent all season trapping in the mountains and are needing supplies for another season. Some of them are rough characters. Some of them are in debt to you. In fact, Thomas Fitzpatrick owes you 3 pelts and Kit Carson owes you 3 pelts.

In any case, following are some of the items you brought with you from St. Louis:

Lead	(5)
Knives	(1)
Beads	(7)
Hatchets	(2)
Tobacco	(8)
Blankets	(2)
Buckets	(0)
Bags of Tea	(3)

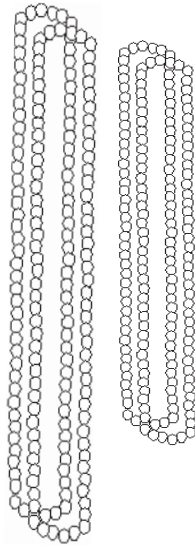
Pelts



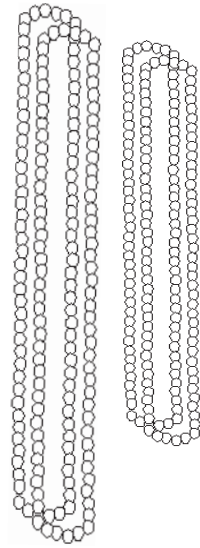
Trade Items



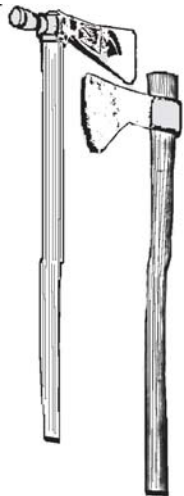
Lead bars



Trade Beads



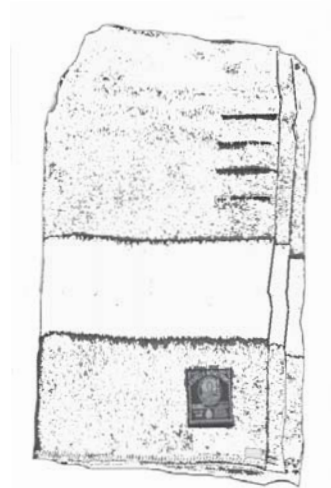
Trade Beads



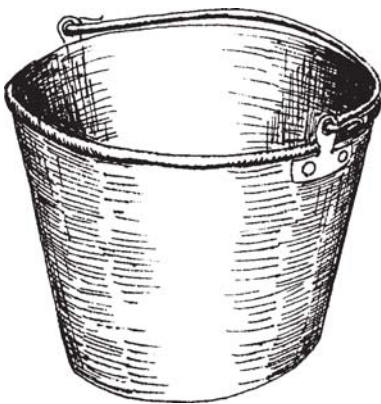
Metal Hatchets



Knife



Wool Trade Blankets



Metal Bucket



Tobacco Twist



Book List

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

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Saum, Lewis O. *The Fur Trader and the Indian*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1965.

Wishart, David J. *The Fur Trade of the American West, 1807-1840*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1970.

Websites

Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site
P.O. Box 9
Stanton, ND 58571-0009
(701) 745-3309
www.nps.gov/knri

Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site
15550 Highway 1804
Williston, ND 58501
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Yellowstone National Park
Post Office Box 168
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