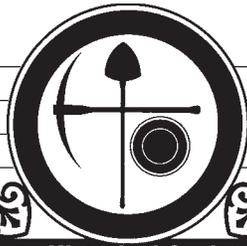


This month's theme:  
**Fur Trappers**



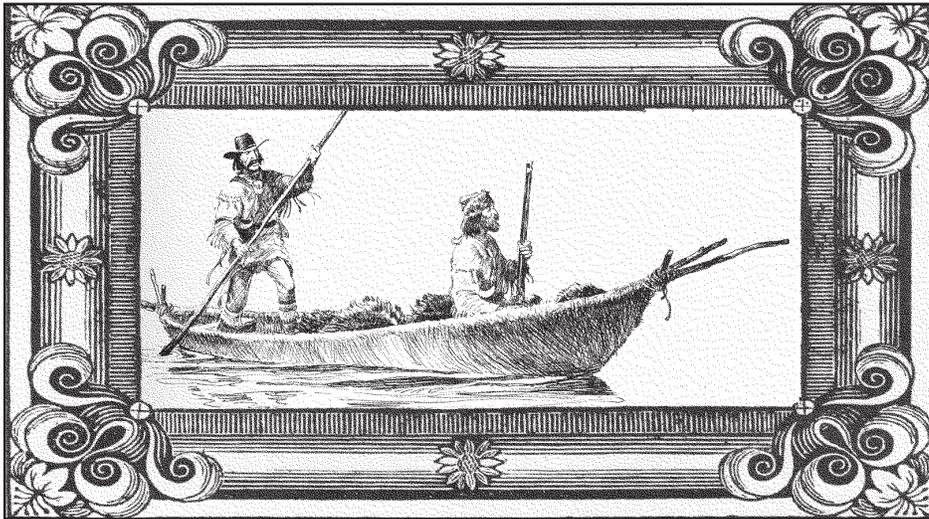
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The Newsletter of the Idaho State Historical Society's Junior Historian Program

# PROSPECTOR

January, 2005



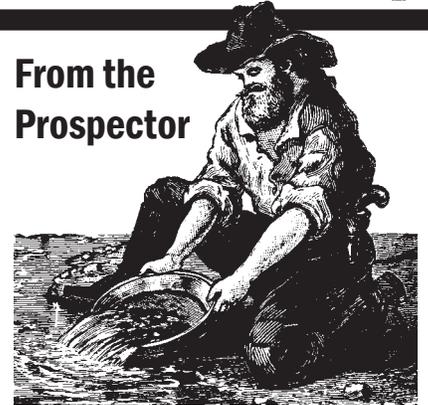
## The Fur Trappers

**T**he fur trade was important to the settlement of early Idaho. Aside from mapping and exploring the mountains and rivers of Idaho, the trappers helped start friendships between Idaho's native people and the settlers from the East. For about forty years, the fur trade was the only way to make a living in Idaho and, like the gold rush that followed a few years later, it made some men very wealthy. In fact, by the 1840's several large fur trapping corporations had

already come and gone in Idaho and two large fur trading forts had been built to handle the heavy business. No good thing lasts forever though. As important as the fur trade was, as wealthy as men got, as powerful as the big trapping companies became, the entire way of life was brought down by a worm. That's right—a worm, a creature no bigger than your little finger. But that's getting ahead of ourselves. To tell the story right we have to start at the beginning.

*Continued on next page*

### From the Prospector



### Howdy Prospectors

**I**magine Idaho in the early 1800's. The land was mostly unmapped, with no roads, no permanent towns, and the only inhabitants were seven Native American tribes who had a very different way of life compared to people in the East. The mountains were treacherous, with fierce weather and wild animals and nobody there to help you if you got into trouble. Back then you needed to be very brave and have many important skills, like hunting or navigation, to survive. This was the dangerous land where the first fur trappers did their work. In this issue we'll take a look at these mountain men who lived here during the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and see how they did their job. Enjoy the exciting story of the fur trappers! ⌘

When Lewis and Clark passed through the Rocky Mountains they noticed beavers in the rivers and lakes. This was an important and exciting discovery. What's so great about the beaver? To biologists they're rodents, just bigger versions of mice and rats. They don't make very good pets. And, except for the tail, which some people say is quite tasty, they are not a very good food. So what's the big deal? The answer, of course, is their fur. In the early 1800's across Europe and eastern America, felt top hats were in fashion. Top hats are round and tall and look very elegant. Back then, if you wanted to prove to everyone how fashionable you were, you wore a topper. Now it just so happens that the black hairs on the beaver's back made excellent hat felt. The fine jagged hairs hold together well, and the soft felt will bounce back after being crushed. The story of the fur trade is really the story of hats.

The first fur trappers entered Idaho soon after Lewis and Clark's expedition. Brave explorers came through the Teton Mountains to the east and down from Canada to the North. In 1810 John Jacob Astor, a rich businessman in the East, sent an expedition across the state to find good places to trap animals. The trappers ran into many troubles in

the wilderness and, in the end, the expedition failed. Still, Astor's men found many beaver across what is now our state and many other trappers came to Idaho.

Fur trappers, sometimes called mountain men, were a

difficult. The businesses that made hats were far away in the east. In the early days traders sold their fur at rendezvous. A rendezvous was a gathering. Fur trappers would meet once a year at a prearranged spot to sell their fur to buyers and to get the supplies

they needed for another year in the mountains. Later, in the 1830's, big fur trading companies built forts to speed up trade. These forts, like Fort Boise in western Idaho and Fort Hall in eastern Idaho, increased business. More and more beavers were disappearing from the waters and being shipped to the big cities in the east.

Then suddenly, everything changed. Nobody wanted to buy beavers and the business fell apart. Remember the worm we mentioned in the



tough bunch. They roamed over rugged, mostly unmapped lands to find the perfect hunting grounds. Back then, there weren't any stores in Idaho. If you went in the wild you had to rely mostly on yourself. Many supplies like clothes and shelter were made by the trappers from resources they found in the mountains. Some trappers made friends with local Indians. When they were lonely or in trouble they could turn to the Indians for help.

At first, selling beaver fur was

beginning? Our culprit is the silkworm, a creature that is not really a worm at all, but a caterpillar. This Asian caterpillar spins a fine soft cocoon around itself before metamorphosing into a moth. The cocoon is made of silk, a soft material that is made into fabric. In the 1840's felt hats were no longer in fashion. Men in Europe and the eastern United States now wore silk hats. Nobody wanted beaver hats anymore, and so the Idaho fur trappers were out of business. ☘



# The Fun Page

## Mixed-Up Message

Can you figure out the mixed-up messages below? Hidden in each jumble of letters are words that are important to fur trapping in Idaho. Rearrange the letters to make a word (or

words) and write it in the box to the right. Then, when you're done, fill in the bottom boxes with the letters that match each number. Good luck!

VAEREB	<input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/>	5
TOTPHA	<input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/>	4
LRPETGA	<input type="text"/>	3
FALLOTRH	<input type="text"/>	
REFBOSTOI	<input type="text"/>	2
TOARS	<input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/>	
REDSUOZENV	<input type="text"/>	1

<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	K	W	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	M
1	2	3	4	5			

Answers: Beaver, Top Hat, Leg Trap, Fort Hall, Fort Boise, Astor, Rendezvous, and Silk Worm



## Next Month's Activities

**W**ell, we've told you all we know about fur trappers, but we need your help so that we can learn more. Pick from one of the activities below or make up your own fur trapping project and send it in to our Prospector Headquarters. We'll take some of your best work and print it in next month's magazine. Remember to include your name, where you're from, and the name of your Prospector chapter. We can't wait to see what you send in!

**Future Fashion:** The story of fur trapping in Idaho is really the story of hats. In the early 1800's men liked to wear beaver felt top hats so, trapping beaver was a good business. Later, in the 1840's men started to wear silk hats instead, and the fur trappers were out of a job. As time goes on, fashions change. Do you think you are wearing the same style of clothes that your parents wore when they were kids? What kinds of clothes do you think your kids will wear? Pretend you have a time machine and you can travel 100 years into the future. Draw us a picture of the weird

clothes you think people of the future will wear. Do the fashions change or does it stay the same?



**In Your Backpack:** Mountain men spent a lot of their time alone in the wilderness. Because there weren't any nearby stores, they carried everything they needed with them. It must have been very difficult to decide what to take and what to leave behind. Pretend you are a fur trapper heading off into the mountains of

Idaho. Give us a list of the ten things you must bring along and why. Are you going to bring a tent? Food? Your Game Boy? Tell the rest of the Prospectors what you couldn't live without if you were living alone in the wilderness.

**Furry Creatures:** The beaver was the main target of fur trappers in Idaho, but there were other animals whose fur was sold to the east. Trappers occasionally caught otters, muskrats, minks, and even rabbits. Do a little research on one of these other fur-bearing creatures and tell us what you learned. Where does the creature live? What does it eat? Is it endangered or are many still living in Idaho? We can't wait to find out what you learn!

Send in your work by February 14<sup>th</sup> to:

Prospector Club  
 Lucky Noah  
 Idaho State Historical Museum  
 610 North Julia Davis Drive  
 Boise, ID 83702

Or email it to us at [kzwolfer@ishs.state.id.us](mailto:kzwolfer@ishs.state.id.us).