

This month's theme:
The Mountain Men



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

PROSPECTOR

November, 2006



The Mountain Men

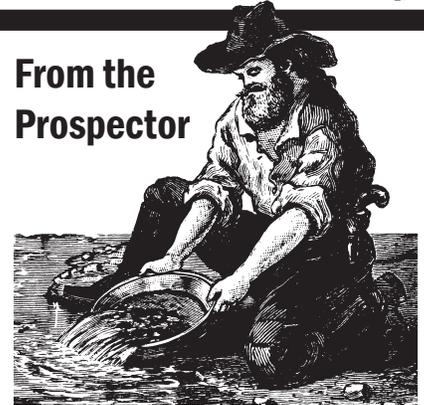
Some of the early founders of Idaho were a group of rough men who lived in the mountains and trapped animals for a living. These trappers, who became known as the mountain men of the West, explored every stream and river they could find. They fought off grizzly bears, Indians, and each other for their place in the mountains. Fearless and rugged, the mountain men were often referred to as 'scoundrels' and said to be 'reckless in their behavior.' They loved adventure and, like the gold miners that came after them, hoped to make their fortune.

In the early 1800's furs, especially beaver skins, were in great demand for use as hats in America and Europe. At first most of the trapping was done in the Northeast and Midwest, but eventually men started to move to the western wilderness to hunt for beaver.

Back then, there was no real law in the West, so no claims or rights to property were recognized. This made the West a tough place to live and also a tough place to stay alive. Men had to rely on their wits and the things they possessed had to be moveable. Most mountain

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From the Prospector



Howdy Prospectors!

Well, the chill of winter is here. Every time the temperature drops, my mule won't budge from the office. He doesn't like the cold. He'd rather lounge under a blanket in front of the fireplace and drink hot cocoa. He wouldn't do so well in the early 1800's. In those days, the only people in Idaho were the Native Americans and the mountain men. The only way you could keep warm in the harsh winter back then was to hide under a pile of thick animal furs. Which brings me to this month's issue; today we're going to teach you a little bit about the fur trappers who braved the danger and loneliness of Idaho wilderness over 150 years ago. Enjoy this exciting story of the mountain men of Idaho!

Lucky Noah

Mountain Men Continued

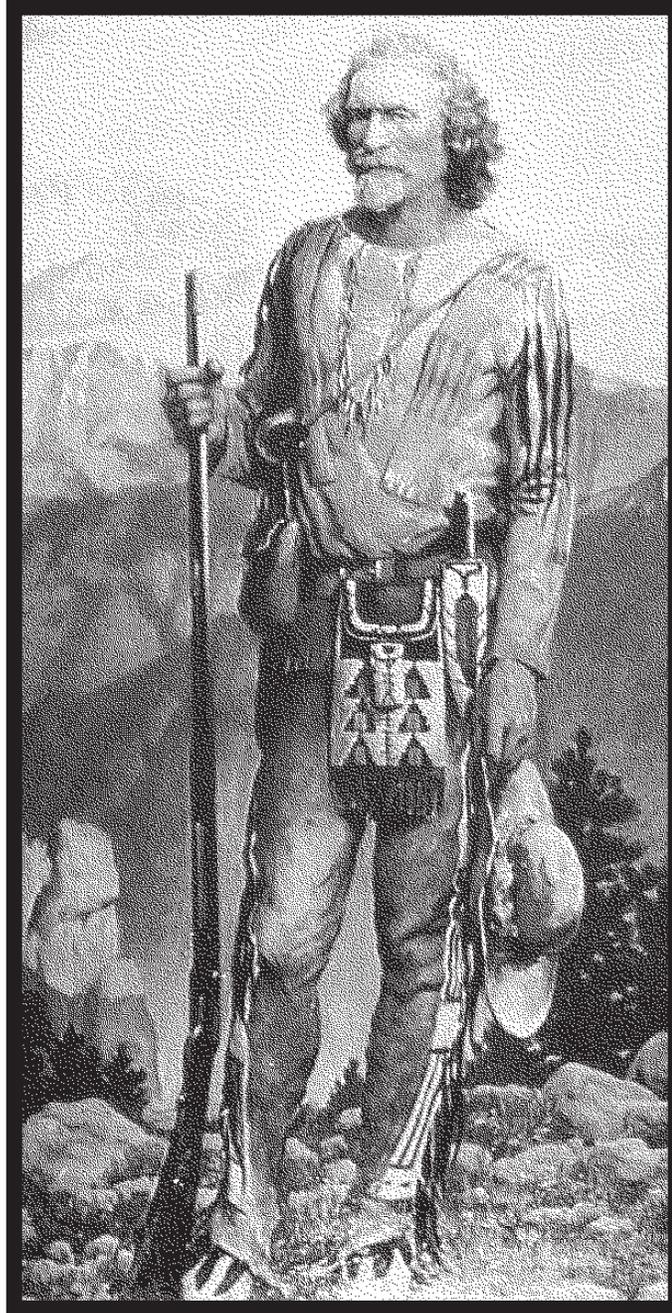
men lived in portable camps. Typically a teepee made of buffalo hides was their only home. Since they were always on the move, they only carried what was necessary to survive. Tools such as a knife, flint and steel to start fires, leg traps, a tool to punch holes, lead balls and powder for a rifle, and a few home comforts, like a pipe, were either slung over his shoulder or tied to his waist.

Mules were sometimes used to carry supplies because the mule was well adapted to the rough country. But many trappers or mountain men preferred having two horses, one for the trapper and one for his belongings. Mountain Men valued their horses and they were known to say they would 'sooner part with their favorite wife than one of the horses' Travel by river was necessary at times and they used canoes which were dug out from the trunks of a cottonwood trees that were common along western rivers.

Sometimes it was necessary for a fur trader to abandon furs or other property temporarily. They would dig a deep pit and bury the goods, and come back at a later time to pick up their property. This is called 'caching' and no trace of the goods buried would be able to be seen. They didn't want other trappers, Indians or even wolves and coyotes to find their goods.

Out of necessity the mountain men dressed as Indians and lived

like them and sometimes even among them since many took Indian wives. Their clothes were made of buckskin they had sewn themselves,



and they usually wore moccasins and hats of coonskins or felt. Some mountain men just preferred using a bandanna as a head covering. Just

Like the Indians, they often decorated their clothing. Some men used embroidery, beadwork, porcupine quills and feathers to liven up their outfits. They wore their hair long and unwashed, but they were known to braid it using bright ribbons to impress women. In order to make money, the mountain men needed to sell their furs to eastern fur companies. There were trading posts scattered throughout the West, but they could be difficult to reach. For about 15 years an annual gathering or "rendezvous" was held in Idaho. This meeting gave the trappers an opportunity to sell their fur to eastern companies and gather supplies for the following year.

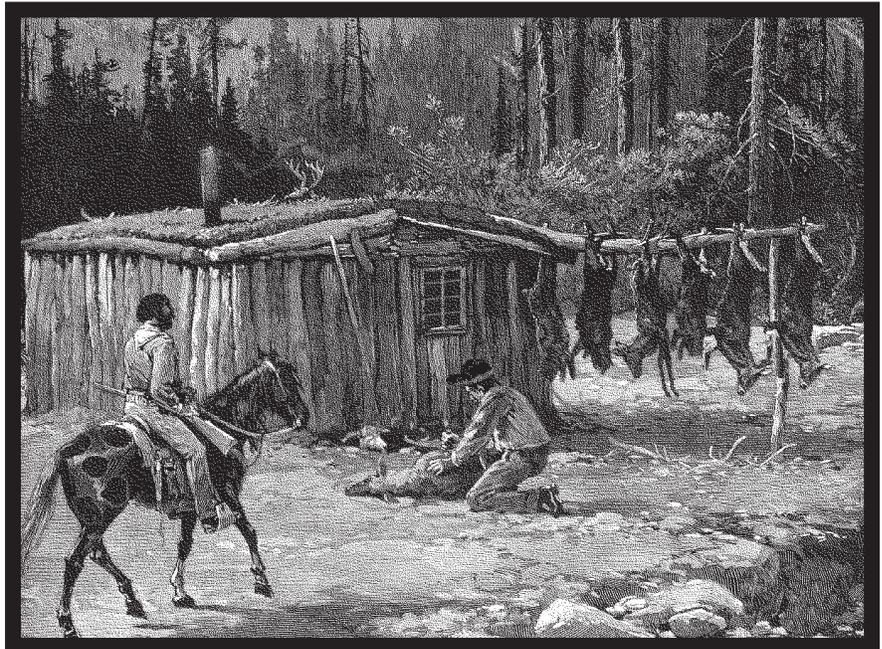
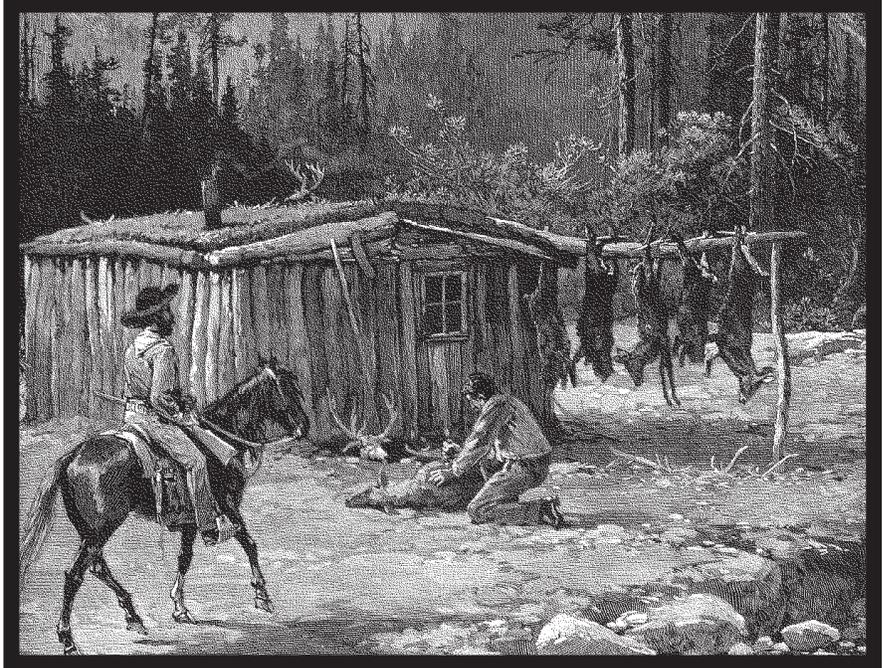
By the mid-1800's the era of the fur trappers was over. Increased competition and changing fashion lowered the price of fur and made trapping impractical. Many of the mountain men moved on to other jobs like buffalo hunting or guiding pioneers and the military across the rugged mountains. Today,

except for a few remaining historical forts, there is little left to remind us of this exciting time in Idaho history. ♦



The Fun Page

There are nine differences between these two pictures of a mountain man's camp. Look carefully and see if you can find them all!



1. Extra window panes
2. The Chimney is taller
3. The antlers are gone from the skull by the shack
4. The men have switched hats
5. There are now spots on the horse
6. The rock in the bottom right corner has moved
7. The forest is thicker
8. the horse's hooves have changed colors
9. There is an extra deer hanging from the pole



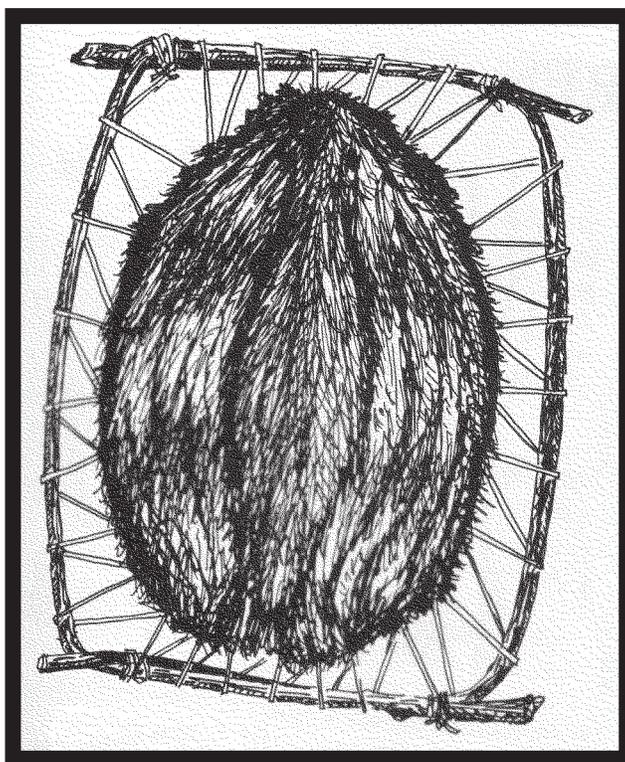
Next Month's Activities

Well, we've told you all we know about mountain men, but we need your help so that we can learn more. Pick from one of the activities below or make up your own mountain man 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, the school where you're from, and the name of your Prospector chapter. We can't wait to see what you send in!

A Better Beaver Trap: The main tool of a fur trapper was a metal leg trap. These simple, spring loaded devices were placed in shallow water. When a beaver applied pressure to the trigger the trap snapped shut and held the animal's leg tight. Although these traps were useful 150 years ago, technology has come a long way. In the era of computers even the simplest tools sometimes get an upgrade. Put your inventor's cap on and design a beaver trap for the new millennium. Draw us a picture of your cool new device and explain to us how it works.

Diary of a Mountain Man: The life of a mountain man was hard and lonely. Hundreds of miles from the nearest eastern city they only had a few other fur trappers and the

your hard life. Did you catch any beaver? What was the weather like? What dangers did you face? We can't wait to see what you come up with!



Rivers and Streams: In order to catch beaver, you first have to find water. There are thousands of rivers and streams throughout Idaho that were great habitat for the furry critters. Tell us about a waterway near where you live. What is its name? Is it big or small? Do you know anything about its history or the animals that live there?

Send in your work by January 10th to:

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

nearly Native Americans to keep them company. Sometimes when people are alone, they make a diary to keep themselves busy. Pretend you are a mountain man in the early days of Idaho. Write about a day in

Or email it to us at kzwolfer@ishs.state.id.us.