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IDAHO FUR TRADE

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Fur hunters came to Idaho in 1808 from two directions: Canada and the upper Missouri, which they approached from Saint Louis. John Colter, who had come west with Lewis and Clark, returned up the Missouri to join Manual Lisa's fur trade venture while the rest of the expedition continued on to Saint Louis. In 1808 Colter finally got around to exploring Teton Valley in Idaho, along with the upper Yellowstone country, in his search for beaver. Trouble with the Blackfeet kept him from expanding his operations into Idaho. But trappers from Canada started the Idaho fur trade later that year on the Kootenai, far to the north. David Thompson, of the North West Company of Montreal, began trading with the local Indians near Bonner's Ferry, May 8, 1808, and established Kullyspell [Kalispell] House on Pend d'Oreille Lake, September 9, 1809. Coming south from a post he already had set up in British Columbia, he found convenient routes across Idaho (which had eluded Lewis and Clark) and went on to establish additional posts in Montana and Washington. Kullyspell House--the earliest trappers' outpost in that part of the Pacific Northwest later assigned to the United States--had a poor location, and within two years, Spokane House (built in 1810 west of the present city of Spokane) replaced that earlier trading center. Thompson retired from the Pacific Northwest in 1812, but his North West Company continued active in Idaho. Saint Louis trappers also made another effort in Idaho in 1810, when Andrew Henry built a winter post near Saint Anthony after fleeing across the Continental divide in order to escape hostile Blackfeet Indians. Henry withdrew the next spring, but some of his men returned to Idaho with Astorians headed west from Saint Louis later in the season.

Donald Mackenzie--who started with the North West Company, then came to Idaho as a partner in John Jacob Astor's Pacific Fur Company, and finally returned to the North West Company to organize the Snake country fur trade--did more than anyone else to explore Idaho and to turn fur hunting into a successful venture. Mackenzie came overland with Wilson Price Hunt's expedition of Astorian trappers in 1811. After failure of a disastrous attempt to bring canoes down Snake River from Fort Henry, he led the advance party of Astorians on a long hike to their operating base on the Pacific coast. On the way he explored the Boise region and the rough country above Snake River canyon between Weiser and Lewiston. Returning to the Clearwater, he built a winter camp among the Nez Perce near Lewiston in 1812. After failure of the Pacific Fur Company and sale of Astoria to the North West Company in 1813, Mackenzie went east, where he finally began to promote the Snake country as a trapping region. Particularly after John Reid's short-lived post on Snake River near later Fort Boise was wiped out by Bannock Indians at the beginning of 1814, the Snake country had a bad reputation. But in 1816, Mackenzie came back to expand North West Company operations into the Snake country, and by 1818 he had his Snake brigade operating from Boise to Bear Lake and the upper Snake in the Yellowstone

Park region. In the summer of 1819 he held a regular trappers' rendezvous (a supply system later used regularly by William H. Ashley and his successors in the Saint Louis based Rocky Mountain fur trade) in Boise Valley, and the next winter he based his brigade of fur hunters on Little Lost River. There he managed to work out a peace agreement among the Northern Shoshoni, Bannock, and Nez Perce, in the interest of expanding the Snake country fur trade. With consolidation of the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company in 1821, Mackenzie went on to other assignments of major importance in Canada. But in 1822, Michel Bourdon led his Snake brigade to new country on the Salmon, and Finnan MacDonald took the trappers out in 1823. After some unfortunate clashes with the Blackfeet, particularly in the Lemhi, MacDonald refused to hunt furs any longer in the Snake country. But Alexander Ross led the Snake country trappers into more new country (exploring Upper Wood River, Stanley Basin, and the Upper Weiser) in 1824, and Mackenzie's system continued until 1832, when the country was largely trapped out and fixed posts (Fort Hall and Fort Boise) soon supplanted the annual Snake expedition which had been out hunting beaver for fourteen seasons.

Competition for the Hudson's Bay Company reached the Snake country in 1824. Jedediah Smith and a small band of mountain men supplied from Saint Louis found their way to the Portneuf early that fall. There they found a detachment of Alexander Ross' Iroquois trappers who had been left "pillaged and destitute" by unfriendly Bannock warriors. Escorting the luckless Iroquois back to Alexander Ross and the Hudson's Bay Company Snake brigade, Smith and his six associates went on a long fur hunt with the British trappers. Late in 1824, Peter Skene Ogden took command of the British Snake brigade, and more than a decade of sharp competition ensued. An aristocratic, highly organized monopoly company fought a loose combine of frontier mountain men, who lived strictly according to Indian custom except for spending most of their time looking for beaver. Organized on an Indian model into several independent bands of fur hunters, the mountain men put on an energetic campaign in the Snake country and the Rockies. To hold them back from penetrating into a highly valuable beaver country of interior British Columbia (known then as New Caledonia), the Hudson's Bay Company decided to trap out the Snake country. That way, barren zone, interposed between the Rockies and the Hudson's Bay Company fur empire farther northwest, would keep the mountain men at a safe distance. Normally the Hudson's Bay Company pursued a conservationist policy to keep the beaver country in production one century after another. But the Snake country, located beyond the Hudson's Bay Company monopoly fur hunting lands anyway, had to be handled differently. From 1824 to 1832, British and Canadian trappers, helped by mountain men by the hundred, depleted the fur resources of the Snake country.

While Jedediah Smith's small detachment of mountain men was out trapping with Alexander Ross and P. S. Ogden, John H. Weber had a larger party in a winter camp in Cache Valley just north of the later town of Franklin. Arriving in the fall of 1824, Weber's band operated in country previously trapped by Donald Mackenzie and Michel Bourdon. From their Idaho base, Jim Bridger went out to explore Salt Lake, and for the next several years, Weber's mountain men radiated out over a wide area of southern Idaho and adjacent beaver country. In the spring of 1826, William H. Sublette and David E. Jackson took some of these men on an expedition that explored the Payette lakes country, and that summer William H. Ashley held his second annual fur trade rendezvous in Cache Valley. There, on July 18, 1826, William H. Ashley sold out his fur trade business to a new firm of Jedediah Smith, David E. Jackson, and William H. Sublette. Ashley agreed to bring supplies to the

next rendezvous at Bear Lake. Jedediah Smith then set out for California while the other partners trapped in the Snake and Yellowstone country. Except for Smith's men, they generally returned late in 1826 for another winter in Cache Valley. Smith, Jackson, and Sublette held their next two trappers' rendezvous (1827-1828) on Bear Lake, and for a decade after 1826, most white trappers in the Idaho fur trade were mountain men based out of Saint Louis.

After 1826, Ogden and his Snake brigade had to spend part of their time exploring southern Oregon. Before he had finished, Ogden had pretty well trapped out the Snake country and had explored the Humboldt in Nevada, Pit River in California, and had descended most of the Colorado below Grand Canyon. When, after six annual Snake expeditions, Ogden went on to a new assignment in British Columbia, John Work took the British trappers into remote parts of the Salmon River mountains when his search for beaver (1830-1832) showed that the Idaho fur trade had gone into decline. A protective Snake country barren zone, planned by the Hudson's Bay Company, had been realized by the time Work got through.

After 1828, the annual Rocky Mountain trappers' rendezvous shifted eastward for a time. But in 1832, that annual fur hunters' trading festival came to Pierre's Hole--for years a major center of the Idaho fur trade.

More Indians than trappers turned up at the Pierre's Hole rendezvous from July 8-18, 1832. Altogether more than 200 mountain men (some of them independent, but most associated with the Rocky Mountain Fur Company or the American Fur Company) joined 120 lodges of Nez Perce Indians and 80 lodges of Flatheads for the summer fair and frolic. New entrants into the fur trade--expeditions of Nathaniel J. Wyeth and B. L. E. Bonneville--also appeared. A wild battle with the Gros Ventre Indians, brought on by an Iroquois trapper, marked the end of the meeting. After a sharp fight, the Nez Perce and the trappers managed to drive off the Gros Ventre and head out for their fall hunts.

Trapping parties continued to work in the Salmon River country in the fall of 1832, and each year Henry's Fork from 1832-1836. Hudson's Bay Company expeditions, and bands of American trappers employed by Nathaniel Wyeth and B. L. E. Bonneville, continued to move all the way across southern Idaho each year. Permanent fur trade posts--Fort Hall and Fort Boise--gave a new stability to a generally declining Idaho fur trade from 1834 on. Wyeth built Fort Hall as an outlet for trade goods he had been unable to dispose of at the 1834 rendezvous, and Hudson's Bay Company trappers retaliated by building Fort Boise. Wyeth had to set out at Fort Hall, although the Hudson's Bay Company did not get around to taking over that post until 1838. By then the rendezvous system of supplying the Rocky Mountain fur trade had come to an end, and few trappers managed to find the rendezvous attempted in 1839. Most went into other enterprises, generally in other parts of the country; those who stayed and trapped (in spite of a severe beaver price decline) had to dispose of their fur to the Hudson's Bay Company. After 1840, though, the Hudson's Bay Company posts (Fort Hall and Fort Boise) became important stations on the Oregon Trail; traffic of west bound settlers attracted more attention than the fur trade. After Idaho became part of the United States in 1846, the Hudson's Bay Company retained Fort Boise and Fort Hall pending a financial settlement under the Oregon boundary treaty. Indian restlessness, engendered by heavy traffic on the Oregon Trail, followed by army military expeditions against the Boise Shoshoni and their associates, forced the company to close Fort Boise in 1855 and Fort Hall in 1856.

During the years of the Idaho fur trade, by far the majority of inhabitants were

Indians, and the Indian way of life prevailed in Idaho. Although fur trapping dislocated the Indian economy in part, some convenient white implements made life easier for the natives of Idaho. Even the white trappers lived pretty much like Indians, with the exception of a few stationed in the permanent forts. Aside from severe ravages of white disease (which plagued the Indians in the early stages of fur trade contact), the Indians made out pretty well until extensive white settlement followed the fur trade and brought next to insoluble problems. But during the years of the fur trade, white exploration and trade did not disrupt Indian political, social, and cultural institutions, and while the mountain men stirred up quite a lot of friction with the Indians at times, the Hudson's Bay Company followed a strict policy of avoiding hostilities. Although a number of skirmishes and battles (mostly involving mountain men and Indians) broke out during the fur trade era, most of the trouble came later. Fur hunting brought Indians and whites together in a way that could not be matched after white settlement changed the situation.

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