COLORADO TRAPPERS & TRADERS – TRAPPERS

Beaver Ecology

When Europeans came to North America, beaver lived in almost every region that had streams and creeks. The newcomers trapped the beaver for its pelt. Its soft under-fur was highly valued for making men's hats. As Europeans and then Americans moved westward, they trapped so much that beaver nearly disappeared.

A Felt Top Hat

Beaver pelts were used to make top hats like the one to the right. Men wore top hats for business and dress-up occasions. Beaver hats were in fashion from the late 1700s to the 1830s.

A Felt Top Hat

Photo: N/A

More About This Topic

The merchants who purchased beaver pelts were not interested in the fur itself. Rather, they used the under-fur or fiber underlying it. Hat makers "pounded, mashed, stiffened, and rolled" this fiber to make felt. They then used the felt to make hats. By the late 1830s, tastes in fashion changed and hat makers used materials such as silk to make fashionable hats.

Their Own Words

"Beaver has so depreciated in value within the last few years [Ruxton was writing in the 1840s], that trapping has been almost abandoned; the price paid for the skin of this valuable animal having fallen from six and eight dollars per pound to one dollar. Which hardly pays the expenses of traps, animals, and equipment for the hunt. . . . The cause of the great decrease in value of beaver-fur is the substitute which has been found for it in the skins of the fur-seal and nutria—the improved preparation of other skins of little value, such as the hare and rabbit—and, more than all, in the use of silk in the manufacture of hats, which has in a great measure superceded that of beaver. The curse of the trapper is leveled against all the new-fashioned materials of Paris hats. . . . [p. 146]"

Source: George Frederick Ruxton, *Wild Life in the Rocky Mountains: A True Tail of Rough Adventure in the Days of the Mexican War*, ed. Horace Kephart. New York: Macmillan, 1924.

Mother Beaver With Kits

The beaver has only one mate and the pair produces two to four kits in late May or early June. This pattern is true for almost every year. A mature beaver, usually two or three years old, will weigh from 30 to 60 pounds. Males usually are larger than females.

Mother Beaver with Kits

Photo: Minnesota Zoo Website

More About This Topic

Beaver colonies are organized by family units--the mother, father, and their offspring. When the kits are fully grown, they are forced to leave the parent's colony. They may wander for a while, but they often establish their own colonies close to their parent's home pond.

Their Own Words

"The female seldom produces more than three kittens at a birth, but I know an instance where one . . . [had] no less than eleven in her. They live to a considerable age, and I once ate the tail of an old 'man' beaver whose head was perfectly grey with age, and his beard was of the same . . . hue. . . . The kittens are as playful as their namesakes of the feline race, and it is highly amusing to see an old one . . . inciting her young to gambol [play] about her, whilst she herself is engaged about some household work [p. 149]."

Source: George Frederick Ruxton, Wild Life in the Rocky Mountains: A True Tail of Rough Adventure in the Days of the Mexican War*, ed. Horace Kephart. New York: Macmillan, 1924.*

A Beaver Dam

The ideal habitats for the beaver are sluggish streams and small lakes like the one in this photo. Beavers avoid streams that run in rock beds or that are so shallow they dry up in the summer. They build dams that slow the current and create ponds that hold water year-round. The ponds also help protect the beaver, since the entrance to their lodge is under water. Dams also promote aquatic plants such as cattail roots and water lilies, which are the beavers' favorite food in summer.

Beaver Dam

Photo: Denver Public Library, Western History Collection

More About This Topic

According to naturalist Ernest Seton, "the beaver dam is perhaps the most famous of animal undertakings. Everyone knows that it is the beavers' custom to dam up small streams and to build their thatched and mud-plastered log cabins on the margins of the ponds thus made. The dams ensure the makers sufficient depth [of the pond] to protect them from enemies over summer and . . . to make certain that the water will not freeze to the bottom in winter. The dam itself is a vast complicated structure of sticks, stones, roots, mud, and sod. . . . No dam is ever finished, no dam is ever without need of repair. . . [p. 98]."

Source: Ernest T. Seton, Animals: Selected from Life Histories of Northern Animals, (New York: Doubleday, 1926).

Their Own Words

"The habits of the beaver present quite a study to the naturalist, and the are certainly the most [wisely] instinctive of all quadrupeds. Their dams afford a lesson to the engineer . . . . For the purpose of forming dams . . . the beaver often fells a tree eight or ten inches in diameter, throwing it, with the skill of an expert woodsman, in any direction he pleases, always selecting a tree above the stream, in order that the logs may be carried down with it to its destination. The log is then chopped into small lengths, and, pushing them into the water, the beaver steers them to the lodge or dam [p. 148]"

Source: George Frederick Ruxton, *Wild Life in the Rocky Mountains: A True Tail of Rough Adventure in the Days of the Mexican War*, ed. Horace Kephart. New York: Macmillan, 1924.

A Beaver Lodge

Beavers construct one of two kinds of lodges. One kind is made of branches cemented together with mud. You can see an example in the middle of the beaver pond in the photo. Another kind is a den hollowed out of the stream bank. In either kind of lodge, the entrance is under water.

Beaver Lodge

Photo: Denver Public Library, Western History Collection

More About This Topic

With all the effort beavers put into building dams and lodges, they usually do not move their homes or travel very far. With water for protection and wood and food nearby, they have little need to go very far from their home pond. In fact, once a beaver family establishes its colony, it rarely goes farther than one mile from its home pond. This made it easy for hunters to find and trap beaver.

Their Own Words

"The lodge of the beaver is generally excavated in the bank of the stream, the entrance being invariably under water; but not [i]nfrequently, where the banks are flat, the animals construct lodges in the stream itself, of a conical form, of limbs and branches of trees woven together and cemented with mud. . . . With his broad tail, which is twelve to fourteen inches long, and about four in breadth, and covered with a thick scaly skin, the beaver plasters his lodge, thus making it [the tail] perform all the [uses] of a hand [p. 148, 149]"

Source: George Frederick Ruxton, *Wild Life in the Rocky Mountains: A True Tail of Rough Adventure in the Days of the Mexican War*, ed. Horace Kephart. New York: Macmillan, 1924.

Beaver In A Plains Stream

The waterways chosen by beaver for their homes are usually surrounded by aspen, willow, birch, elder, or cottonwood trees. These trees provide food and wood for building dams and lodges. Beaver also made lodges and dams on plains' rivers and streams, like those in the photo. On the plains, beaver used cottonwood and willow trees for their food and building.

Beaver in a Stream

Photo: Denver Public Library, Western History Collection

More About This Topic

Rocky Mountain meadows were ideal places for beaver to build their homes. The beavers' favorite food, aspen trees, grow in these meadows. In the mountains and on the plains, their food sources are found close to streams. Aspen trees, for example, usually grow within 100 feet of a lake or stream.

Their Own Words

"The beaver was once found in every part of North America from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico, but has now gradually retired from the . . . [threats] of civilized man, and is met with only in the far, far west, on the tributaries of the great rivers, and the streams which water the mountain valleys in the great chain of the Rocky Mountains. On the waters of the Platte [River] and Arkansa [River] they are still numerous, and within the last two years have increased considerably in numbers [p. 147]."

Source: George Frederick Ruxton, Wild Life in the Rocky Mountains: A True Tail of Rough Adventure in the Days of the Mexican War*, ed. Horace Kephart. New York: Macmillan, 1924.*

The Beaver As Wood Worker

The photo shows evidence that beaver have been at work cutting down trees. Cutting down trees is, according to naturalist Ernest Seton, "still on the whole one of the most remarkable of animal undertakings. Two beavers will cut down a three-inch sapling in as many minutes and a small tree in an hour or so. . . . In cutting they gnaw deep parallel grooves round the trunk and then rip out the wood between these grooves in large chips, their broad teeth splitting them out as does a carpenter's chisel."

Beaver as Wood Worker

Photo: Denver Public Library, Western History Collection

More About This Topic

According to naturalist Ernest Seton, some experts claimed that beavers gnawed equally all around the trunk of a tree. However, other experts claimed that they gnawed deepest on the side of the tree facing the water. That way, the tree would fall toward the water and make it easier for the beavers to move the log where they wanted it.

Their Own Words

"When but two [beavers] are engaged they work by turns, and alternately stand on the watch, as is the well-known practice of many animals while feeding or at work. When the tree begins to crackle, they desist from cutting, which they afterward continue with caution until it begins to fall, when they plunge

into the pond, usually, and wait concealed for a time, as if afraid that the crashing noise of the tree0fall might attract some enemy to the place [p. 99]."

Source: Morgan, quoted in Ernest T. Seton, Animals: Selected from Life Histories of Northern Animals*, (New York: Doubleday, 1926).*

Beaver Pond And Lodge

Beaver ponds like the one in this photo helped protect beaver from predators. They built lodges with entrances under the water. They also stored food for winter under water.

Beaver Pond and Lodge

Photo: Denver Public Library, Western History Collection

More About This Topic

The beaver had few natural enemies. The animals that preyed on beaver were the wolverine, the bear, the wolf, the lynx, and the otter. Beaver dams and lodges protected them from most of these predators. "But the greatest of beaver enemies," according to naturalist Ernest Seton, "has undoubtedly been man . . . [who] has desired him both for food and for clothing."

Source: Ernest T. Seton, Animals: Selected from Life Histories of Northern Animals, (New York: Doubleday, 1926), p. 101.

Their Own Words

"Beaver fur was at one time extensively used in the manufacture of hats but has become so rare and valuable that it is now chiefly used for muffs, collars, and trimming. The early prosperity of New York and Canada was based on the beaver . . . which lured on the early explorers and brought here original colonists.; and it was the beaver pelt that, bartered for the manufactured products of the old world, first made life tolerable for . . . [people] in the new [world]."

Source: Ernest T. Seton, Animals: Selected from Life Histories of Northern Animals*, (New York: Doubleday, 1926), p. 101-02.*

Trappers' Daily Lives

The fur trade west of the Mississippi River began in the mid-1700s. At first, the Europeans and Americans involved in the trade did not intend to hunt and trap the beaver and other fur-bearing animals themselves. Rather, they hoped that the Indians in the region would supply the furs in exchange for guns, knives, and traps. By the early 1800s, however, they realized that the Indians could not (or would not) produce enough furs to satisfy the demand for fur in Europe and America.

The companies involved in the fur trade began in the 1820s to employ their own hunters and trappers. These hunters and trappers lived year-round in the mountains, close to their work. The life was hard and it was dangerous. The following screens describe what the daily life of these trappers and hunters was like.

A Mountain Man

This is a drawing of a fur trapper of the early 1800s. The artist, Frederick Remington, drew this image years after these "mountain men" had passed from the scene. Remington imagined the trappers to be rugged individuals who faced hardships and dangers all alone. Trappers did live close to nature. They hunted wild game for food and wore clothing made of animal skins. Some trappers did work alone. However, most worked for fur companies that sent trappers out in small groups. Few had to face the dangers of the wilderness by themselves.

Mountain Man

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

The vast majority of mountain men worked directly for a large fur trading company. These companies employed hundreds of trappers and hunters at a time. These hunters and trappers worked for wages. The companies supplied the hired trappers with their food, equipment, and other supplies. The furs produced by these hunters belonged to the company.

Their Own Words

To Enterprising Young Men

The subscriber wishes to engage ONE HUNDRED MEN, to ascend [travel up-stream] the river Missouri to its source, there to be employed for one, two or three years.--For particulars enquire of Major Andrew Henry, near the Lead Mines, in the County of Washington, (who will ascend with, and command the party) or to the subscriber at St. Louis.
--Wm. H. Ashley"

Source: Missouri Gazette and Advertiser (1822) quoted in George Laycock, The Mountain Men *(Guilford, CT: The Lyons Press, 1996): 77.*

Trappers Resting

Alfred Miller drew this sketch of trappers at rest to show the kinds of clothing they wore. The store-bought clothes that trappers had worn when they traveled to the mountains soon wore out. They replaced these with clothing similar to that worn by Indians in the area. They wore outer garments made of buckskin with seams fringed with leather. They used the fringes as string or thread to repair clothing, moccasins and equipment. The trappers wore under shirts made of flannel or cotton. When those wore out, they made shirts of antelope or deer skins.

Trappers Resting

Photo: The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (37.1940.29)

More About This Topic

The trappers quickly wore out their shoes or boots. They replaced them with Indian-style moccasins, usually made of buffalo hide. They made stockings from parts of blankets they brought with them. They used buffalo skin to make the lower part of trouser legs, as buckskin usually lost its shape or shrank in water (where trappers spent much of their time during trapper season). Buffalo robes served as blankets and heavy coats during cold winter weather. Trappers also wore fur hats with ear flaps in winter time.

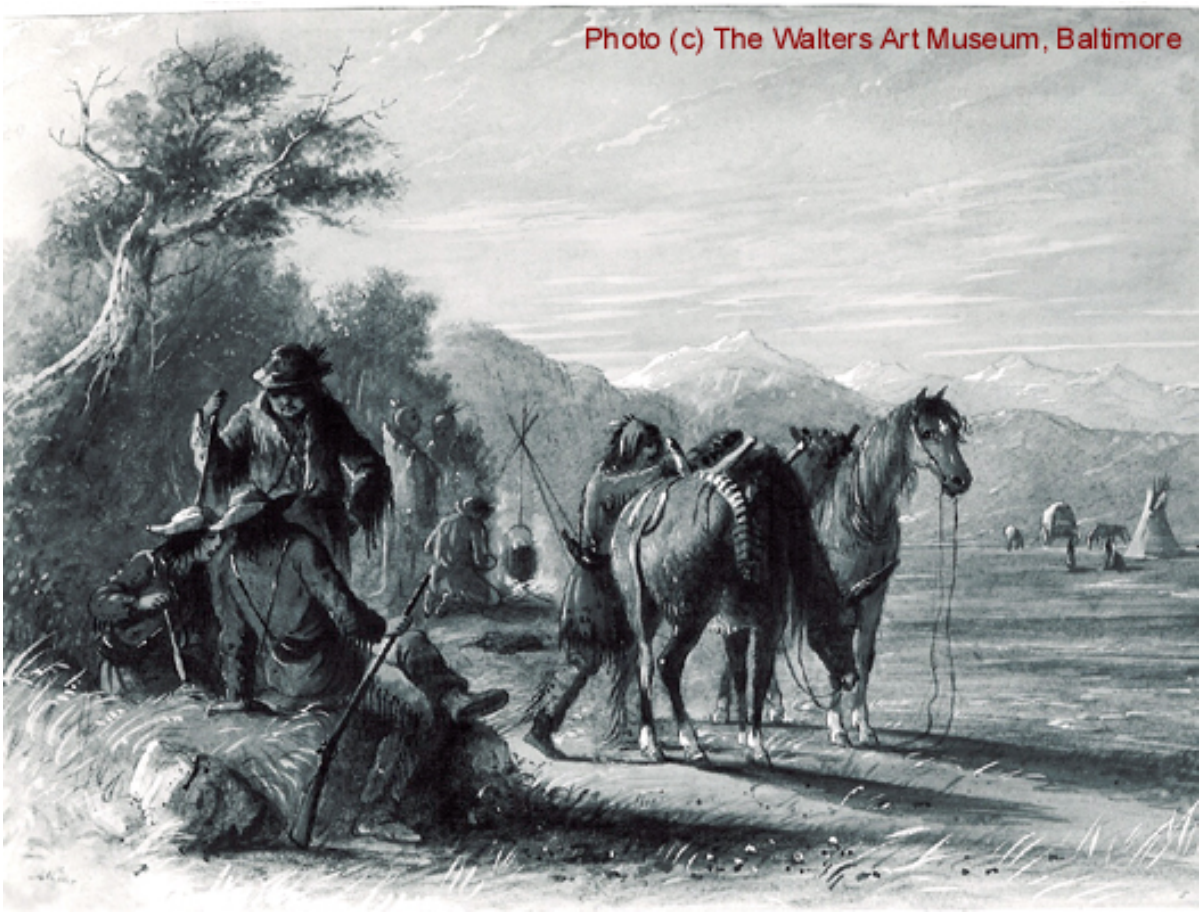
Their Own Words

"The trappers in the sketch are en repose [resting], the peculiar caps on their heads are made by themselves, to replace the felt hats, long since worn out or lost,--their fringed shirts, 'leggings,' moccasins &c., are made by the Indian women, and sewed throughout with sinew instead of thread, which they do not possess."

Source: Alfred Jacob Miller, The West of Alfred Jacob Miller *(Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951): text for plate 29.*

Camp Receiving A Supply Of Meat

Alfred Miller drew this sketch to show hunters returning to camp with a supply of meat. Trappers depended upon themselves to supply their own food and water. They lived mostly on meat from animals they killed. In the larger camps, the most skilled hunters did most of the hunting. In smaller camps, the trappers often took turns hunting for game. When hunting was good and meat plentiful, the trappers gorged themselves on the best parts of the buffalo or other game. The tongue, liver, and the hump ribs of buffalo were the choice parts. When game was less plentiful, the trappers ate even the toughest parts of the meat.



Camp Receiving a Supply of Meat

Photo: The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (37.1940.50)

More About This Topic

When food was scarce, as the trappers said, "meat was meat." By this they meant that in hard times they would eat just about anything. This included beaver, rabbits, and other small animals. In really hard

times, the trappers ate their own pack animals, and in some cases even their own moccasins. Starving trappers even ate insects. Trapper Joe Meek, for example, was so hungry that once he held his hands over an ant hill. When his hands were covered with ants, he licked them clean.

Their Own Words

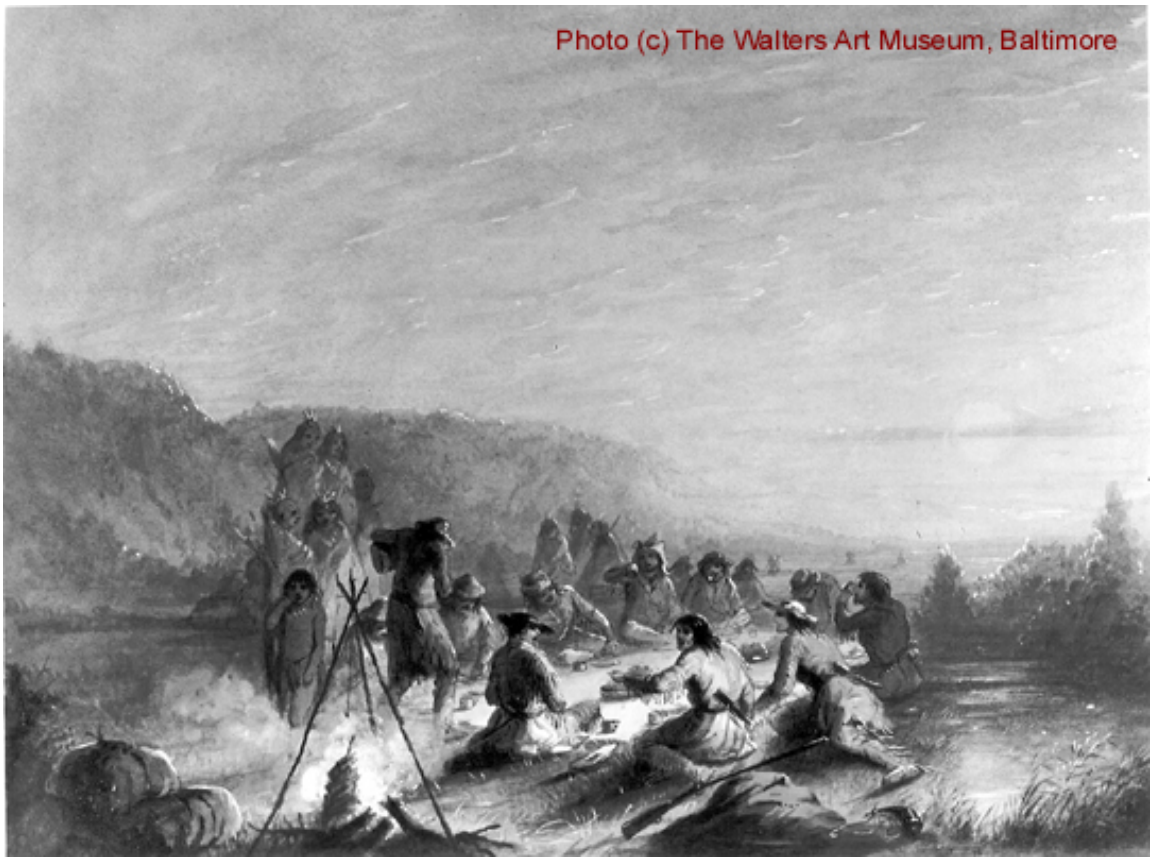
"As there are about 120 men to be provided for daily in our company, it may readily be conceived that great care was taken in selecting of hunters to the camp.

Very often, going out alone, the hunter is apt to encounter hostile Indians, so that in addition to his being a prime marksman, courage and perseverance were requisite. Selecting the 'Buffler' (Buffalo) 'seal fat,' he takes the finest morsels, hump rib, fleece, tongue, and side ribs, packs them, and then away to camp."

Source: Alfred Jacob Miller, The West of Alfred Jacob Miller *(Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951): text for plate 50.*

Breakfast At Sunrise

Alfred Miller titled this sketch "breakfast at sunrise." The title suggests that the trappers began work early and ended it late. Even so, the trappers' daily life depended upon the time of year. Trappers' work was seasonal. They usually went on two hunts every year--one in the fall and one in the spring. At these times, the trappers fanned out searching for beaver. The camps were busiest at these times. The trappers hunted and brought back pelts. The camp-keepers, in turn, scraped, stretched, and otherwise prepared the pelts for packing. At the same time, hunters supplied meat for the busy, and hungry, workers.



Breakfast at Sunrise

Photo: The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (37.1940.52)

More About This Topic

In the summer, the trappers were less busy. They moved about more, hunted game and fish, and otherwise relaxed more than during the hunting seasons. Summertime was also the season for the trappers' annual rendezvous. In the winter, the trappers stayed close to their camps. They built solid shelters to keep warm and dry. They did not hunt for furs in winter, but they did have to hunt for food, wood, and water. This kind of work was even more difficult to accomplish in winter.

Their Own Words

"The sketch represents 'our mess' at the morning meal. . . . The plate service of the table is of capital ["the best'] tin ware . . . and the etiquette rigid in some particulars;--for instance, nothing in the shape of a fork must be used. With the 'Bowie' [knife] you separate a large rib from the mass before you, hold firmly to the smaller end, and your outrageous appetite teaches you all the rest. . . . Indians are looking on patiently, in order to be ready for the 2d table [i.e., they were served second]."

Source: Alfred Jacob Miller, The West of Alfred Jacob Miller *(Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951): text for plate 52.*

Camp By Moonlight

Alfred Miller titled this sketch "moonlight camp scene" and the trapper standing is "spinning a yarn." One of the chief entertainments of the mountain men was yarn-spinning or telling stories around the night camp fire. The talk around the evening camp fire was a way for trappers to amuse themselves. It also was a way to pass on important "lessons" of the trappers' life. Perhaps this was because most mountain men were young and uneducated. Many were illiterate. Unfortunately, they did not write down or preserve many of these stories.

Camp by Moonlight

Photo: The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (37.1940.135)

More About This Topic

In his book Across the Wide Missouri, Bernard De Voto wrote that spinning yarns was one way that the mountain men passed on important craft wisdom to the "greenhorns," that is, those new to the business.
"It was shop talk, trapping, hunting, trailing, fighting Indians, escaping from Indians, the lore of animals

and plants, and always the lay of the land and old friends revisited and new fields to be found, water and starvation and trickery and feasts. . . . "

Source: Bernard De Voto, Across the Wide Missouri (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1947): 51.

Their Own Words

"An old trapper is up on his feet spinning a yarn wherein he is giving an account of an adventure of Markhead's with a grizzly bear. According to his account, Markhead was afraid of nothing on or under this eart, and 'was bound to shine [stand out] in the biggest sort of crowd' . . . During the recital there was a running commentary from the Trappers.--'Wagh' ' he was some'--'had old grit in him'--'could take the grissle off a darned panther's tail.' &c."

Source: Alfred Jacob Miller, *The West of Alfred Jacob Miller* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951): text for plate 135.

Free Trappers In Trouble

Alfred Miller titled this drawing "free trappers in trouble." Their trouble was that they were starving when Miller's caravan found them along the trail. Mountain men lived most of the year cut off from all contacts with the east. Except for short periods at the summer rendezvous, they lived a primitive way of life. They had to adapt to the environment in which they found themselves. They faced dangers of all sorts and had to rely on one another to avoid, or deal with, these dangers.

Trapper in Trouble

Photo: The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (37.1940.163)

More About This Topic

Trappers faced many hardships and dangers. They had to provide their own food, clothing and shelter. When they or their animals were injured, they had to treat the injury. They had to repair broken traps and rifles. The dangers they faced included attacks by hostile Indians and encounters with ferocious grizzly bears. Most mountain men became used to the hardships, as few of them returned to civilized society. Most chose to stay in the west.

Their Own Words

"The sketch illustrates an incident of two mountain Trappers, found near Independence Rock, in a starving condition. . . . [T]heir ammunition was completely exhausted,--but on that morning one of them had succeeded in killing two rattle snakes, which were in the process of cooking on the fire. Our Captain's question to them was, 'Good God! how can you eat such disgusting food?' One of them answered, 'This child doe'st savez [savvy--understand] what disgustin' is'--Wagh!"

Source: Alfred Jacob Miller, The West of Alfred Jacob Miller *(Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951): text for plate 163.*

The Greeting

Alfred Miller titled this sketch "the greeting." It shows trappers greeting a caravan of supplies from the east. For most of the year, mountain men were isolated from the outside world. Once a year the mountain men made contact with that world to exchange their furs for various kinds of goods. Before 1825, these exchanges took place at trading posts owned by the fur companies. After 1825, the companies created a new system for exchanging furs for goods. Each summer the trappers and fur company agents met at an agreed upon place. This was called the yearly rendezvous, a French word that means meeting place.

The Greeting

Photo: The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (37.1940.133)

More About This Topic

The mountain men looked forward to these meetings. They allowed them to replace broken or lost equipment, to get new supplies of powder, flints, and shot, and to get favored luxury items such tobacco and liquor. The fur trade was a global business. That is, most of the furs trappers in the Rocky Mountains produced found their way into an international market. European demand for furs gave the furs their

value. It was the primary reason why trapping was a lucrative job for the mountain men. When the European demand for fur declined in the 1840s, the value of furs declined and the fur trade collapsed.

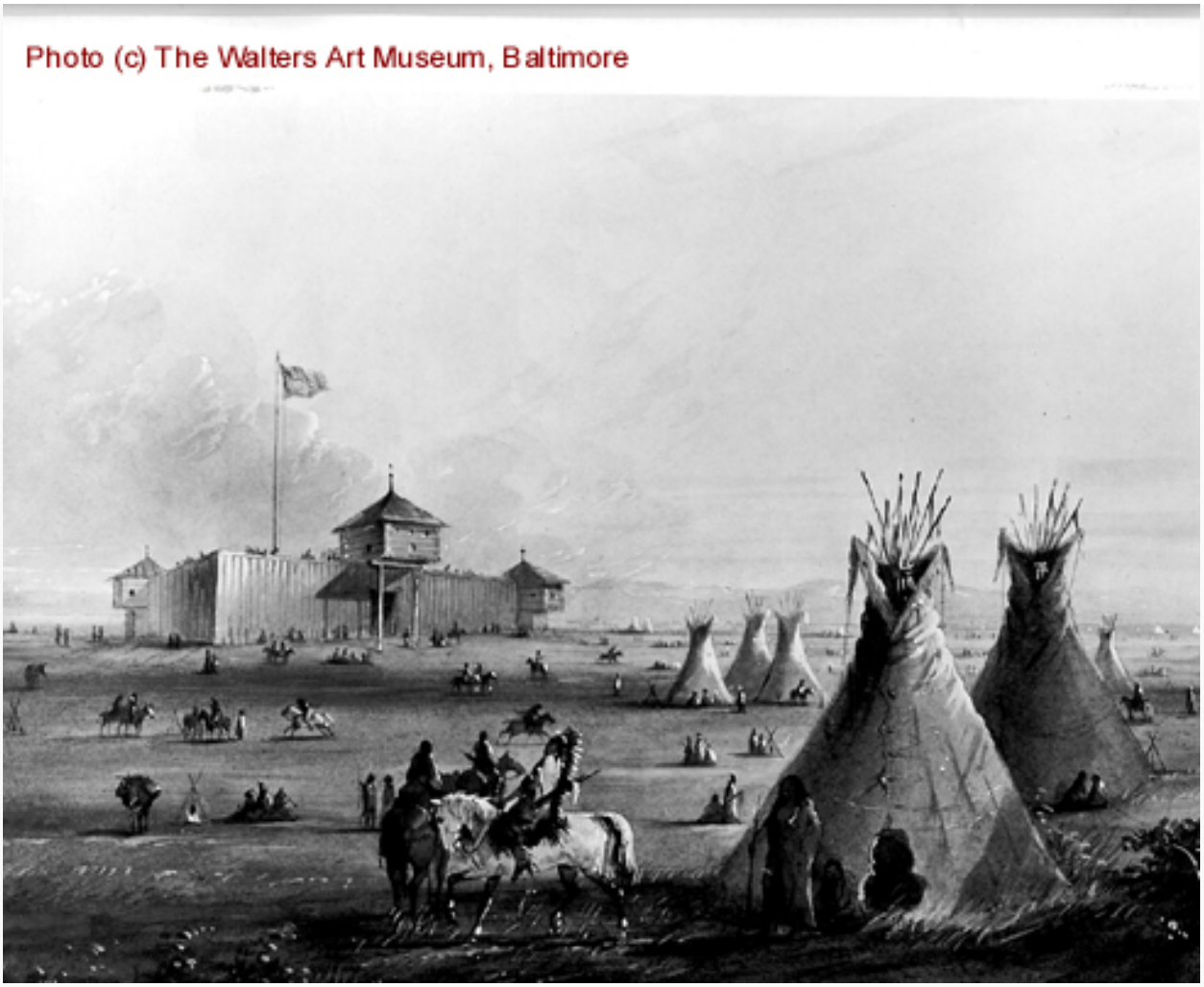
Their Own Words

"In approaching our destination . . . our ears were saluted by sounds that raised the pulse immediately . . . . It was a tremendous Indian yell of a large body of men, and we heard the clattering of their horses as they came down the valley,--as soon however as we had sight of them, we were relieved;--it was a body of Trappers, who had heard of our approach and sallied forth to give us a greeting;--this was done by a [firing] of blank cartridges and a hearty shaking of hands among the merry fellows."

Source: Alfred Jacob Miller, The West of Alfred Jacob Miller *(Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951): text for plate 133.*

Fort Laramie

Alfred Miller drew this sketch of Fort Laramie on his way to a rendezvous. It was a large trading post in what is now Wyoming. At first, the fur trading companies tried to have Indians supply them with furs. The companies established a series of forts, or trading posts like this one, where Indians could exchange their furs for manufactured items. The companies even established smaller trading posts that moved around to be more convenient for the Indians. The companies soon gave up on this idea. The trading posts proved too expensive to maintain. The Indians produced too few furs to satisfy the demand for them.



Fort Laramie

Photo: The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (37.1940.49)

More About This Topic

In 1825, William Ashley struck upon the idea of a yearly rendezvous to exchange goods for furs. For the next 20 years or so, the rendezvous largely replaced the trading posts as centers for these exchanges. Even so, several forts, such as Fort Laramie, survived. They continued to provide needed services and goods for many trappers. By the 1840s, Fort Laramie was a major stop for emigrants along the Oregon Trail. By this time, many former trappers served a scouts and wagon masters for the emigrant trains traveling to Oregon and California.

Their Own Words

"This post was built by the American Fur Co[mpany] situated about 800 miles West of St. Louis, is of a quadrangular form, with bastions at the diagonal corners to sweep the fronts in case of attack; over the ground entrance is a large block house, or tower, in which is placed a cannon. . . . Tribes of Indians

encamp here 3 or 4 times a year, bringing with them peltries to be traded or exchanged for dry-goods, tobacco, vermillion, brass, and diluted alcohol."

Source: Alfred Jacob Miller, The West of Alfred Jacob Miller *(Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951): text for plate 49.*

Trappers' Work and Tools

From 1800 to about 1840, beaver fur was in great demand for making felt hats. These were in fashion in Europe and in the eastern United States. The pelts of beaver brought an average of $4 a pound at trading posts or at the annual rendezvous. One pelt usually weighed about a pound and a half. The saying "six dollar a plew, prime," referred to a whole beaver pelt ("plew") in "prime" (or the best) condition.

The beaver coat was thickest in winter. That was the best time to trap beaver. But since trapping in deep snow during winter time was nearly impossible, the trappers got most of their pelts during the fall and spring hunts.

A Mountain Man

There were several kinds of trappers. The so-called free trappers worked for themselves, supplied their own equipment, and sold their furs to the highest bidder. Other trappers worked directly for one of the large fur companies. The company provided their equipment and food. In return, all the fur produced by the trapper belonged to the company. Still other trappers worked for shares from the company. These trappers and the company split the costs of equipment and supplies and the trappers got to keep a share of the profits.

Mountain Man

Photo: The Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

The vast majority of mountain men worked directly for a large fur trading company. These companies employed hundreds of trappers and hunters at a time. These hunters and trappers worked for wages. The companies supplied the hired trappers with their food, equipment, and other supplies. The furs produced by these hunters belonged to the company. Many, if not most, hoped to become tree trappers who worked for themselves, but few ever did.

Their Own Words

"The difference between a hired and a free trapper was greatly in favor of the latter. The hired trapper was regularly indentured [worked under contract], and bound not only to hunt and trap for his employers, but also to perform any duty required of him in camp. . . . In return for this toilsome service

he received an outfit of traps, arms and ammunition, horses, and whatever his service required. Besides his outfit, he received no more than three or four hundred dollars a year as wages."

Source: Francis Fuller Victor, The River of the West: The Adventures of Joe Meek*. (Missoula: Mountain Press, 1983): 49.*

Trapping Beaver

Alfred Miller titled this drawing "trappers starting for the beaver hunt." The sketch suggests that mountain men hunted in groups. The fur companies usually sent out trappers in large parties. The more trappers working in the field, the more beaver that could be caught in any given season. Going out in large groups also provided protection from hostile Indians.

Trapping Beaver

Photo: The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (37.1940.1)

More About This Topic

Most large groups of trappers broke up into smaller groups when they arrived at a good place to trap. These smaller parties broke up into pairs for the actual trapping. After the pairs of trappers exhausted the supply of beaver in a stream, they rejoined the larger party. The larger party would then seek new streams that had not been trapped out.

Their Own Words

"On the 17th of March, 1829, the company, numbering about sixty men, left St. Louis, and proceeded on horses and mules, with pack-horses for the goods, up through the state of Missouri. . . . [After the rendezvous, Captain] Sublette then decided upon their routes, dividing up his forces into camps, which took each its appointed course, detaching as it proceeded small parties of trappers to all the hunting grounds in the neighborhood. These smaller camps were ordered to meet at certain times and places, to report progress, collect and cache their furs, and 'count noses.'"

Source: Francis Fuller Victor, The River of the West: The Adventures of Joe Meek *(Missoula: Mountain Press, 1983): Volume 1, 43, 57.*

Looking For Beaver "Sign"

The trappers typically moved up-current as they hunted for beaver in streams like the one shown here. This was so because the signs of beaver, such as tree shavings, would float downstream on the current. Signs of Indians or other trappers would also float downstream, telling the trappers that this was a place to be avoided. Most often, the higher the trapper moved upstream, the safer it was for them.

Beaver Sign

Photo: Library of Congress, American Memory, American Environmental Photos

More About This Topic

Beaver hunting and trapping was seasonal work. A beaver pelt was considered prime when it was most thick, which was in the winter time. However, trappers did not usually trap beaver in the winter, because the work was just too difficult then. So, trappers usually made two hunts each year--one in the fall (from September to December) and one in the spring (from March through May).

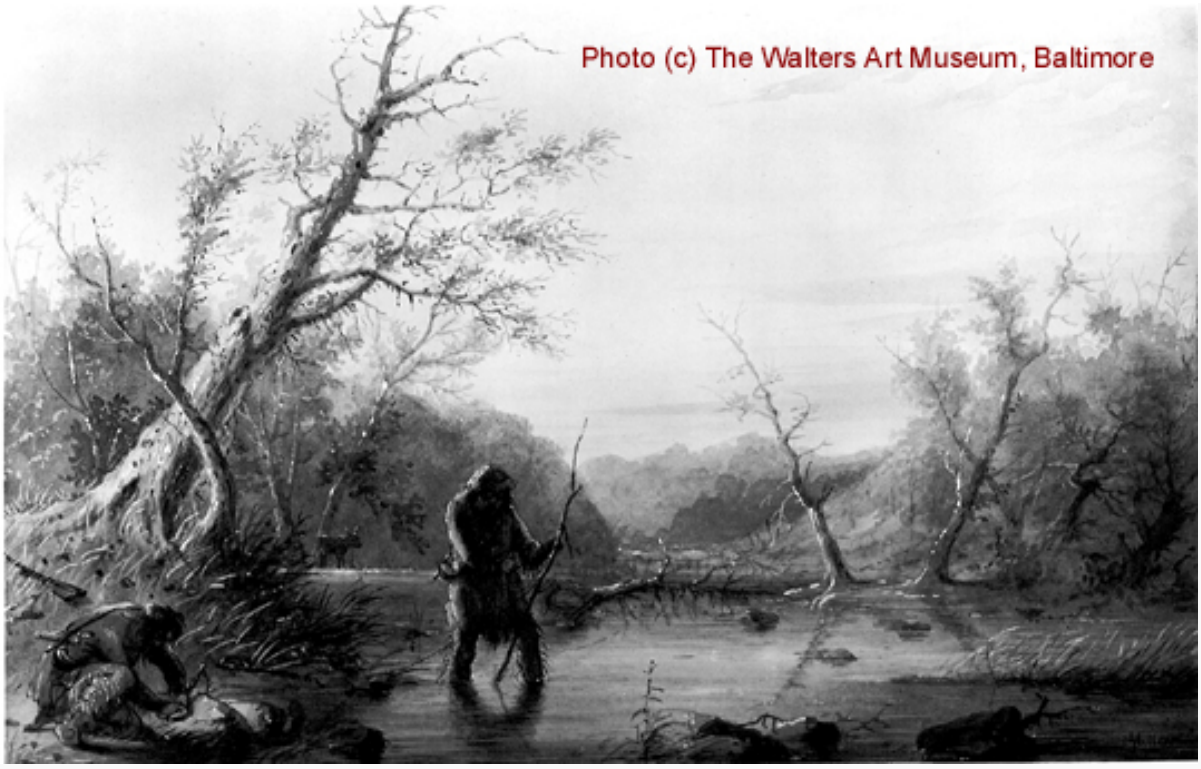
Their Own Words

"Encircled with danger, they wander far and near in pursuit of 'sign' of beaver. Ever on the alert, a turned leaf, grass pressed down, or the uneasiness of animals, are signs palpable to him of proximity to an Indian foe, and places him on his guard. With these precautions, he generally outwits the wily savage under equal advantages."

Source: Alfred Jacob Miller, The West of Alfred Jacob Miller *(Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956): Plate 1.*

Trapping Beaver

Alfred Miller titled this drawing "trapping beaver." The sketch shows two trappers beginning to set their traps. Once the trappers found sign of beaver, the trappers usually set their traps in late afternoon. Since the beaver moves about at night, working at dusk allowed the trapper to avoid warning the animals of his presence. This also prevented other trappers or Indians from discovering the locations of their traps. This equipment was too costly--and could not easily be replaced in the wilderness--to risk it being stolen.



Trapping Beaver

Photo: The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (AJM, 37.1940.111)

More About This Topic

The trapper set his traps by wading into the water of the creek or stream. Working in the water was necessary for two reasons. First, the traps had to be set under the water to keep the ever-alert beaver from spotting them. Second, the water covered the trappers' scent. After setting his traps, the trapper also splashed water over his tracks on the stream bank to eliminate his scent.

Their Own Words

"In hunting the Beaver two or more trappers are usually in company. On reaching a creek or stream, their first attention is given to 'sign.' If they discover a tree prostrate, it is carefully examined to ascertain if it is the work of Beaver, and if thrown for the purpose of damming the stream. Foot prints of the animal in the mud or sand are carefully searched for, and if fresh, they then prepare to set their traps."

Source: Alfred Jacob Miller, The West of Alfred Jacob Miller *(Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951): text for plate 111.*

Beaver Lodge

Beaver lived in lodges like the one in the photo. However, they used pathways on the stream banks to get wood and mud into the stream. Trappers placed traps on these pathways. To entice the beaver to a trap, the trapper smeared castoreum (he called it "medicine") on the bank or near the trap, or on a stick attached to the trap. Beaver naturally emitted this substance to mark territory. So the smell of the castoreum attracted beaver to the spot where the trapper smeared it. This substance was extracted from small glands near the beaver's tail. The trapper carried this substance in a small wooden box.

Beaver Lodge

Photo: Library of Congress, American Memory Collections

More About This Topic

The traps, baited with castoreum, were placed below water in the normal run of the animal. The traps, which weighed from three to five pounds, were attached to a length of chain. The traps were heavy so the beaver could not swim to safety with the trap. The end of the chain was attached to a long stick--called a float--that was driven into the bed of the stream. This float was made of dry wood so the beaver could not easily chew through the stick and escape.

Their Own Words

"[The trappers] sets his trap in the run of the animal, hiding it under water, and attaching it by a stout chain to a picket driven in the bank, or to a bush or tree. . . . The trap is baited with the 'medicine,' an oily substance obtained from a gland . . . of the beaver. . . . A stick is dipped into this and planted over the trap; and the beaver, attracted by the smell, and wishing a close inspection, very foolishly puts his leg into the trap, and is a 'gone beaver'. . . When a lodge is discovered, the trap is set at the edge of the dam, at the point where the animal passes from deep to [shallow] water, and always under water."

Source: George F. Ruxton, (1843) Wild Life in the Rocky Mountains*. Horace Kephart, Ed. (NY: Macmillan, 1924): 154.*

Trappers' Camp

Alfred Miller called this drawing "camp fire--preparing the evening meal." The sketch shows a trapper preparing a buffalo "hump rib" for supper. Just as there were different kinds of trappers, there were also different kinds of other workers in a trappers' camp. In large companies, there were hunters, trappers, and camp-keepers. During the two trapping seasons each year, the duties of each group of workers varied a great deal.

Trappers' Camp

Photo: The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (AJM, 37.1940.4)

More About This Topic

During the two trapping seasons, the trappers focused exclusively on trapping. At the same time, the hunters worked--as they always did--to supply enough meat for all the workers to eat. The camp-keepers performed all the grunt work of the camp. These chores included night watch, cooking the meals, and scraping, preparing, and pressing the beaver pelts.

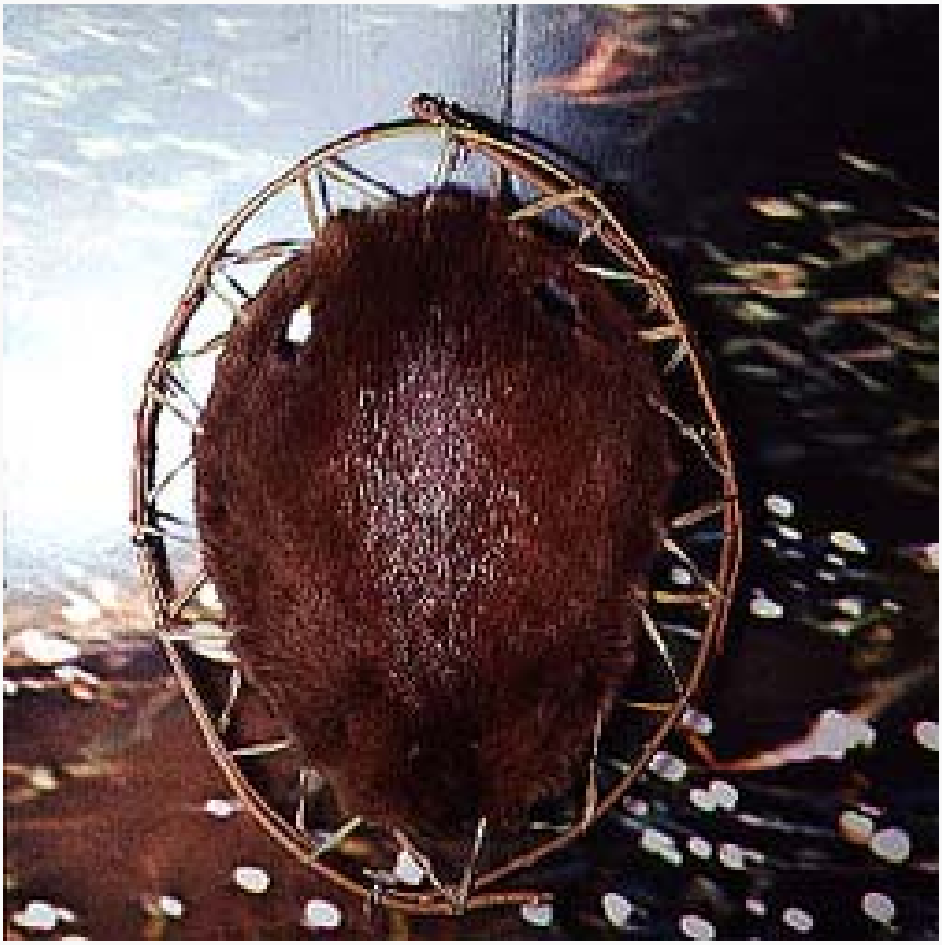
Their Own Words

"The duty of a trapper, for instance, in the trapping season, is only to trap, and take care of his own horses. When he comes in at night, he takes his beaver to the clerk, and the number is counted off, and placed to his credit. Not he, but the camp-keepers, take off the skins and dry them."

Source: Francis Fuller Victor, The River of the West: The Adventures of Joe Meek *(Missoula: Mountain Press, 1983): 54*

Beaver “Plew”

After the beaver were trapped, the pelts had to be processed. Usually this was the job of the camp-keepers. First, they scraped the pelts free of flesh. Then they stretched the pelts on round willow frames like the one in this photo to dry in the sun for a day or two. When the pelt was dry it was folded with the fur side in and marked with the trapper's name. The pelts were then pressed into bundles of about twenty pelts. Each bundle weighed about 80 pounds. These bundles or bales could then be packed on horses or mules or carried in carts or wagons.



Beaver “Plew”

Photo: N/A

More About This Topic

If the fall and spring hunts were successful, a trapping party could accumulate 150 to 200 pelts each season. As trappers moved their camps quite often, carrying around all these pelts was a problem. As a result, the trappers created their own store houses in the wilderness. That is, they dug holes in the ground in which to store their furs, until they were ready to transport them to the rendezvous or to a trading post. They called these underground storehouses caches.

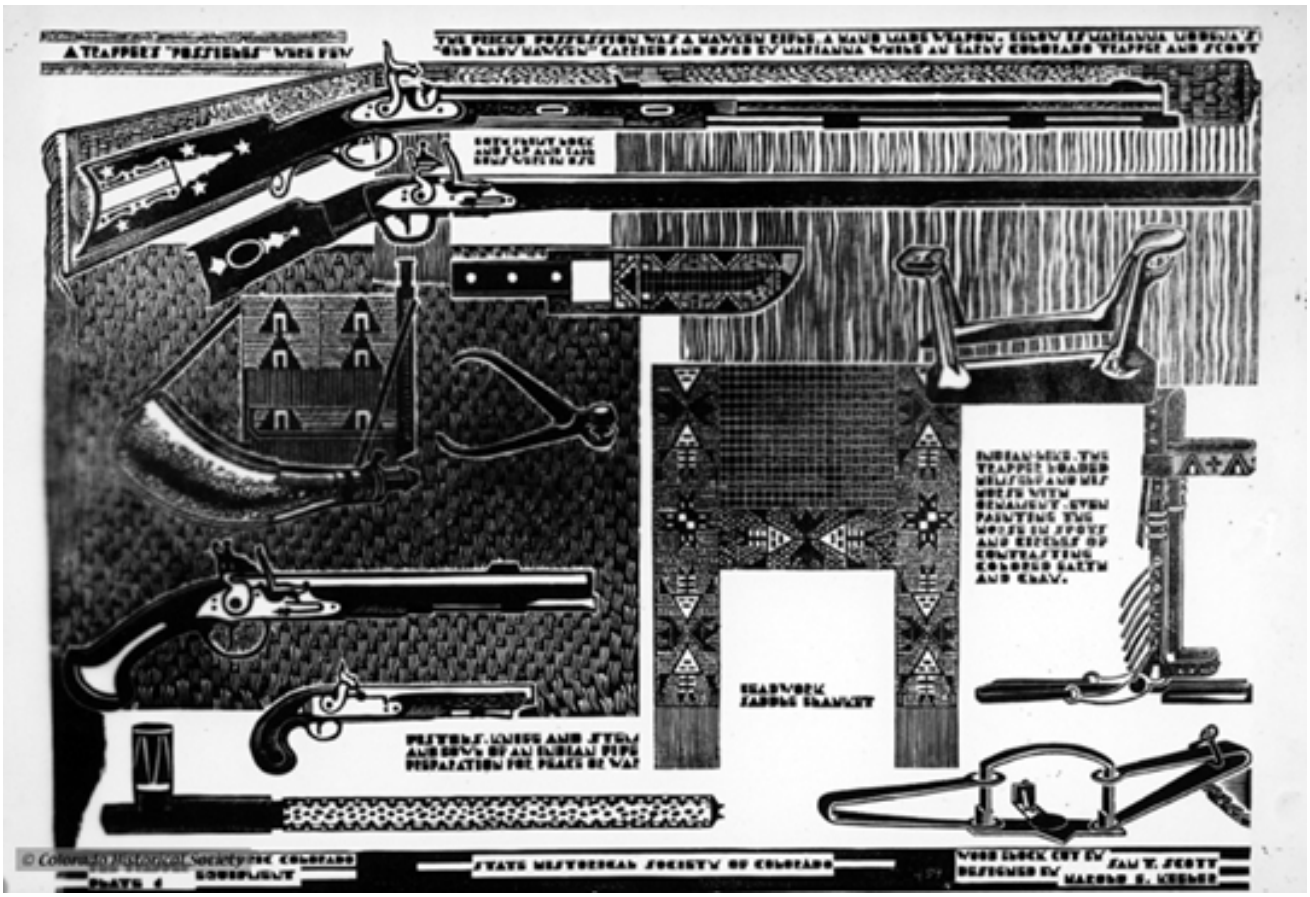
Their Own Words

"Early in the morning the hunter mounts his mule and examines the traps. The captured animals are skinned, and the tails, which are a great dainty, carefully packed into camp. The skin is then stretched over a hoop or framework of . . . twigs, and is allowed to dry, the flesh and fatty substance being carefully scraped (grained). When dry, it is folded into a square sheet, the fur turned inwards, and the bundle, containing about ten to twenty skins, tightly pressed and corded, and is ready for transportation."

Source: George F. Ruxton, Wild Life in the Rocky Mountains Horace Kephart*, Ed. (NY: Macmillan, 1924): 154-55.*

Trappers' Equipment

As the diagram to the right suggests, the trappers' equipment included a rifle, sometimes a pistol, gun powder carried in a powder horn, and a bullet pouch. Trappers always carried a hunting knife, usually a famous "Green River" knife. Trappers also carried a wooden box that contained the castoreum used to bait beaver traps. Most also carried what they called a "possibles" sack or bag that contained such items as flints, awls, and a bullet mold.



Trappers' Equipment

Photo: The Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

Trappers' equipment also included a horse and one or more mules to help the trapper carry his equipment and beaver pelts. So the trapper usually had a saddle, bridle, and an apishamore (a saddle blanket made of square pieces of buffalo robe). Trappers had a trap sack that usually contained from six to eight traps. Many trappers also carried a hatchet or tomahawk. All this equipment was quite costly and almost impossible to replace in the wilderness where they worked. Only at trading posts or the annual rendezvous could trappers replace lost or stolen equipment.

Their Own Words

"On starting for the hunt the trapper fits himself out with full equipment. In addition to his animals he procures 5 or 6 traps (usually carried in a trap-sack), ammunition, a few pounds of tobacco, a supply of moccasins, a wallet called a "possible sack," gun, bowie knife, and sometimes a tomahawk. Over his left shoulder and under his right arm hang his buffalo powderhorn, a bullet pouch in which he carries balls, flint, and steel, with other knick-knacks. Bound round his waist is a belt, in which is stuck his knife in a sheath of Buffalo hide, made fast to the belt by a chain or guard of some kind. . . ."

Source: Alfred Jacob Miller, The West of Alfred Jacob Miller *(Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951): text for plate 1.*

Indian-Trapper Relations

Trappers were the first white Americans to live in what is now called Colorado. White trappers first came into contact with Indians west of the Mississippi River in the mid-1700s. In the early 1800s, their number increased. Still, the Indians of the western plains and Rocky Mountains far outnumbered the trappers. Relations between the trappers and Indians varied. Some tribes were friendly, others were hostile.

Trappers and Indians had many obstacles to overcome. They remembered past encounters that were not always friendly. They spoke very different languages as the photo here indicates. They came from different cultures. Sometimes the trappers and Indians overcame these differences, sometimes not.

Communicating By Signs

Alfred Miller called this drawing "trappers and Indians communicating my signs." Indian tribes living on the plains and in Rocky Mountains spoke many different languages. They communicated with each other through sign language. Sign language helped them trade with one another. As whites ventured into these areas, they had to learn sign language so they could "talk" to the Indians they encountered. Over time, some trappers learned Indian languages. Intermarriage of trappers and Indian women also led trappers to learn the languages of their wives.

Communicating by Signs

Photo: Courtesy The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (AJM, 37.1940.193)

More About This Topic

North American Indians spoke as many as 500 different languages. Sign language developed to help these Indians communicate with one another. Sign language consists of different hand gestures. The sign for a tipi, for example, is bringing together both index fingers in cone shape. The sign for a woman was the hand sweeping down from the head, to indicate long flowing hair. The sign for a man was to hold up an index finger (with the palm toward the "speaker"), indicating an erect animal. The sign for a white man was to move the fingers across one's forehead, indicating wearing a hat.

Their Own Words

"The Trappers experience much difficulty in acquiring a knowledge of the Indian tongue, and as if the language was not embarrassing enough, its pronunciation is still more puzzling,--the sound proceeding from the throat. It requires them to sojourn for years amongst the tribes to acquire anything like a proficiency, and in the absence of this they resort to signs, the meaning of which they learn readily, and thus hold animated conversations."

Source: Alfred Jacob Miller, The West of Alfred Jacob Miller *(1837) (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951): text for plate 193.*

Indian Hospitality

Alfred Miller called this drawing "Indian hospitality." Whether Indians were friendly or hostile toward individual trappers depended on many things. Some tribes such as the Pawnee (plains) or the Blackfeet of the northern Rocky Mountains were fiercely hostile to nearly all whites. Other tribes, such as the Cheyenne and Arapahoe, were for the most part friendly to whites. Indians' attitudes toward whites often depended on the personal reputation of a specific trapper. It also often depended upon whether a trapper was friendly that tribe's enemies. Sometimes an Indians' friendliness toward a trapper depended upon what he had to offer in trade.

Indian Hospitality

Photo: The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (37.1940.143)

More About This Topic

Trading with whites presented Indians with a difficult choice. On one hand, most Indian tribes desired the guns, ammunition, kettles, knives, utensils, blankets and clothing that whites were willing to trade

for furs, meat, and horses. On the other hand, most Indians realized that the trappers were encroaching on their traditional hunting grounds. As large numbers of trappers invaded Indian territory, that choice became all the more difficult.

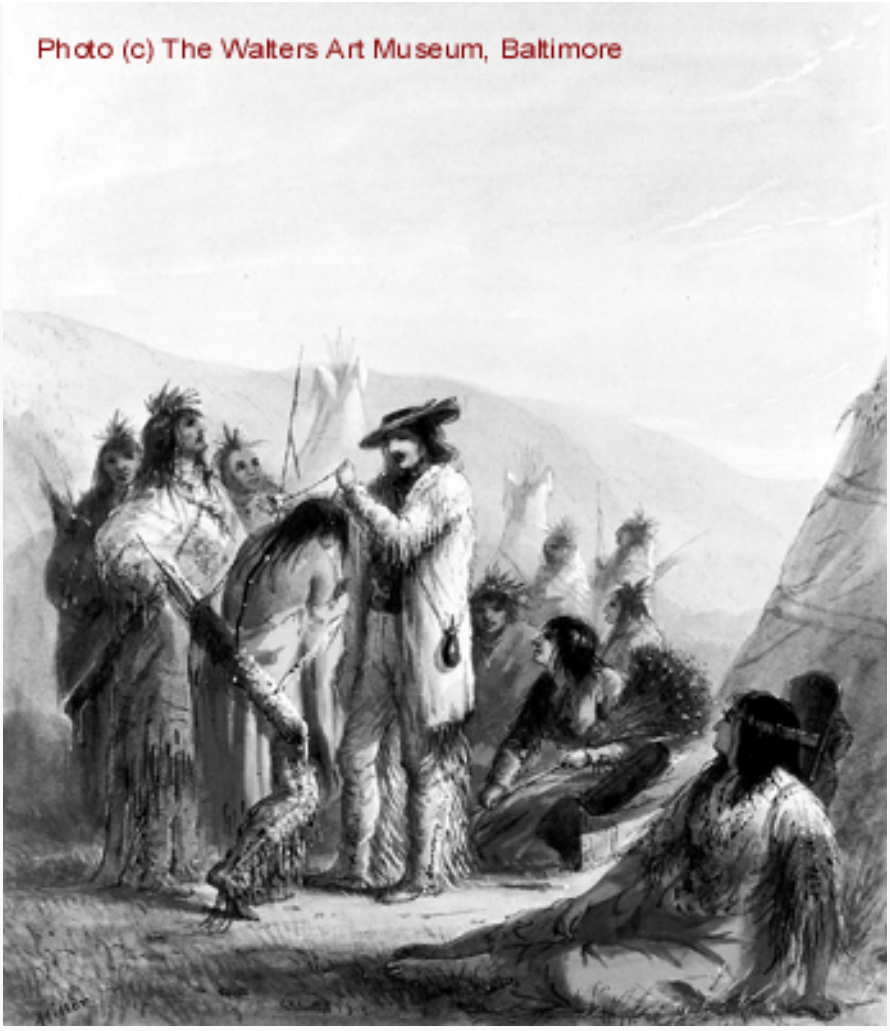
Their Own Words

"The sketch represents the interior of a Lodge and the Snake Indian entertaining a free Trapper at a feast. The latter is engaged in recounting [telling of] some adventure to his host, partly by his limited knowledge of the Indian Language, and by signs.
To the right is seated an Indian woman who watches his every movement with intense interest;--she has no doubt often heard of the extravagant generosity of these reckless fellows, and worships him accordingly."

Source: Alfred Jacob Miller, The West of Alfred Jacob Miller *(1837) (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951): text for plate 143.*

Presents To Indians

Alfred Miller called this drawing "presents to Indians." Long before white trappers and traders arrives, Indian tribes in the West traded among themselves. This trade involved ceremony and diplomacy as well as the exchange of goods. The white trappers discovered that trade had to be conducted in certain ways or the Indians might take great offense. One of these ways involved giving the Indians presents.



Presents to Indians

Photo: The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (AJM, 37.1940.13)

More About This Topic

Indian custom required gifts to be exchanged before trading could take place. Gift-giving actually served several purposes. First, giving the Indian gifts showed friendship. Second, valuable gifts gave their recipients higher standing among their own people. Third, gift-giving was another form of non-spoken communication. The trappers and traders had to practice the trading rituals of the Indians tribes with whom they wished to deal. For most Indians, gift-giving was a right. It had to take place.

Their Own Words

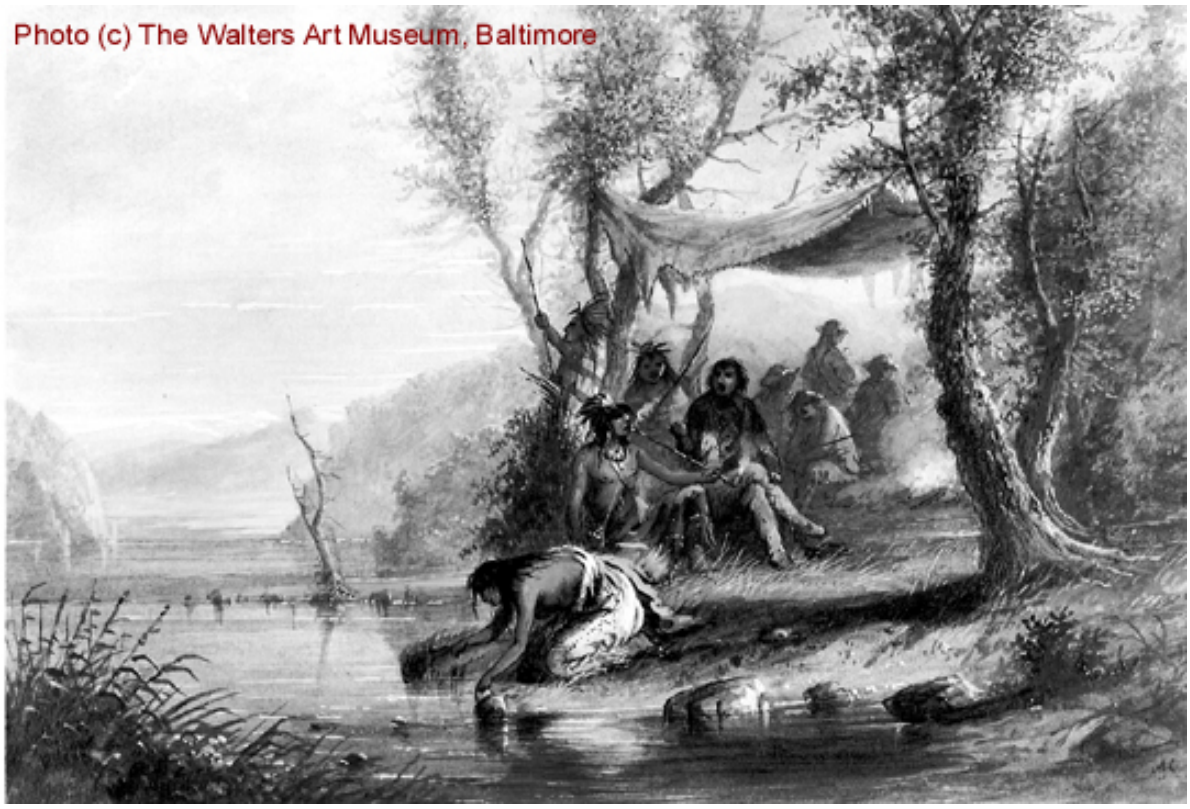
"The scene here presented transpired within the shadow of the Rocky Mountains, where large bodies of Indians had assembled in order to sell their furs, and to be present at the [feast] that takes place previously. The grim Chiefs, Braves, & Warriors were selected from many, either from some meritorious

action, or because they had rendered some services personally useful to some of our band. They attached great importance to the matter, as it gives them a certain status with their people."

Source: Alfred Jacob Miller, The West of Alfred Jacob Miller *(Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956): Plate 13.*

Visit To An Indian Camp

Alfred Miller titled this sketch "visit to an Indian camp." The drawing suggests that Indians were a common feature of the trappers' lives. According to historian Richard White, roughly 2,000 trappers were employed in 1832, the height of the fur trade. Of these, fur companies operating from St. Louis employed nearly half. Another 600 worked for the Canadian Hudson Bay Company. The rest were largely free trappers working out of Taos, New Mexico. Almost all of these trappers lived year after year in or near the Rocky Mountains.



Visiting an Indian Camp

Photo: The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (AJM, 37.1940.152)

More About This Topic

The trappers later told stories about their experiences in the mountains. Most were adventure tales about close calls with wild animals and hostile Indians. They also told stories of visiting--and living in--the camps of friendly Indians. Some trappers, such as Jim Beckwourth, lived for years with a specific tribe. Beckwourth, in fact, became a Crow chief.

Their Own Words

"In the progress of our journey we took especial care to see as much as possible of the Indian and his domestic life. In making such visits our men carried their rifles, as an Indian's respect for you is increased thereby, and indeed our safety depends often upon it. Whenever we found friendly Indians encamped, the inevitable pipe was brought forward and passed around, each taking two or three whiffs,--this not only proclaims a welcome, but is also a bond of amity [friendliness], and also their mode of expressing good will towards you."

Source: Alfred Jacob Miller, The West of Alfred Jacob Miller *(Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951): text for plate 152.*

Trapper's Bride

Alfred Miller called this drawing "The Trapper's Bride." It suggests that many white trappers and traders married Indian women. Evidence suggests that trappers in large did marry Indian wives. In addition, following Indian custom, the mountaineers could actually buy an Indian wife.

Trapper's Bride

Photo: The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (AJM, 37.1940.12)

More About This Topic

Historian William Swagerty estimates that nearly 40 percent of the trappers who married for the first time married Indian wives. Another 10 percent married women who were part white and part Indian. In addition, 20 percent of the trappers working out of Santa Fe and Taos took wives of Spanish/Mexican descent. Swagerty estimated that most unmarried trappers found a wife within a year or two of reaching the mountains. The average trapper's marriage lasted 15 years and resulted in an average of three children.

Their Own Words

"The scene represents a Trapper taking a wife, or purchasing one. The prices vary in accordance with circumstances. He (the trapper) is seated with his friend, to the left of the sketch, his hand extended to his promised wife, supported by her father and accompanied by a chief, who hold the calumet, an article indispensable in all grand ceremonies. The price of acquisition, in this case, was $600 paid for in the

legal tender [money] of this region: [that is] Guns, $100 each, Blankets $40 each, Red Flannel $20 pr. yard, Alcohold $64 pr. Gal., Tobacco, Beads, &c. at corresponding rates."

Source: Alfred Jacob Miller, The West of Alfred Jacob Miller *(Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951): text for plate 12.*

Fort Laramie (Interior)

Alfred Miller called this sketch "Interior of Fort Laramie." The original trading post was built in 1834 where the Laramie River enters the North Platte River, in what is now southern Wyoming. This location was also on an ancient Indian trail that passed from south to north along the front range of the Rocky Mountains. In 1841, the American Fur Company rebuilt the fort using adobe. Miller's drawing shows that diverse people came to trade at the fort.

Inside Fort Laramie

Photo: The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (AJM, 37.1940.150)

More About This Topic

The American Fur Company renamed Fort William to Fort John, but the for was popularly known as Fort Laramie. From its building in 1834, Fort Laramie became the center for trade with such plains Indian tribes as the Oglala Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapahoe. In the 1840s and 1850s, Fort Laramie also became an important stop on what became the Oregon Trail. This fort, similar to Bent's Fort on the Arkansas River, were truly crossroads of many cultures.

Their Own Words

"The view is from the great entrance looking West, and embraces more than half the Court, or area. When this space is filled with Indians and Traders as it is at slated periods, the scene is lively and interesting. They gather here from all quarters. From the Gila [River] at the South, the Red River at the North, and the Columbia River West, each has its quota and representatives."

Source: Alfred Jacob Miller, The West of Alfred Jacob Miller *(Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951): text for plate 150.*

Threatened Attack

Alfred Miller called this drawing "caravan taking to water." His primary point was that fur trappers and traders tried as far as possible to avoid potential problems with Indians. The memoirs and other writings of mountain men are full of stories that support Miller's view. The mountain men were constantly on the alert for signs of Indians' presence in an area they were trapping or through which they were traveling. They tried avoid contact, especially when their numbers were small in relation to the estimated number of Indians.

Threatened Attack

Photo: The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (AJM, 37.1940.170)

More About This Topic

For their part, Indians also often avoided the fur trappers and traders when their numbers were small in comparison to a group of trappers. That was so, of course, unless the Indians sought to trade with the trappers and traders. The fur traders and trappers viewed the Indians as a constant potential menace. In that the mountain men were seen by the Indians as interlopers on their hunting grounds, there was probably good reason for these concerns.

Their Own Words

"The Trappers are here being pursued by Indians, or as they style it--'the varmints are on their tracks.' To baffle them and throw them out, they use all manner of stratagems,--forced marches, at night, lighting no camp fires, and living on dried meat . . . and lastly entering streams or rivers and fording them up or down as the [demands] of the case might require,--for when they are transporting valuable packages of goods, their instructions are to avoid all collisions with the savages, for many reasons,--one of the most prominent being that they must lose either by victory or defeat."

Source: Alfred Jacob Miller, The West of Alfred Jacob Miller *(Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951): text for plate 170.*

Threatening To Attack Fur Boats

Alfred Miller called this sketch "Threatened Attack--approach of a large body of Indians." The drawing suggests that some tribes were not afraid of a large party of trappers and traders. Indian tribes' attitudes toward the trappers and traders ranged from constantly hostile (Blackfeet and Pawnee) to the frequently friendly (Crow and Cheyenne). However, a tribe's attitude toward trappers and traders depended upon what advantages it might gain by friendly relations with them. Trade with the whites, for example, might be an advantage for a tribe that was smaller and relatively powerless in comparison with a larger and stronger tribe. Indian-white relations often depended upon how various Indian tribes got along with one another.

Attack Fur Boats

Photo: The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (AJM, 37.1940.76)

More About This Topic

Individual Indians from a friendly tribe could still pose dangers for the mountain men. Even friendly Indians stole their horses. Horses were among the Indians' most valuable of possessions; indeed, they were essential for these Indians' survival. They developed horse-stealing into a fine art. The trappers' and traders' horses were often viewed as easy targets for the Indians. These Indians also valued trappers' other equipment (traps and knives) and the furs they had trapped. The trappers' memoirs and tales are full of stories in which Indians found and stole caches of furs or equipment left in a camp unattended.

Their Own Words

"On this eventful morning our caravan, pursuing as usual the even tenor of its way, we descried one of our hunters returning to the camp at full gallop. His speech was to the purpose, 'Injins all about--thar will be some raising of h'ar [hair],--as sure as shootin.' On his heels followed others confirming this. At this juncture, it would have been a good study . . . to watch the [faces] of the different men. The staid indifference of the old trappers ready for any emergency, the greenhorns . . . pale about the gills and quite chopfallen [worried and perhaps ashamed]. No boasting now!"

Source: Alfred Jacob Miller, The West of Alfred Jacob Miller *(Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951): text for plate 76.*

Trappers' Rendezvous

A rendezvous was a trading fair that usually lasted several days. It is a French word for an appointment or meeting place. Missouri trader Captain William Ashley held the first trappers' rendezvous in 1825. Traders like Ashley brought trade goods--rifles, powder, traps, knives, tools, cloth, and beads--from St. Louis to the Rocky Mountains. The traders exchanged these items for the trappers' and Indians' beaver pelts. Each year the site of the rendezvous was usually in the center of trapping country. A rendezvous was held every summer between 1825 and 1840.

Breaking Camp At Sunrise

Alfred Miller titled this drawing "Breaking up Camp at sunrise." The wagons in this drawing are hauling goods for a rendezvous across the plains. When weather was good, the supply trains began each day very early. Miller described the start of the day as follows: "At four o'clock in the morning, it is the duty of the last man on guard to loosen the horses from their pickets, in order to range and feed. At daylight, everybody is up;--our [cooks] are busy with preparations for breakfast;--tents and lodges are collapsed, suddenly thrown down, wrapped up, and bundled into the wagons."

Source: The West of Alfred Jacob Miller, text for Plate 142.

Breaking Camp at Sunrise

Photo: The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (AJM, 37.1940.142)

More About This Topic

Before 1832, the supply trains most often consisted of pack animals. After that date, trains of two-wheel carts and wagons hauled trade items to the yearly rendezvous. In either case the traders traveled what they called the central route between Missouri and the Rocky Mountains. This route followed the course of the Platte River closely. Summer was the best time of the year to cross the plains, so supply trains usually began their trip in April or May. Early spring starts usually ensured that grass for the animals and water for all was available on the plains.

Their Own Words

"[At the start of the day] one of the strongest contrasts presents itself, and illustrates in a striking manner the difference between the white and red man. While all is activity and bustle with the Anglo-Saxon as if he feared the Rocky Mountains would not wait for him, the Indian lingers to the last moment around the camp fire. . . ."

Source: Alfred Jacob Miller, The West of Alfred Jacob Miller *(1837) (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951): text for plate 142.*

Caravan On The Move

Alfred Miller called this drawing "Caravan en route [on the way]." Supply trains were organized like an army. One person, usually the main trader, was in charge of the entire train. His word was law. As Miller described it: "The government of a band of this kind is somewhat [harsh], being composed of a [diverse] group of people from all sections, free and company trappers, traders, half-breeds, and Indians. Our leader was admirably [suited] for it, as he understood well the management of unruly spirits."

Source: The West of Alfred Jacob Miller, text for Plate 51.

Caravan on the Move

Photo: The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (37.1940.51)

More About This Topic

The supply trains faced all kinds of problems along the way. For example, the plains were almost treeless, except along rivers and streams. The plains' climate in summertime is very dry. As a result, wagon wheels shrank and sometimes broke. It was impossible to replace broken wheel spokes with the wood that could be found on the plains. Wagon trains had to take along a supply of hard wood for making spokes.

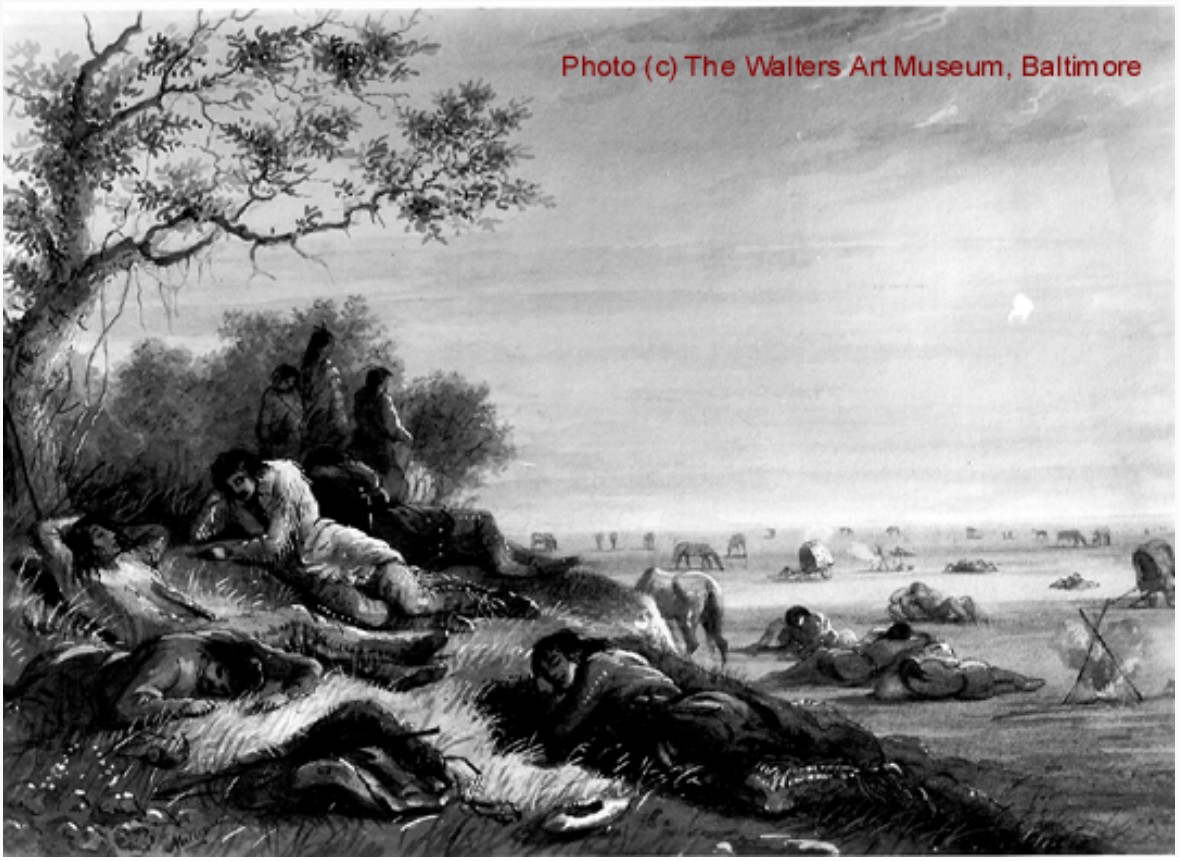
Their Own Words

"In the first days our journey was straight west. The first day we marched over the broad Santa Fe road, beaten out by the caravans. Then leaving it to our left we took a narrow wagon road, established by former journeys to the Rocky Mountains, but often so indistinctly traced, that our leader at time lost it, and simply followed the general direction. Our way led through prairie with many undulating hills of good soil . . . On the prairie itself there is no wood."

Source: Frederick A. Wislizenus. A Journey to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1839. *(Glorietta, NM: The Rio Grande Press, 1969): 31.*

Noon Day Rest

Alfred Miller called this drawing "Noon-day Rest." Rendezvous supply trains usually began to travel each day at sunrise. The trains usually stopped around noon so the workers could rest and prepare a meal. The main reason for these rest periods was to let the animals that carried or pulled the goods rest. Each noon-day stop also avoided traveling during the hottest part of the day. The mid-day stops most often lasted several hours. As a result, travel to the rendezvous was slow. Most supply trains averaged only 10 to 15 miles per day.



Noon Day Rest

Photo: The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (AJM, 37.1940.139)

More About This Topic

Crossing the plains with horses, mules, wagons and carts took a great deal of patience. The pace of travel was only as rapid as good care of the animals would allow. The pack animals needed to rest, to graze, and to water. Otherwise, the animals would not last through the entire journey. If the animals were lost, all was lost.

Their Own Words

"Every day at 12 o'clock the caravan halts, the horses are permitted to rest and feed, men receive their dinner, and then take a Siesta. . . . A guard is stationed of course, on the bluffs to prevent a surprise, and also to look after the horses, for,--Some must watch while others sleep,
Thus runs the world away."

Source: Alfred Jacob Miller, The West of Alfred Jacob Miller *(Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956): Plate 139.*

Picketing The Horses

Alfred Miller called this sketch "Picketing Horses." It shows how important the pack animals were to the train. After the commander of the supply train found a good camping place for the night, the most important activity was caring for the horses and mules. The second in command usually inspected the draft animals to see if they had sores on their backs. These sores were sometimes caused by packs rubbing on their backs all day. They were then watered and put out to graze. Only after these chores were completed did the people begin to prepare their own meals.

Picketing Horses

Photo: The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (AJM, 37.1940.178)

More About This Topic

Sometimes the supply train would travel until nearly sunset. At other times, the train would stop sooner if the commander found a good place to make camp. A good camping place usually had good water, plenty of grass, and an adequate supply of wood. On the plains, these places were usually along rivers or streams. Whatever the time the train stopped for the night, there was a lot of work to do. In addition to caring for the animals, the workers had to gather firewood, carry water for themselves, and begin to prepare the evening meal.

Their Own Words

"It is near sunset and the whole camp is very busy, the horses and mules have been driven in, and each man runs towards them as they come, secures his own horse, catches him by the lariat (a rope trailing on the ground from his neck), and leads him to a good bed of grass, where a picket is driven, and here he is secured for the night, the lariat permitting him to graze to the extent of a circle 25 feet in diameter, and all this is eaten down pretty close by morning."

Source: Alfred Jacob Miller, The West of Alfred Jacob Miller *(Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951): text for plate 178.*

Dangers Along The Trail

Alfred Miller called this drawing "Pawnee Indians watching the caravan." Miller said that "of all the Indian tribes I think the Pawnees gave us the most trouble." On the plains, the Pawnee were regarded as especially hostile and dangerous to travelers. Even so, the trappers regarded Indians of most plains tribes with caution and suspicion. These Indians usually viewed the supply train's stock of animal as especially prized targets for theft.

Danger Along the Trail

Photo: The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (AJM, 37.1940.44)

More About This Topic

In traveling to rendezvous, the traders and trappers encountered many different Indian tribes. Some of these tribes were openly hostile to the traders and trappers most of the time. On the plains, one of these tribes was the Pawnee. Even when the traders and trappers encountered friendly tribes, they did not trust them very far. They were constantly on alert to protect their goods and animals from these Indians.

Their Own Words

"Of all the Indian tribes I think the Pawnees gave us the most trouble, and were (of all) to be most zealously guarded against. We knew that the Blackfeet were our deadly enemies, forewarned here was to be forearmed. Now the Pawnees pretended amity [friendship] , and were a species of 'confidence Men'. . . Whether they were within the Camp or in our vicinity it was [important] to put a double guard over the horses. Then when we were [on the move] we were continually under their [watchful eyes], and we knew it."

Source: Alfred Jacob Miller, The West of Alfred Jacob Miller *(Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951): text for plate 44.*

The Lost “Green Horn”

Alfred Miller called this drawing "The Lost 'Green-Horn." Trappers applied the term "greenhorn" to people new to the trade of trapping. Greenhorns lacked experience in terms of the environment, of wild animals, and of Indians. Their lack of experience and knowledge often put these people at great risk.

The Lost "Green Horn"

Photo: The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (AJM, 37.1940.141)

More About This Topic

The greenhorns were often assigned to the easiest tasks. At first, the greenhorns served as cooks and camp-keepers, attended the animals, and were assigned night watch over the camps. If they accomplished these tasks well, they might then be assigned more skillful tasks. But greenhorns had to prove themselves before they were given additional responsibilities.

Their Own Words

"On reaching the Buffalo District, one of our young men began to be ambitious, and although it was his first journey, boasted continually of what he would do in hunting Buffalo if permitted. This was John (our cook), he was an Englishman . . . Our Captain, when any one boasted, put them to the test, so a day was given to John and he started off early alone [to hunt buffalo]. [After being gone two days] one of the [search] parties brought in the wanderer--crest-fallen and nearly starved;--he was met with a storm of ridicule and roasted on every side by the Trappers."

Source: Alfred Jacob Miller, The West of Alfred Jacob Miller *(Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951): text for plate 150.*

The Trappers' Rendezvous

Alfred Miller called this drawing "Rendezvous." It shows a scene at the rendezvous of 1837, which Miller attended. As Miller described the scene: "At certain specified times during the year, the American Fur Company appoint a 'Rendezvous' at particular localities (selecting the most available spots) for the purpose of trading with Indians and Trappers, and here they congregate from all quarters. The first day is devoted to 'High Jinks" . . . in which feasting, drinking, and gambling form prominent parts."

Source: The West of Alfred Jacob Miller, text for Plate 110.

Trappers' Rendezvous

Photo: The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (AJM, 37.1940.159)

More About This Topic

After months of traveling, the supply train finally arrived at the place for the rendezvous. These places were usually selected a year in advance, so everyone would know where to go. The ideal location for a rendezvous was a wide mountain valley. The location needed good grass and water for the animals, wood for fuel, and ample game for food. However, no single location could support all the trappers, traders, Indians, and their animals that came together for these trade fairs. The rendezvous had many campsites clustered around a central market place. These small camps were moved often as water and grass were exhausted.

Their Own Words

"Our next objective point was the upper Green River valley . . . [where] we found traces of whites and Indians, that had journeyed ahead of us through this region a short time before, probably to the rendezvous, which takes place yearly about this time in the neighborhood of the Green River. As our destination was the same, though our leader did not know precisely what place had been chosen for it this year, some of our men were sent out for information. . . . The journey which we had made from the border of Missouri, according to our rough estimates, was near 1,200 miles."

Source: Frederick A. Wislizenus. A Journey to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1839*. (Glorietta, NM: The Rio Grande Press, 1969): 83, 84, 86.*

Scene At Rendezvous

Alfred Jacob Miller titled the drawing (to the right) "Scene at 'Rendezvous.'" He described the scene as follows: "A large body of Indians, Traders, and Trappers are here congregated, and the view seen from a bluff is pleasing and animated. In the middle distance a race is being run . . . Ball playing . . . and other games are largely indulged in, and the Company make it a point to encourage the Indians in these sports to divert their minds from mischief. . . ."

Source: The West of Alfred Jacob Miller, text for Plate 175.

Scene at Rendezvous

Photo: The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (AJM, 37.1940.175)

More About This Topic

The rendezvous served two purposes: celebration and business. For the trappers, the former was very important. For the traders, the latter was definitely most important. For their furs, the hired or company trappers received supplies for the following trapping season, perhaps some luxuries such as tobacco and alcohol. The trappers were generally paid poorly for their labors and the risks they ran. Prices for the goods brought from St. Louis were high compared to the prices of beaver pelts.

Their Own Words

"A good hunter can take an average of 120 [beaver] skins in a year . . . worth in Boston about $1,000. [The trappers] can be hired for about $400 payable in goods at an average of 600 per [cent] profit."

Source: Nathaniel Wyeth, quoted in David Wishart, The Fur Trade of the American West, 1807-1840 *(Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979): 197-198.*