Teacher Resource Information:
The Mountain Man and Fur Trade Industry

Mountain men and the fur trade industry were key components of U.S. history. European fur ventures had already been established in the late 17th century in Canada and the northwest territories of the U.S. The American fur trade began in the 1500's by colonists. John Jacob Astor was one of the first well-known names to be identified with the fur trade in America. Astor started the Pacific Fur Company located at the mouth of the Columbia River. Astor built fort Astoria in 1810, which was short lived due to the War of 1812. Manual Lisa established the Missouri Fur Company, which ran from 1807-1820. Astor emerged again on the fur trade scene when he established the western department of the American Fur Company in St. Louis in 1822. By this time the British fur companies had gained control of the Colombia River fur trade. In 1822 William Henry Ashley advertised: "To enterprising young men. One hundred young men to ascend the Missouri River to its source, there to be employed for one, two or three years." This began the Rocky Mountain Fur Company.

Within the realm of the American fur trade enterprises, there were basically two areas of trapping and trading: the Upper Missouri and the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. However, there were multiple fur companies that contributed to the fur trade in multiple areas of the country. The Upper Missouri basically relied on Native Americans to trade buffalo robes at the forts, where they were later taken to St. Louis. The Upper Missouri fur trade did trap beaver as well as trade for buffalo robes.

The Rocky Mountain Fur Company trappers focused on beaver pelts. Beaver was in high demand in the eastern U.S. and in Europe because of the fashionable beaver hats and other women's fashions. Mountain men would trap beaver in the wilderness, gather once a year where the pelts were sold at the rendezvous, and then the pelts would be hauled back to the city to be sold. This allowed the mountain men to remain out in the wilderness for longer periods of time without having to travel to the trading posts. Many of the mountain men we hear about worked for the Rocky Mountain Fur Company.

The image of the lone mountain man, living solitary in the wilderness may have been correct for some, but many mountain men trapped in groups. This afforded the mountain men protection against raids by Native Americans and other dangers. The lifestyle of the mountain man was full of danger and adventure. Mountain men would come in contact with animals, such as grizzly bears, or occasionally Native American raiders. Other dangers included starvation, dehydration, dysentery, burning heat, and freezing cold.

Approximately 1,000 trappers roamed the Rocky Mountains during the height of the fur trade between 1820-1830. Some mountain men were salaried and supplied by the fur companies. In return, the pelts belonged to the fur companies. Others may be outfitted by a fur company in exchange for a share of their pelts. Finally, there were "free trappers." These trappers did not have to answer to any fur company.

Trapping was done mostly in spring and fall, when the winter beaver pelts were prime. In this condition the pelt was more valuable and made better felt. The pelts were heavier, thus fetching a higher price (beaver pelts were sold by the pound).
Mountain Men did have access to maps, however, there were many sections of the country that had not been explored in depth at the time of the mountain man. The Mountain men were instrumental in exploring and mapping the western regions. These maps became essential as people began moving west.

The equipment of the mountain man was sparse and well used. Osbourne Russell provides an apt description of the typical mountain man:

"A Trappers equipment in such cases is generally one Animal upon which is placed...a riding Saddle and bridle a sack containing six Beaver traps a blanket with an extra pair of Moccasins his powder horn and bullet pouch with a belt to which is attached a butcher Knife a small wooden box containing bait for Beaver a Tobacco sack with a pipe and implements for making fire with sometimes a hatchet fastened to the Pommel of his saddle his personal dress is a flannel or cotton shirt (if he is fortunate to obtain one, if not Antelope skin answers the purpose of over and under shirt) a pair of leather breeches with Blanket or smoked Buffalo skin, leggings, a coat made of Blanket or Buffalo robe a hat or Cap of wool, Buffalo or Otter skin his hose are pieces of Blanket lapped round his feet which are covered with a pair of Moccasins made of Dressed Deer Elk or Buffalo skins with his long hair falling loosely over his shoulders complete the uniform."

The mountain men most well known today, such as are: Jim Bridger, Peter Skene Ogden, Etienne Provost, Kit Carson, James Beckwourth, Joe Meek, Hugh Glass, and Jedediah Smith. Many place names around the West, and in Utah, were named after the fur trade industry and individual mountain men. Cache Valley, Ogden, and Provo are all such names.

By 1834, the demand for beaver had dropped dramatically and many of the fur companies collapsed. The silk hat was the new fashion and beaver was not in demand. In the early 1830's beaver pelts sold for $6 per pound in Philadelphia. In 1843 the price had dropped to less than $3 per pound. It is interesting to note, however, the biggest pullout of beaver was in the 1860's. The fur companies were going strong, they had taken over and pushed out all free trappers.

Mountain men had high adventure, often told in the form of tall tales. In addition to these legendary tales, mountain men were not only turning a profit from the fur trade industry, but they became guides, government officials, and explorers after the fur trade industry declined. Mountain men often used their knowledge of the West to guide emigrants across the many overland trails west. Many mountain men joined the military and established forts along the Oregon Trail, such as Fort Bridger, established by Jim Bridger.

Sources:

- American West Heritage Center Research Files
- http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/HNS/Mtmen/furtrade.html

Mountain Man Information:

- http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/HNS/Mtmen/furtrade.html
- http://www.xmission.com/~drudy/amm.html
- http://www.thefurtrapper.com/rendezvous.htm
- http://www.isu.edu/~trinmich/Discoverers.html