



Idaho Fur Trappers

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Who were the Idaho Fur Trappers?

Idaho's **Fur Trappers** were a group of men who came west to trap beavers to send back to the people living in the eastern United States. Many of the fur trappers were people who did not fit in with city life in the east. Some of the fur trappers were young men looking to 'make it big' while others were old men looking to get away from the busy cities and return to nature. A few were even outlaws looking to hide from the law on the edges of the world. Fur trapping was always part of the **American Frontier** because the population of fur animals dwindled quickly after the frontier was tamed. Most men who came west as fur trappers did not have wives. Rarely the trappers would take a Native woman to marry as their wives, but this was not common.



Late 1800s fur trader

Reflection Question: Why do you think that the fur traders had to keep coming further west?

When did the Fur Trappers live?

The fur trapping has been part of life in America since before the **American Revolution**. French fur trappers had been working in the North East since before the first British colonies were founded. However, the Fur Trappers did not come to Idaho in large numbers until after the Lewis and Clark expedition. The expedition ended in 1806 but it took some time for the fur Trappers to come west. Lewis and Clark, however, paved the path west for the fur trappers to follow. The fur trade kicked off after the **War of 1812**. The Rocky Mountain Fur Trading Company was founded in 1822 and controlled much of the fur trade until 1834 when the company went bankrupt. The fur trade continued well into the 1840s and 1850s. However, the declining beaver population meant that by 1845 large scale trapping was over.



William Clark and Merriweather Lewis

Reflection Question: Why did it take so long for the fur trappers to come to the Rocky Mountains?

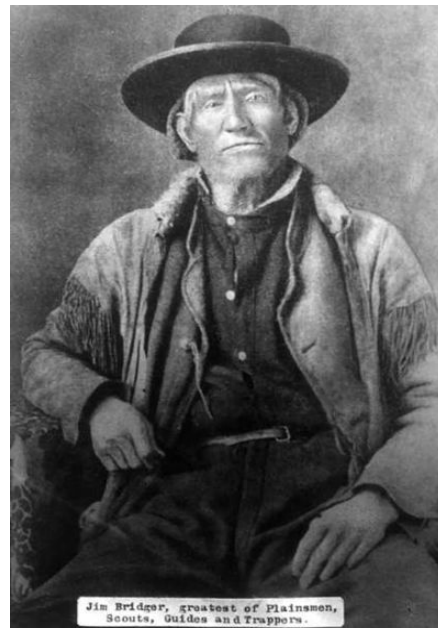
Where did the Fur Trappers live?

The Idaho fur trappers lived all over the state of Idaho. However, they were mainly centered in the Columbia drainage basin. This means that there were fur trappers living all over the state of Idaho with the exception of far southeastern Idaho. Many of the trappers were concentrated in the panhandle of the state. They preferred to live in northern Idaho because there was a greater concentration of fur animals that lived there.



What did they wear?

They did not dress like the people living in the city and they did not really dress like the Native Americans. They had a style of dress that was a style all their own. Many of the fur trappers dressed in **buckskins** and furs. However, they did not usually start trapping dressed like that. Many fur trappers came as they were with the clothes that they used for their past jobs. As things wore out the trappers would replace them with what they could find. It was also common for the trappers to trade with the local Native Americans for many things including clothes. By the time a fur trapper was ready to retire he could have gathered quite the assortment of clothing. Every fur trapper had their own style and dressed a little bit differently. Some adopted the dress of the local Native Americans while others simply wore whatever they had to wear.



Jim Bridger, greatest of Plainsmen,
Scouts, Guides and Trappers.

Hats

A hat was something that every good fur trapper had. These were as varied as the fur trapper's clothes. Many trappers wore fur hats made from the local fur animals that they hunted. Some of the trappers even bought back the beaver felt hats that were made from the beaver pelts they traded. Wool was another common material that was used for hats, but wool also had to be shipped all the way from the East. This meant that wool was often too expensive for most mountain men.

One of many styles of hat common to the fur trappers.



What did they have in their pockets?

While it may seem silly to us today, the fur trappers did not have pockets. This was because pockets are hard to sew on to clothes without a sewing machine. Instead, the fur trappers carried around a large bag that was usually made of leather. This bag was called a **possibles bag**. This bag was similar in size and shape to a modern purse. However, I would not want to tell a fur trapper that he was carrying a purse! The style of possibles bags varied greatly, but they all contained one large pocket. Some fancy ones even had pouches for storing more things and were elaborately decorated.



So what did they carry in their possibles bag?

They carried everything that they might need to do their job. They would carry things to build a fire, as well as all of the tools that they needed to maintain their rifles and traps. They would also carry their food for the day and a container for carrying water. Often they would carry a **powder horn** or a **powder flask** on the outside of their possibles bag to carry the black powder for their rifle. Most fur trappers also carried anything valuable with them in the possibles bag so that they did not leave it at camp.



Powderhorn.

Reflection Question: What valuable things would you keep in your possibles bag if you were a fur trapper?

What tools did they use?

Traps

Almost all of the fur trappers used the same kind of traps to catch their beavers. They were all based on a jaw style trap. This also happens to be the same kind of animal trap that most people think of. These traps worked by closing around the beaver's foot and holding it under water until the beaver drowned. These traps also caught a number of unintended animals.



Long Guns

Every trapper also carried a **flintlock** or **cap lock** rifle or a musket both of which shot lead **round balls**. The difference between the two are few, but important. A musket has a smooth barrel that directs the ball toward a target. While a rifle has groves in its barrel that twist the ball as it leaves the gun. The advantage of the rifle was that it could be shot at a longer range than the musket. However, the musket had the advantage of being able to fire small pellets called **shot**. This allowed the musket to be used to hunt both large animals like deer and elk and small animals like rabbits and squirrels.



Top: Cap Lock Rifle, Bottom: Flint Lock Rifle

Pistols

Nearly every trapper also carried a pistol of some kind. These were almost always single shot and normally used the same round balls as their rifle. The pistol was used as a backup for the rifle and was carried on a belt around the fur trapper's waist. Revolving pistols came into existence toward the end of the Rocky Mountain fur trade era. However, they were expensive and prone to breaking so it is unlikely that many fur trappers used them.



Tomahawks

The **tomahawk** was one of the most important tools in a fur trapper's **accompaniments** or possessions. It served a double purpose as a camp tool, and a last ditch weapon. The first settlers who came to the new world brought tomahawks with them, but they found that the people living here also had tomahawks of their own.



What did their houses look like?

Most fur trappers did not live in a house. Instead, they lived in canvas shelters. These shelters came in a variety of forms. They can be grouped into two different categories. The first category of shelters resemble a **Tipi**. These are free standing shelters that provided good year-round protection from the environment. This shelter was borrowed from the Native Americans of the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains.

The second type of shelter is called a **lean-to**. It is simply a piece of canvas that makes a roof over a small area. These were not well suited for the winter. Many trappers who used this style of shelter moved into warmer regions during the cold months.



Review Questions

How do you think the Native Americans might have viewed the fur trappers? Do you think it was positively or negatively?

If you were a fur trapper what kind of things might you carry in your possibles bag and why?

What do you think the fur trappers could have done differently to prevent the near extinction of the beaver population in the Rocky Mountains?

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Common Core State Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.1

Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.4

Determine the meaning of general academic and domain-specific words or phrases in a text relevant to a grade 4 topic or subject area

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.7

Interpret information presented visually, orally, or quantitatively (e.g., in charts, graphs, diagrams, time lines, animations, or interactive elements on Web pages) and explain how the information contributes to an understanding of the text in which it appears.

Idaho Content Standards

Common Core does not address 4th-grade history.

4.SS.1.1.1 Describe ways that cultural groups influenced and impacted each other.

4.SS.1.2.1 Identify the major groups and significant individuals and their motives in the western expansion and settlement in Idaho

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