

“Mountain Men” and the Fur Trade

“Mountain Men” was the name given to trappers who were lured west by the profits of the fur trade. They moved into Oregon Country, the huge, barely charted area beyond the Rockies, where the forests and mountains were home to beaver and other fur-bearing animals. These men opened the way for later settlers. Today, this area includes the states of Oregon, Washington, Idaho, parts of the states of Wyoming and Montana, and southwestern Canada.

The fur trade was an important industry in the first 200 years of European settlement in North America. The French and their Indian allies had dominated the trade in the old Northwest Territory. The trade attracted adventurous frontiersmen who trapped beaver and traded with the Native Americans.

At first, the British had a monopoly on the fur trade in Oregon Country, but by the 1820s, U.S. companies were competing for the enormous profits to be made from the fur trade. Originally the British and the Americans set up trading posts where Native Americans and a few non-Native American trappers would come to sell or barter their furs. Then two U.S. businessmen hit upon the idea of an annual rendezvous, or fair, where Native Americans and trappers could bring their furs and sell them to traders for guns, knives, whiskey, cloth, and similar trade goods.

The rendezvous took place at a designated site in Wyoming. From the 1820s until the late 1830s, beaver was the most important trade commodity. Beaver hats were in style in the East and in Europe. By the late 1830s, however, styles had changed and the beaver had all but disappeared due to overtrapping. The life of the mountain man was ending.

But by then the mountain men had gained a reputation as wild and colorful characters. To Easterners, they were romantic figures, dressed in buckskin, with long hair, roaming the forests at will and answering to no man. But the life of mountain men was hard. They lived off the land, finding food where they could—animals, plants, nuts. In the spring, summer, and fall, they hunted and trapped on their own, but they often wintered in Native American villages. If a trapper fell and broke a leg, was mauled by a bear, or slipped and fell into a river, he could die. No one would know because he was alone in the forests.

Land Routes: Santa Fe Trail and Oregon Trail

Between 1840 and 1860, more than 250,000 people went west. Most settlers went to the Oregon Territory and California. The most famous route was the Oregon Trail, which began in Independence, Missouri, and crossed 2,000 miles of plains, mountains, and rivers. In southern Idaho, the trail diverged. Those wanting to go to California followed the California Trail through northern Nevada into California's Sacramento Valley. The ruts cut by thousands of wagon wheels can still be seen along parts of the Oregon Trail. **50**

The even older Santa Fe Trail went from Independence, Missouri, to the former Spanish capital of Santa Fe. It was first used in 1821 and continued as a major trade route until 1880, when a railroad line was opened. The trail was relatively short—780 miles—on open plains across Kansas and up the Arkansas River or across the desert. The Santa Fe Trail, unlike the Oregon Trail, was basically a trade route.