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FUR TRADE AND TRADERS

IN COLORADO

AND

NORTH WEST PACIFIC STATES

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A great deal has been contributed by the fur trade to the colorful history of Colorado, comparatively little has been written into the records, mainly because the early trappers and traders in that section, were for the most part, illiterate or so busily engaged in their pursuits they had little time to put their thoughts on paper or the desire to record events as they transpired. Many of the happenings which today create wonder and consternation, were to them, just a part of the day's work and little thought or attention was given to their possible historical value in the days to follow.

One of the earliest records of fur trading operations in the territory which is now Colorado, dates back to 1719 when Valverde, then governor of New Spain, now New Mexico, in order to investigate the truth of rumors he had heard of the presence of French traders on the Platte river and other streams in the vicinity of its source, dispatched a detachment of soldiers under Captain Villasur, with instructions that, if found, the Frenchmen were to be evicted from that territory, which was then under the jurisdiction of Spain and subject to its control. The Spaniards came across a little party of French traders, but upon proceeding to obey their orders, found that the Frenchmen were so firmly intrenched in the esteem of the Indians, that the dusky warriors willing turned, and helped the Frenchmen almost annihilate the little Spanish army. This unlooked for behavior greatly dimmed the Spanish ardor for such expeditions, and from then on, fur traders were left very

much to themselves and continued their pursuits undisturbed.

In June 1799, Maisonneure and Penelope, French fur traders, accompanied by ten French Canadians engaged, six Indian guides and twenty well burdened pack mules reached the mouth of the Platte river. Following the course of the main river until the confluence was reached, they chose the south fork of the river and on July 20th arrived at the site of the present city of Denver. After a period of trading and trapping, they returned to St. Louis with a goodly supply of furs as the reward for their arduous labors.

Much of the same territory was explored by James Purcell or (Pursley), a Kentuckian who led a mounted contingent of Paducca and Kiowa Indians, in the year 1804-5. After trading with the Indians in that section, they ventured into the virgin wilderness of the Rocky mountains in search of further supplies. The return journey, was made through another section of the country a good deal further north and cannot rightly be construed as having any bearing on the Colorado fur trade.

By 1810 there was a considerable increase in the population in this territory as the glowing descriptions of the country surrounding the Arkansas and Red rivers, which constituted the southern boundaries of the new Louisiana purchase, emphasized by Lieutenant Zebulon Montgomery Pike in his report to President Jefferson by whom he had been dispatched on a voyage of exploration, had started a stream of fur traders and others to the southwestern country. As an extra inducement for immigration to this section was the prospect of a lively trade with the prosperous towns of New Spain and, of a greater importance to the fur traders, the fast growing possibilities of Santa Fe becoming a market center for the

fur business.

The next fur trader of prominence to enter the territory was Ezekiel Williams of St. Louis, who with a party of nineteen men were doing a large trapping and trading business in 1811. The following spring some of the party sought beaver in the South Park country while another group went farther west and are lost from any further record. Williams, however, remained in the territory of the upper Arkansas until he was taken captive by the Araphee tribe who kept him captive during the winter of 1812-13, along with his companions. Early in the year, he managed to escape and after suffering a series of untold hardships made his way back to St. Louis. Before being taken captive, however, he had succeeded in hiding his stock of furs and in the following spring after his return to St. Louis, joined a party headed by Joseph Philibert and returned with them to the same territory. He was fortunate enough to find his furs intact, but his former companions had been cruelly slaughtered. He made his way back again to St. Louis with his load and became prominently identified with the growth of that market.

Meanwhile Philibert joined A. P. Choteau and Julius de Munn who were making a persistent effort to obtain permission from the Spanish officials to trap, south and west of the Arkansas river. In this, however, they were as persistently refused and their final effort was rewarded by being escorted out of New Mexico by some two hundred Spanish soldiers and a strong warning to keep out of that territory hereafter. In defiance of the threats, they commenced operations in the forbidden territory and eventually found themselves taken to Santa Fe and imprisoned and all their furs confiscated. It is said, however, that they were reimbursed for this outrage, some thirty years later.

But by 1821, Spanish domination had gone into the discard and Mexico was welcoming others to the territory, in strong contrast to the monopolistic and exclusive system of old Spain. Taos had become a base for trapping operations and Santa Fe, was beginning to blossom as an important fur trading center for that region. From now on the story of Colorado begins to bristle with the names of men whose venturesome and heroic deeds have made history so tense and fascinating to those who have the liking and opportunity for its study. The names of Kit Carson, Bent Bros., Ceran St. Vrain, Jim Bridger, Jim Baker, George Simpson, Fitzpatrick, Sublettes, Roubidoux, the Glenn-Fowler Company and many others are emblazoned across the pages of Colorado history of fur and fur traders. In 1824, William Beeknell, "the father of the Santa Fe trail" conducted fur trading operations on the western slope of the Rockies and a little later Antoine Robidoux built Fort Robidoux at the mouth of the Uncampahgre river.

Up to this time, there had been no systemized methods of fur trading. There had been no attempt at any kind of organization, all efforts being purely individual. But in 1830, came the formation of the Rocky Mountain Fur Co., with General Ashley and several former members of the now defunct Missouri Fur Co., as incorporators and leasing officials. Most of the fur trade north of the Colorado territory was under the sway of the dominating American Fur Co., with a desultory business in the Missouri river region by the Missouri Fur Co., or as it was then known, the St. Louis Missouri Fur Co.

A brave attempt was made to conform to the territory implied by its name and confine its operations to the region of the Rockies in Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, Idaho and Montana, but it soon became evident that there

was little hope for a long existence against the powerful machination of the American Fur Co., whose ruthless methods knew no bounds and a short career of four years was ended by its sale to the larger company, The American Fur Co. While in existence, it instituted many innovations which proved of great value to the trade in general. One of these was the "midsummer rendezvous" which might be said to be the forerunner of the present conventions of the various trades and associations. During the midsummer at a specially appointed spot, traders and trappers would meet and often times the owners of the trading companies or their managers would make the trip and be there with fresh supplies for trade and barter. There would be new and enticing trinkets to catch the eye of the Indian trapper who was on his own as well as more substantial and satisfying supplies for the independent trader and trapper. These get-together meetings usually resulted in a rich harvest for the fur companies who reciprocated by staging a three to four day celebration with races and contests of skill, plenty to eat and drink and a general cementing of friendship all around. As could be expected, some of these periods of jollification and good fellowship resulted much in indiscriminate drinking and carousing that sometimes undid all the good that had been accomplished.

The period from 1824 to 1832 was the hey-day of the fur trade in Colorado, during which time it produced all sorts and conditions of men and characters. There was James P. Beckwourth, known everywhere from the Arkansas to the upper reaches of the Missouri and contended by some to be the most fluent and picturesque liar of all time. From a perusal of his diary or the story purported to be from that book, he must have been some sort of a super-man to have accomplished all the things he

claims to have done at one and the same time. Then there was the hero of the plains, Kit Carson; the owners and drivers of the mighty freight-wagons, the Bent Bros; Jim Bridger of national fame and a host of others, saints and sinners alike, though we are afraid the former were much in the minority.

Gradually, the fur bearing animals in that region began to get scarcer and accordingly competition more keen and ruthless. Venture after venture came to a tragic if not fatal end, more times through conflicts between themselves than through ruptures with the native tribes. Life was held cheaply when it competed with profits with none to witness dark deeds but the silent rocks and marshes of virgin territory. Then styles began to change and the London Dandies were discarding their hats of beaver and casting longing and envious eyes on the new styles of silk. The bottom had fallen out of the beaver market and the price of skins fell to \$1.00 a piece.

The death-knell of the fur trade was slowly tolling. The rich fur-bearing regions of Colorado had been explored and exploited to the very last limit and depleted of its furry inhabitants. And in the wake of the departing fur trade was an army of pioneers, none the less hardy, but marching to the tune of wagon wheels turning on their axles on paths already laid out by the fur traders and trappers.

The fur-trade histories of the northwestern states embraced in the territory from Montana to the Pacific Ocean are so welded together that to separate them into individual narratives would merely be a repetition of events and a duplication of narration. Their pages are permeated through and through with the story of one man's efforts to bring into reality the visualization of a fur empire stretching from the Pacific to Atlantic oceans in United States territory and later on to embrace the entire fur bearing area of the North American continent. A colossal dream indeed and probably deserving of a better fate than it received.

The history of North America is indissolubly linked with the fur trade; for two centuries it was its principal business and often the only one transacted on the frontiers. To France must be given the credit of being the pioneer nation in the building of the fur trade and in turn the blame its monopolistic tendency for its loss of prestige and control to the cool and calculating Britons that came in the paths of conquest.

The fur trade of the Pacific Northwest and the name of John Jacob Astor are synonymous - you cannot think of one without you think of the other. His domination of the fur trade south of the Canadian border, for many years, is not only historical but an exhibition of prodigious power and authority. The incorporation of the American Fur Co., in 1809 was his starting point. This was to gather in and control the fur trade of the Pacific Northwest. No sooner had this been completed when Astor turned his attention to the possible control of the fur trade of the Pacific Coast. The valuable fur of the sea otter, plentiful off that coast, was in great demand in European countries and the trade not one to be overlooked in his gigantic scheme of world domination of the fur industry.

Briefly, the situation in the fur trade at this time, can be summed up as follows. The Hudson Bay and Northwest companies were fighting for supremacy in the country northwestward from Lake Superior and a southern line of operation lying well within the U. S. territories surrounding the sources of the Mississippi and extending to the Missouri river in the vicinity of the Mandan villages. The Mackinaw Co., and other traders were operating in the upper lakes and westward to the Mississippi. Some few expeditions had been made as far as the Rockies by various St. Louis traders though their business was mainly confined to the upper Missouri and tributaries with a large part of the trade being along the Osage and Kansas rivers, southwestward towards the Arkansas river.

Seeing that the Mackinaw Co., if allowed to continue operations might prove a serious obstacle to an unbroken flow of trade from coast to coast, Astor and his associates bought up the company, changing its name to the Southwest Company. The control of the fur trade was now complete--The Pacific Fur Co.--American Fur Co.--Southwest Co.-- an unbroken line from coast to coast.

The war of 1812, however, wrought havoc with all Astor's plans and schemes. The Southwest Co., was forced to suspend operations and at the conclusion of the war was entirely dissolved. A similar fate was meted out to the Pacific Fur Co., though it was afterwards sold to the Northwest Co., for \$40,000. Only the American Fur Co., remained. But that company survived the storm and remained to dominate the fur trade for many years to come.

The refusal of the newly organized St. Louis Missouri Fur Co., from the ashes of the old Missouri Fur Co., to allow Astor to have any

part in it, is perhaps in a large way responsible for much of the ruthless competition of the American Fur Co., in the years to follow. The resumption of fur trading operations was a series of fierce conflicts between the rival companies with many tragic ending. If there were any rules laid down as to the conduct of the business, they were never observed, much less obeyed. It was simply a rule of the survival of the fittest.

The year 1822 ushered a new competitor into the field in the person of the the Rocky Mountain Fur Co., organized by William Ashley of St. Louis and under the management of Andrew Henry. For the first venture the region of the Yellowstone country was chosen. The original company was made up of many men whose names are now well known in the realms of fame and adventure.

Andrew Henry continued in charge until the fall of 1824, when he was succeeded by Jedediah S. Smith who had become a partner of Ashley. In 1826 Ashley sold out his interest to Smith, Jackson and Sublette and for many years the company was known as the Smith, Jackson & Co. In 1830 the outfit was sold to Milton G. Sublette, Henry Frack, John B. Gervais and James Bridger, who operated it under its rightful name, the Rocky Mountain Fur Co. It was while under their management that the never to be forgotten incident in the annals of the fur trade, the battle of Pierre's Hole or Jackson's Hole, near the Teton Pass, was fought with the Gros Ventre Indians with disastrous results on both sides.

The ruthless competition of the American Fur Co., proved too much for them, and they finally sold out to the Astor interests to avoid complete failure and ruin.

From then on the American Fur Co., practically dominated the entire fur bearing country of the U. S. until the western march of progress combined with the decrease in both the production and marketing of furs forced their sale to the northern companies.