

Sports and Amusements Among The Fur Hunters of The Rockies

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A reckless and new breed of men, the fur hunters of the Far West, made its debut in American history in the third decade of the 19th Century. The Mountain Men, as they referred to themselves, roamed the Rockies shooting buffalo, tracking deer, and laying traps for the elusive beaver. They lived in the twilight region between civilization and savagery. The intent of this paper is to provide a glimpse into the grim, but obviously not monotonous, life of these aristocrats of the wilderness. Despite the erosive effects of the wild environment on the eastern cultural heritage, one may discover the surprising fact that amusements and diversions found their ways into the hard and solitary life of the Mountain Men.

The fur trappers of the Rocky Mountains were limited in their contacts with civilization to an annual trading "Rendezvous" or an infrequent incursion of a preacher. The Rockies themselves molded the lives and characters of the trappers. The changing seasons had a guiding effect on their existence. The successful hunts of the spring were followed by the summer rendezvous. This trade "rendezvous," or as Billington called it, "the annual Rocky Mountain Fair," took place generally in June and July. Trappers, Indians, and traders flocked from all over the West to the meeting point that had been selected the previous year. From 1824 until 1840, sixteen annual meetings were held.

The assembled fur hunters were indeed a picturesque company. Captain Joseph Thing, in a letter of June 29, 1834, remarked that the "mountain companies are all assembled on this river this season and make as crazy a set of men as I ever saw." There was little which distinguished the fur trapper from the Indians. According to Ruxton's observation, their dress was "the usual hunting-frock of buck-skin, with long fringes down the seams, with pantaloons similarly ornamented, and moccasins of Indian make." The clothing, Ruxton suspected, was never removed from the time it was put on until it was discarded. The trading days lasted for three to four weeks. Following the exchange of "hairy bank notes" (beaver skins), for a year's provision, the rendezvous was transformed into a mixture of frolicsome sports and a frenzy of drinking, gambling, and debauchery. The immersion in sports, gambling, and drinking was perhaps a compensatory consequence of a life of deprivation of elementary necessities and human companionship.