

## Mountain men.(trappers and frontiersmen)

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The fur hunters, or mountain men, of the first half of the nineteenth century were among the most daring of America's frontiersmen. They hunted mainly for beaver, whose pelts would meet the demand for waterproof beaver hats. These hunters were explorers, too. They probed almost every corner of the land between the Missouri frontier and the Pacific coast. In the process, they became trailblazers and guides for westward-moving pioneers.

Some mountain men worked for companies. Some were independent, or free trappers. Their gear included a horse and saddle, a plain leather belt, butcher knives powder horns, bullet pouches, and a rifle in a cover that had long tassels or fringe at the muzzle. Other equipment included a blanket, a few pots and pans, a hatchet, a rawhide quirt, and four to six traps carried in a trap sack. Except for a little flour, coffee, tea, and salt, mountain men lived by hunting and gathering off the land.

Many of these men had been farm hands who had grown tired of such work. They had strength, stamina, and a good knowledge of tools--all qualities necessary to survive in the wilderness. Mountain faced dangers on the trail--wild animals, bad weather, rough terrain, and sometimes hostile Indians (though they more often formed lasting friendships with Native Americans). It has been estimated that one in every five trappers died on the trail. But the rewards outweighed the risks for these men.

A good trapper could bring 300 to 400 pelts to sell at the annual rendezvous, or fur gathering. They were worth \$1,000 to \$2,000 at a time when skilled workers, such as carpenters, made only about \$1.50 a day.

At that yearly assembly, mountain men exchanged news and socialized.

Descriptions of what they had seen or where they had traveled made their way back East. In time, the shrinking demand for furs combined with the increase in the number of western settlements brought an end to this unique way of life.--R.D.S.S.

Pelts are animal skins that still have the furs on them.

Powder horns are animal horns, capped at the open end, used to carry gunpowder.

A quirt is a riding whip with a short handle and a braided lash.