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Robert Glass Cleland

This Reckless Breed of Men

The Trappers and Fur Traders of the Southwest



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CHAPTER I

Beaver and Mountain Men

THE BEAVER, whose peltry constituted the basis of the Western American fur trade, flourished in North America from the Arctic Circle to the gulfs of Mexico and California. After the close of the eighteenth century, three great river systems west of the Mississippi — the Missouri, Columbia, and Colorado — constituted the principal hunting-grounds for American trappers; but beaver were also found in large numbers on the Rio Grande, Arkansas, Humboldt, Sacramento, San Joaquin, and a hundred other independent streams.

Contrary to common opinion, many of the desert or semi-desert rivers of the Southwest were major trapping fields. For the beaver was — and still is — at home alike in the deep chasms of the San Juan and Colorado rivers, where the summer heat becomes almost unbearable for human beings; in the warm, sluggish waters of the lower Gila; and along the winding channels of the Colorado delta. The fur of the desert river beaver, though somewhat lighter in color and practically worthless from early spring to late fall, is only slightly inferior to that of the northern beaver during the remainder of the year.

As a preface to this study, it is also necessary to point

out that the Spanish province of Alta California once had a large beaver population. California beaver were of three types or races: the Shasta beaver in the interior, the large golden beaver in the central delta area of San Francisco Bay, and the Sonora beaver on the Colorado. The rivers of southern California apparently had too little water to maintain beaver colonies; but the animal flourished in large numbers in the northern drainage basins of the state, especially on the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers and their tributaries, and in the low, marshy regions tributary to San Francisco Bay.

A few beaver were found in the streams that flowed out of the northern Coast Range Mountains into the Pacific; but though the animal thrived at high altitudes in other mountain systems, it had not established itself above the thousand-foot level in the Sierra Nevada by the time the trappers reached California, and the fur-hunters' narratives make no mention of beaver in the Owens, Walker, Carson, Truckee, and other rivers that flow eastward out of the central and southern Sierra.¹ No satisfactory explanation has been found for this curious restriction of the animal's habitat.

A beaver of average size weighs between thirty and forty pounds, but fifty- or sixty-pound adults are not uncommon,

¹ For confirmation of these statements and the beaver's present distribution in California, see Grinnell, Dixon, and Linsdale: *Fur Bearing Mammals of California* (Berkeley, 1937), Vol. II, pp. 635-6. I am also indebted to Seth B. Benson of the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology of the University of California at Berkeley, for further information on the subject.

Silt from mining operations apparently drove the beaver out of many northern California streams after 1850.

and a few authentic specimens running over a hundred pounds have been reported. The animal's hind feet are webbed, his scaly tail possibly furnished the pattern for the first Indian canoe paddles. The beaver finds it an instrument of many uses — a rudder when he swims, a balancing device when he runs or gallops, a prop when he sits down or squats on his haunches, and a convenient artifice for slapping or plopping the surface of the water when he wishes to warn other beaver of approaching danger.

The bark and leaves of the aspen, cottonwood, willow, and similar trees furnish the animal's chief supply of food. His teeth and jaws are powerful enough to cut through the hardest oak, but the old belief that a beaver felled a tree in a predetermined direction has been discarded. In quiet water the beaver builds a house of branches, twigs, and mud. He is then called a lodge beaver. In swift-running streams the same beaver tunnels into the bank and makes his nest above the water level. He is then spoken of as a bank beaver.

In his monumental work on the American fur trade Chittenden thus described the methods commonly used in trapping this traditionally sagacious animal:

The universal mode of taking the beaver was with the steel trap, in the use of which long experience had taught the hunters great skill. The trap is a strong one of about five pounds' weight, and was valued in the fur trade period at twelve to sixteen dollars. The chain attached to the trap is about five feet long, with a swivel near the end to keep it from kinking. The trapper, in setting the trap, wades into the

stream, so that his tracks may not be apparent; plants his trap in three or four inches of water a little way from the bank, and fastens the chain to a strong stick, which he drives into the bed of the stream at the full chain length from the trap. Immediately over the trap a little twig is set so that one end shall be about four inches above the surface of the water. On this is put a peculiar bait, supplied by the animal itself, castor, castorum, or musk, the odor of which has a great attraction for the beaver. To reach the bait he raises his mouth toward it and in this act brings his feet directly under it. He thus treads upon the trap, springs it and is caught. In his fright he seeks concealment by his usual method of diving into deep water, but finds himself held by the chain which he cannot gnaw in two, and after an ineffectual struggle, he sinks to the bottom and is drowned. Not infrequently he wrests the chain from the stake, drags the trap to deeper water before he succumbs, or, taking it to the shore, becomes entangled in the undergrowth.²

In addition to the castoreum, "a granular, sticky, yellow substance of a rather pleasant odor," to which Chittenden refers, both male and female beaver secrete a thick, pungent, yellow oil from two small glands behind the castors. During the mating season beaver of both sexes deposit oil and castoreum on spots regularly visited by other beaver and add mud, sand, dead leaves, and other material to form so-called "scent-mounds." These hillocks, the largest

² *History of the American Fur Trade*, Vol. II, p. 820. In the summer of 1947 Charlie Young, of Ovando, Montana, a trapper of seventy-seven years' experience, told me that a cottonwood wand planted beside a trap would serve as well for bait as the twig dipped in castoreum. While attempting to strip the bark from the wand, the beaver stepped on the trigger, sprung the trap, and was caught as Chittenden described.

of which are about a foot high, served the trappers as markers for the trails or runways of the beaver. Some trappers believed that the beaver also rubbed castoreum on his fur to make it waterproof.³

Beaver-skinning, like trapping, was an art. After being slit along the animal's belly and on the inside of the four legs, the hide was carefully removed, dried on a willow hoop, and later scraped or grained to rid it of all adhering particles of flesh. A trapper smoked the hides of other animals on a framework of sticks planted around the edge of a hole containing a fire of rotten wood or punk. The process required ten or twelve hours. The Indians followed a somewhat different technique.

"Their mode of dressing the skins is very simple," said an early American writer on the West.

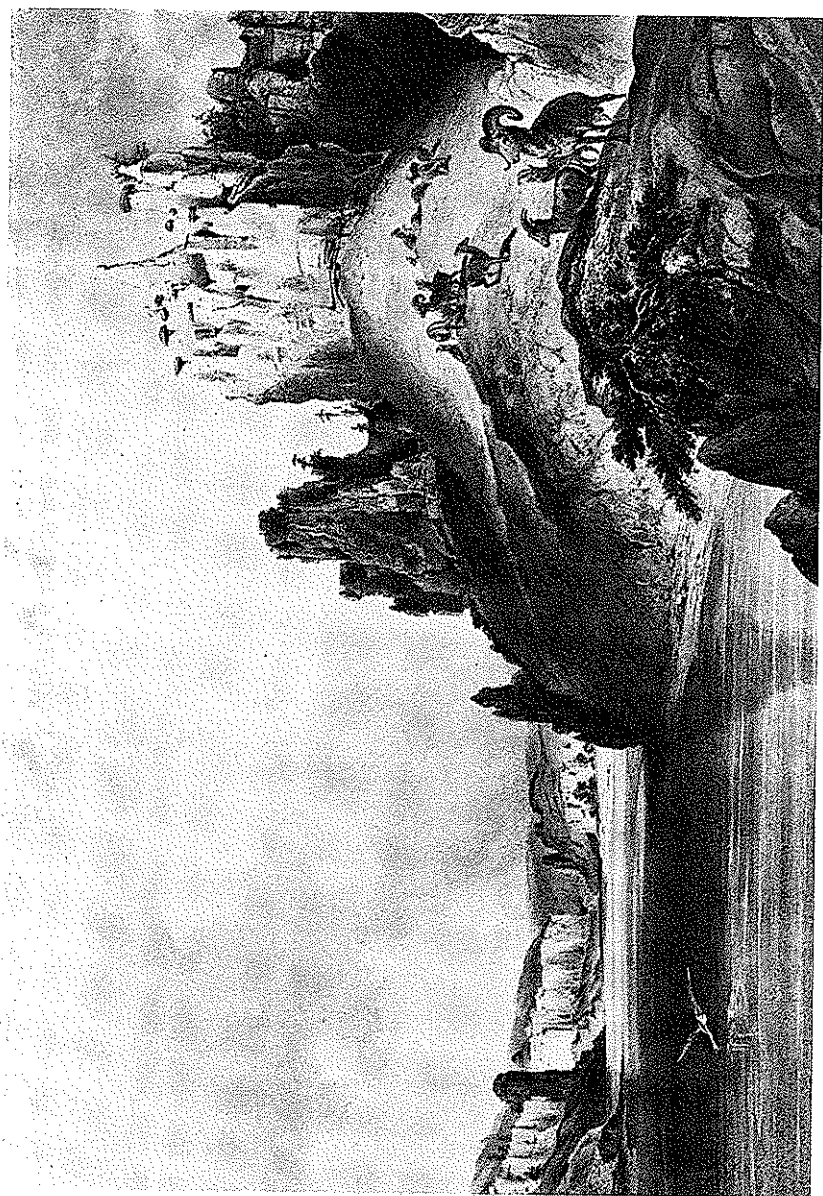
When they wish to preserve the hair, they first extend the skins in the shade, and spread a thin covering of the recent ordure of the buffalo mixed with clay, on the fleshy sides, which for two or three days, are kept constantly moistened with water. In the next place, they are thoroughly cleansed, and subsequently rubbed in the brain of some animal, till they become dry, soft, and pliant.

They are then washed in water thickened with corn bran, dried, and finally scraped with bones, sharp stones, or knives, or sometimes they are worked soft, by drawing them backwards and forwards over the rounded end of a piece of timber, fixed permanently in the ground. When sufficiently dressed, in the manner above described, they are hung up to

³ The castors, sexual organs of both male and female beaver, ran about six pair to the pound. Castoreum itself was worth approximately three dollars a pound in the mountains.



ROCKY MOUNTAIN BEAVER



THE STONE WALLS OF THE MISSOURI

be smoked, either in the smoke aperture of the lodges, or in places constructed exclusively for the purpose.⁴

Beaver skins were folded with the fur inside and packed in bundles by means of a crude press. The bundles were then tied with green buckskin thongs, which contracted while drying and finally became almost as hard and inelastic as iron bands. More elaborate and efficient "wedge presses" were used at the fur-trading posts to bale much larger packs.⁵ According to Chittenden, the standard pack contained "ten buffalo robes, fourteen bear, sixty otter, eighty beaver, eighty raccoon, one hundred and twenty foxes, or six hundred muskrat skins."⁶

Upon reaching a promising beaver country, a trapping expedition usually established a base camp from which small parties or single trappers radiated out for many miles to carry on their operations. In the northern and central Rocky Mountain region the trapping season was limited to the spring and fall; but in some parts of the Southwest, where there was little snow or ice, trapping was continued through the winter.

The American trapper borrowed the word *cache* from his French associate and used it as both noun and verb. A cache was a hiding-place, usually a hole or pit — square, circular, or bottle-shaped — in which food, supplies, or furs were stored for safekeeping or to await more convenient means of transportation. A cache was designed to

⁴ John D. Hunter: *Manners and Customs of the Western Indians* (Philadelphia, 1823), p. 295.

⁵ Carl P. Russell: *Picture Books of the Fur Trade History*, reprint from the *Missouri Historical Society Bulletin*, April 1948.

⁶ Chittenden, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 40 n.

keep its contents dry, safe from destruction by wild animals, and secure from discovery by Indians. All the skill and ingenuity of the trappers were used in the construction of such a hiding-place, but frequently the cache was ruined by flood or seeping water, or found and plundered by keen-eyed Indian thieves. The expectant trapper then returned to the site only to face the loss of goods, fortune, or even life itself.

By 1820, after more than a decade of experimental development, the Rocky Mountain fur trade had assumed a fairly clear-cut, standardized pattern. It was carried on by independent or "free" trappers and by powerful, well-organized partnerships or companies. The free trapper — or freeman, as he was called in the usage of the Hudson's Bay Company — operated entirely on his own. He furnished his own equipment, trapped where he pleased, sold his furs to the highest bidder, and recognized no overlord. His status was distinctly higher than that of a regular company trapper or *engagé*. If a free trapper served temporarily with a company brigade, he received his outfit from the company and sold his skins to his employer.

Instead of joining a company expedition, however, the typical free trapper usually chose either to unite with a large number of other freemen like himself, to set out with only one or two companions for "tother side of the great mountains" or across the continent, or to trap entirely alone.

A band of free trappers, though much looser in organization than a company expedition, customarily elected a leader, drafted a set of regulations governing the conduct

of the expedition, and provided stringent penalties for the violation of these self-imposed rules. In actual practice, however, such punishments were seldom imposed. Each man's equipment in such a party usually included a gun with two locks, a hundred flints, twenty-five pounds of powder, a hundred pounds of lead, a good powder horn, a double shot bag, a butcher or skinning knife, a tomahawk or shingling hatchet, and from four to six traps.

The partnership or company represented "big business" in the fur trade. It had the advantage of capital, organization, continuity, and large-scale operations. It sought to monopolize both trade and trapping wherever large-scale operations were profitable, and often employed drastic methods to discourage competition. The trappers regularly in its employ were outfitted by the company, trapped under orders of one of its captains, turned their furs over to their leader, and lived under semimilitary discipline.

With the exception of John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company, an enterprise comparable in its field to the Standard Oil Company in the early petroleum industry of the United States, most American organizations, such as the Rocky Mountain and the Missouri fur companies, originated in St. Louis and had their headquarters in that gateway to the continent.⁷ Almost always the partners in such companies were themselves successful and experienced mountain men. Many of them were capable executives, as imaginative, adventurous, and persistent in their business undertakings as they were bold, resourceful, and resolute

⁷ For Chittenden's criticism of the monopolistic tendencies and ruthless practices of the American Fur Company, see *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 378, 380.