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Trapping Techniques of the Mountain Man

By: Kent Klein



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Kent is an avid re-enactor and trapper, who has for some time now been experimenting with the techniques of Beaver trapping used by the Mountain Men. He is also a first-rate hide tanner, and author of the book *Tan Your Hide the Alum Way*. - Jason W. Gatliff

Of the varied aspects pertaining to the fur trade in the Rocky Mountains, One area which has perhaps not received much attention, is the tools and methods used by the Mountain Men in pursuit of beaver pelts.

Those who ventured west in pursuit of beaver learned to trap in the east or learned by trial and error along the way. Soldiers in the Lewis and Clark Expedition were allowed to trap for beaver for their own personal gain.

Lewis and Clark in their journal entries noted the abundance of beaver along the Corps of Discovery: "There was a remarkably large beaver caught by one of the party last night. These animals are now very abundant".(1) Indeed, members of the expedition were allowed to trap beaver for their pelts and as for food.:

"There were three beaver taken this morning by the party. The men prefer the flesh of this animal to that of any other which we have. . . .I eat very heartily of the beaver myself and think it excellent; particularly the tale and the liver."(2)

The basic methods used to trap beaver, using the steel jawed foot hold trap, did not appear to change much throughout the mountain man era.

Beaver castor and castorium, contained in the oil sacs, were saved and used to entice the beaver into the trap sets. The liquid castorium was usually carried in a hollowed out piece of wood or horn with a stopper in it, suspended around the neck of the trapper with a leather thong.

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"Last evening, Drewyer visited his traps and caught a beaver and an otter. The beaver was large and fat. We have therefore fared sumptuously today. This we consider a great prize for another reason. It being full grown, was well supplied with the materials for making bate with which to catch others. This bate when properly prepared, will entice the beaver to visit the traps for as far as he can smell them. This, I believe can be safely judged by about one mile. Their sense of smelling is very accute. To prepare beaver bate, the castor or bark stone is taken as the base. This is gently pressed out of the bladderlike bag, which contains it into a phiol of four ounces with a wide mouth; if you have them you will put from four to six stone in a phiol of that capacity, to this you will add have a nutmeg, a douzen or 15 grains of cloves and thirty grains of cinimon finely pulverized, stir them well together and then add as much ardent sperits to the composition as will reduce it the consistency (of) mustard prepared at the table; when thus prepared it resembles mustard precisely to all appearance. When you cannot procure a phiol a bottle made of horn or a tight earthen vessel will answer, in all cases it must be excluded from the air or it will soon loose it's virtue; it is fit for uce immediately it is prepared but becomes much stronger and better in about four or five days and will keep for months provided it be perfectly secluded from the air. When cloves are not to be had use double the quantity of Allspice, and when no spice can be obtained use the bard of the root of sausafras; when sperits cannot be had use oil stone of the beaver adding nearly a sufficient quantity to moisten the other materials, or reduce it to a stif past(e). It appears to me that the principal use of the spices is only to give a variety to the scent of the bark stone and if so the mace vineller (vanilla) and other sweet smelling spices might be employed with equal advantage. The male beaver has six stones, two (of) which contain a substance much like finely pulverized bard of a pale yellow colour and not unlike tanner's ooz in smell, these are called the bark stones or castors; two others, which like the bark stone resemble small bladders, contain a pure oil of a strong rank disagreeable smell, and not unlike train oil, these are called the oil stones; and 2 others of generation. the Barkstones are about two inc(h)es in length, the others somewhat smaller all are of a long oval form, and lye in a bunch together between the skin and the root of the tail, beneath or behind the fundament with which they are closely connected and seem to communicate."(3)

It was not always necessary or accessable to trap beaver by wading into an icy stream to set and check traps:

"...the dams of the beaver causes water to overflow it's banks, and makes a swampy, marshy, country

for miles round. People trapping on these streams are compelled to construct canoes of bull and buffalo skins, in order to visit their traps."(4)

Apparently beaver castor had some medicinal qualities to it as well to the mountainmen. Osborne Russell was shot in the right hip and in the right leg above the knee with arrows by Blackfoot Indians and writes: "... I had bathed my wounds in salt water and made a salve of beavers oil and castoreum which I applied to them, this eased the pain and drawn out the swelling in a great measure."(5)

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According to Osborne Russell, six traps were typically carried by a trapper in a sack: "A trappers equipment in such cases is generally one animal upon which is places one or two ephshemores a riding saddle and a bridle a sack containing six beaver traps..."(6)

According to Captain Bonneville, trappers became proficient at locating beaver and places to set: "Practice has given such a quickness of eye to the experienced trapper in all that relates to his pursuit, that he can detect the slightest sign of beaver, however wild; and although the lodge may be concealed by close thickets and over hanging willows, he can generally, at a single glance, make an accurate guess at the number of its inmates."(7)

Two firsthand accounts left by mountainmen Joseph L. Meek and Osborne Russell explain how traps were used;

"The trapper extracts this substance (castorum) from the gland and carries it in a wooden box he sets his trap in the water near the bank about 6 inches below the surfaces throws a handful of mud on the bank about one foot from it and puts a small portion of the castorum thereon after night the beaver comes out of his lodge smells the fatal bait 2 or 300 yards distant and steers his course directly for it he hastens to ascend the bank but the trap grasps his foot and soon drowns him in his struggle to escape..."(8)

Also: The trapper has an ordinary steel trap weighing five pounds, attached to a chain five feet long, with a swivel and ring at the end, which plays round what is called a float. A dry stick of wood, about six feet long. The trapper wades out into the stream, which is shallow, and cuts with his knife a bed for the trap, five or six inches under water. He then takes the float out the hole length of the chain in the direction of centre of the stream, and drives it into the mud, so fast that the beaver cannot draw it out; at the same time tying the other end by a thong to the bank. A small stick or twig, dipped in musk or castor (taken from the long glands just beneath a beavers skin in front of the genital organs) serves for bait, and is placed so as to hang directly above the trap, which is now set. The trapper then throws water plentifully over the adjacent bank to conceal any foot prints or scent by which the beaver would be alarmed and going to some distance wades out of the stream. In setting the trap, several things are to be observed with care:- First, that the trap is firmly fixed, and the proper distance from the bank- for if

the beaver can get on shore with the trap, he will cut off his foot to escape: Secondly, that the float is of dry wood, for should it not be, the little animal will cut it off at a stroke and swimming with the trap to the middle of the dam, be drowned by its weight. In the latter case, when the hunter visits his traps in the morning, he is under the necessity of plunging into the water and swimming out to dive for the missing trap, and his game."(9)

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It wasn't always necessary to trap beaver to acquire them. Trading for beaver pelts was common: At this hut we obtained a large robe composed of beaver skins fastened together, in exchange for two owls and one fish hook. This robe was worth from 30 to 40 dollars."(10)

Nor was trading always done to obtain beaver pelts: " We left this village the 11th of August, taking with us two of it's inhabitants, each having a trap to catch and a hoe to dig the beavers from their burrows."(11)

Once the beaver was trapped an excellent eye witness account is given by W. A. Ferris as to how the beaver pelts were put up:

May 15. 1852

"Their encampment was decked with hundreds of beaver skins, now drying in the sun. These valuable skins are always stretched in willow hoops, varying from eighteen inches, to three feet in diameter, according to the size of the skins, and have a reddish appearance on the flesh side which is exposed to the sun. Our camps are always dotted with these red circles, in the trapping season, when the weather is fair. There were several hundred skins folded and tied up in packs, laying about their encampment, which bore good evidence to the industry of the trappers."(12)

Mountainmen knew that putting up their pelts properly would bring a better price: "I was now becoming very successful in trapping and caught as many as any of the outfit. Williams taught me to skin, flesh and stretch, in all of which I soon became proficient. Furs indifferently handled always bring a low price on the market."(13)

Evidence suggests that prior to putting up the dried beaver pelts into packs, they were marked on the flesh side, with the trappers name or companys mark for identification:

The 43 beaver skins traded, marked, "R.P. M. F. Co.", I would in the present instance give up if Mr. Fitzpatrick wishes to have them..."(14)

In addition, Lucien B. Fontanelle said "...he went to the cabins and asked Mr. Montard what right he had to trade beaver skins from Indians with white mens names marked upon them knowing them to be stolen or taken by force from the whites? I then ordered him to give me the key or his warehouse which he reluctantly did I then ordered my clerk to go in and take all the beaver skins he could find with your names marked upon them and have them carried to my camp."(15)

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Press' were used of different types to compress the pelts into packs weighing about 80 to 100 pounds each: "They were folded once first side in, and pressed into a pack encased within a wrapper of dried deerskin."(16) "In transporting the furs to market, they were disposed in packs weighing about 100 pounds. A pack of furs contained 10 buffalo robes, 14 bear, 60 otter, 80 beaver, 80 raccoon, one hundred twenty foxes, or six hundred muskrat skin."(17)

The packs were loaded onto mules, horses and later, wagons, and carried to St. Louis or were loaded onto boats and floated down the Missouri River:

" Traders had collected one hundred packs of furs which Ashley took with him on his return east. His route turned north from South Pass to the Bighorn which he descended to the Yellow Stone. There he met a government expedition under General Henry Atkinson, who allowed him to ship his furs on government boats down to St. Louis."(18) So who then were these men who went in pursuit of beaver pelts? "...it is necessary to state the terms on which the men enlist in the service of the fur companies. Some have regular wages, and are furnished with weapons, horses, traps, and other requisites. These are under command and bound to do every duty required of them connected with service ; such as hunting, trapping, loading and unloading the horses, mounting guard; and in short, all the drudgery of the camp. These are the hired trappers."(19)

"Camp keepers" were left at camp to watch over the stock, cook and do the majority of the skinning and hooping of the beaver. And last, but certainly not least, "Freeman or Free Trappers":

"...A party of trappers and hunters, called Free Men, from the circumstances of their not being connected with either of the rival Fur Companies, but holding themselves at liberty to trade with one or all. They rove through this savage and desolate region free as the mountain air, leading a vertuous and dangerous life, governed by no lawss save their own wild impulses, and bounding their desires and wishes to what their own good rifles and traps may serve them to procure. Strange that people can find so strong and fascinating a charm in this rude nomadic, and haverdous mode of life, as to estrange themselves from home, country, friends and all the comforts, allegances, and priviledges of civilization; but so it is, the toil, the danger, the loneliness, the deprivation of this condition of being fraught with all its disadvantages, and replete with peril, is, they think, more than compensated by the

lawless freedom, and the stirring excitement, incident to their situation and pursuits. The very danger has its attraction, and the courage and cunning, and skill, and watchfulness made necessary by the difficulties they have to overcome, the privations they are forced to contend with, and the perils against which they must guard, become at once their pride and boast. A strange, wild, terrible, romantic hard, and exciting life they lead, with alternate plenty, and starvation, activity and repose, safety and alarm, and all the other adjuncts that belong to so vagrant a condition, in a harsh, barren, untamed, and fearful region of desert, plain and mountain. Yet so attached to it do they become, that few ever leave it, and they deem themselves, nay are, with all these bars against them, far happier than the indwellers of towns and cities, with all the gay and giddy whirl of fashion's mad delusions in their train.(20)

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A few trappers made money from the trapping of beaver; the majority of trappers broke even or made nothing from their endeavors. All too often, many of the trappers ended up like George Drouillard (guide and Interpreter for Lewis & Clark) in their quest for beaver pelts. Several years after returning from the expedition, while trapping beaver, an eyewitness records:

"We started forward in company, and soon found the dead bodies of the last mentioned hunters, (the two Delawares, whom he calls Shawnees), pierced with lances, arrows and bullets and lying near each other. Further on, about one hundred and fifty yards, Druyer (Drouillard) and his horse lay dead, The former mangled in a horrible manners; His head was cut off, his entrails torn out and his body hacked to pieces. We saw from the marks on the ground that he must have fought in a circle on horseback and probably killed some of his enemies, being a brave man, and well armed with a rifle, pistol, knife and tomahawk. We pursued the trail of the Indians till night, without overtaking them, and then returned, having buried our dead, with saddened hearts to Fort."(21)

Indeed their were many dangers, hardships, and perils encountered by those who came west in pursuit of beaver. Knowing that the potential for wealth was great but the risks could be even greater, it is indeed a tribute to their courage that they undertook such an adventure. And what an adventure it was!

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4. Adventures of a Mountainman: The Narrative on Zenas Leonard. Written by himself. Edited by Milo Milton Quaife. University of Nebraska Press, 1978 Page 82.
5. Journal of a Trapper. Osborne Russell. Edited by Aubrey L. Haines. University of Nebraska Press. Page 105.
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7. The Adventures of Captain Bonneville, U.S.A. in the Rocky Mountains and the Far West. By Washington Irving. Edited by Edgely W. Todd. University of Oklahome Press. 1986. Page 198.
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9. Broken Hand, The Life of Thomas Fitzpatrick, Mountainman, Guide and Indian Agent. By

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 21. George Drouillard Hunter & Interpreter for Lewis and Clark and Fur Trader, 1807-1810 By M.O. Skarsten. Arthur H. Clark Company. Glendale, California. 1964 Page 310.

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