

Off the Grid: A Mountain Man's Survival Guide

The mountain men were a curious breed of Americans, who became an essential part of the opening up of the American West. Their intent wasn't to become explorers, but rather to trap beavers for their pelts, which were then sold and used to make top hats. Even so, the impact that they made, in the years they were traveling through the west is a great part of the Old West history.

The mountain men were a breed unto themselves. Yet they didn't come from just one part of society. Rather, they were mostly young men when they started out, mostly men who were looking for a stake to get started out in life. A couple of years of trapping beaver would net enough money to set them up in business. Many left after those years, but others found the life agreeable and spent their lives in the west, greeting the Army and the settlers when they came.

It took intelligence and guts to be a mountain man. Their life was dangerous and filled with problems they had to solve. Solving those problems often meant doing so by unconventional means, as they had very little to work with, outside of what nature provided. Yet the fact that they not only survived, but thrived, gives proof to their tenacity and industry.

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Kit Carson was one of those mountain men, as well as spending time as a wilderness guide, an Indian agent and an officer in the US Army. I know nothing about him that isn't available in the history books; but the fact that he appears in my family tree motivated me to study his life when I was younger. His life reads like an adventure story; but the most important part is that he survived in a time and place where many did not. Between dangers that the terrain posed, harsh weather, encounters with bears and mountain lions, the occasional Indian and the risk of infection, many mountain men didn't make it.

To overcome these difficulties, the mountain men carried very little with them, other than their knowledge and the skills they possessed. Few of those skills were brought west with them. Most were learned along the way. Nature is a harsh teacher; but those who pass her lessons learn them well.

Mountain Men and the Indians

One of the great challenges the mountain men faced were the various tribes of native American Indians. Their lives were just as harsh as those of the mountain men, causing them to grow up strong and fierce. Warfare was a common part of their lives, as anyone who was not of their tribe was understood to be an enemy. Such enemies had to be defended against, or at times, attacked under the principle that the best defense is a good offense.

The population of Native Americans was never very high, with there being an estimated 600,000 in the early 1800s, the time of the mountain men. Considering the vastness of the American West, even just the Rocky Mountains, those mountain men could go extended periods of time without encountering them. But that couldn't last forever. Growing up so close to nature, the Indians were great woodsmen, who would quickly recognize the sign of a stranger in their territory. Rather than wait for a

possible attack, those Indians would track the stranger, either to attack first or at a minimum, to assess how dangerous they were. That often entailed fighting them.

So, one of the things that mountain men had to be adept at was fighting. Part of his “kit” consisted of a single shot rifle, perhaps a pistol, a knife and for those who knew about them, a tomahawk. Some mountain men carried bows, rather than rifles, for the faster reload speed. Due to the single-shot nature of their rifles, much fighting was hand to hand, with knife, tomahawk and fist.

It was more advantageous for the mountain men to trade with the natives, rather than fight them. Most carried trade goods with them for this purpose. Since they were either carrying these goods in their pack or on a pack horse, they had to be light. That precluded heavy items like knives and cookware, which would have been good trade goods. Rather, they traded glass beads, cloth, and small silver items, all of which could be used in the making and adorning of clothing.

Considering the small amount of anything that those mountain men could carry with them, considering the weight, they obviously considered those trade goods to be of value. The lesson here is that it is better to trade with a potential enemy, than to fight them. We should keep that in mind for our own survival. Whether we are bugging out or bugging in, we should have small, lightweight goods, which we can trade with others, perhaps even putting off a confrontation.

Their Belt

One of the most oddities about the mountain men was that they were essentially the inventors of the utility belt. Belts had been in use for centuries, mostly as a place to carry weapons and one’s purse (a bag to hold money in the form of coins). Following this, the mountain men would also carry their knife, tomahawk, powder and shot on their belts. But they would not

stop there, they would add several other pouches, which contained such things as their flint and steel to start a fire, some tinder for the same purpose, an awl, thread or cordage for mending, a bullet mold, powder measure, tools to repair and clean their rifle, a compass and a second knife.

These mountain men had to be fully self-sufficient, even when leaving camp. Carrying their most essential survival gear on their belt ensured that they had those things available at all times, even when out checking their trap string.

Each of the bags on their belt was specifically designed for its purpose. The ball bag, where they carried shot for their rifle, was made of hard leather, helping with efficient loading of their rifle. Individual lead balls could be easily located for quick loading, rather than trying to dig them out of the bottom of a soft leather bag.

I like the idea of a survival belt, with everything attached to it, rather than a survival kit. If its all on your belt, you can be sure that it is with you at all times. You don't need to be sure to pick up your EDC bag and sling it over your shoulder. It's also easier to carry that way, held snug against your body and leaving your arms free to move.

Their Pack

Everything else the mountain man had was in his pack or packs, usually strapped on the back of a pack horse or mule. That might make it seem like he was able to carry a lot with him, but that was far from the truth. Steel traps are heavy, taking up a lot of his weight carrying capacity. And he had to think about the weight of the furs that he hoped to take home. Little weight capacity was left for frivolities.

Since the mountain men came from the East, they all started out wearing Eastern clothes, shirts, pants and coats made of wool or cotton. But those materials are ill suited for living

in the ruggedness of the Rocky Mountains. Before long, they would replace those clothes with ones made from deerskin, elk hide, buffalo skins, or even bearskin; all depending on what they managed to shoot for food.

Speaking of food, that was the one thing that the mountain men had to carry along with them... at least some food. While they could get all the meat they needed by hunting and they could forage for edible plants, that still limited their diets. So, they would carry along some flour, salt and coffee; enough so that they could make frying pan bread to augment their diets.

Mostly, they prepared their food with the same knife they used to skin their catches. A single pot or pan served for cooking and they either ate out of it or in a tin plate. One single tin cup gave them a way of drinking their water or coffee. It wasn't luxurious; but it worked.

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At most, their shelter consisted of a canvas tarp, a couple of wool blankets, and an oilskin for the rain. They would have to build some sort of crude shelter, once they staked out an area. Those were rarely log cabins, but were more along the lines of lean-tos. The blankets they brought with them would hopefully be augmented with a buffalo hide or two, before winter set in.

More than anything, the mountain men lived off the land, either learning from the Indians or figuring it out for

themselves. Most probably had some skill at working with their hands, from whatever trade they had practiced back East. That surely served them well, helping them figure out how to make the things they needed. Other things were probably obtained by trading with the Indians, or at the annual Rendezvous in the fall, where they could sell their furs, meet with other mountain men and pick up supplies for the next year.

All in all, it was a hard life; one of much austerity. But if a mountain man was a successful trapper, they could come out of the mountains in a couple of years with more money than they would have earned "back east" in a decade. As they would be living off the land all that time, the sale of their pelts would be almost pure profit. And the experiences of being a mountain man would prepare them for anything else that life could throw their way.