



## THE FUR TRADE

The trade in furs is nearly as old as civilization itself. The North American fur trade was tied to beaver skins from the beginning. For centuries hats were a mandatory part of everyday dress for both men and women. Regardless of the century or the style, hats were made from wool felt. At the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, beaver wool began to dominate the wool industry. For the next three hundred years, beaver hats also dominated the market. At first, European beaver pelts were used to create resilient, water-resistant hats of all sizes, styles and prices. By the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, however, the European beaver had been trapped nearly to extinction. Coincidentally, at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Europeans were beginning to exploit the natural resources of North America. There, along its vast rivers and streams, they found not only a plentiful supply of beaver, but also Native American societies who were both adept at trapping beaver and willing to trade. Thus, from the beginning, North Americans were tied to the European economy through the trade in beaver skins.

The French dominated the early fur trade. Their system relied upon the skill and expertise of Native American hunters. This system took the French further into the interior of North America until they came into conflict with the British. The resulting conflict, called the French and Indian War, expelled the French from the continent and left the English in charge. The American Revolution changed the rules again, restricting the English to the Canadian trade.

The British developed the first major fur company, the British Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) in 1670. From then until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, HBC dominated the fur trade in Canada and the Pacific Northwest. In 1822, John Jacob Astor formed the American Fur Company. He sold his business in 1834, becoming the first American millionaire in the process. William Henry Ashley formed the Rocky Mountain Fur Company (RMFC) in 1822 and introduced a new system for obtaining beaver pelts. Instead of relying on Native Americans, Ashley hired young adventurers to go west to the Rocky Mountains and trap beaver for his company. Once a year, at a designated location, Ashley brought money and trade goods to the Rockies. At this *rendezvous* he paid his "mountain men." When the *rendezvous* ended, Ashley gathered the enormous loads of beaver pelts and transported them to St. Louis for processing and shipment to Europe.

The *rendezvous* system lasted until 1834 when fashion changed. The French, the principal producers of hats, and the arbiters of style, shifted to the production of silk hats. The popularity of the silk hat ended the three hundred year reign of the beaver.