



THE FUR TRADE

The trade in furs is nearly as old as civilization itself. Aristocrats wore mink, fox and otter, but a smaller, more common mammal provided the basis for international trade for over three centuries. This mammal was the North American beaver.

Beaver pelts provided the foundation of the North American fur trade. For centuries hats were a required part of everyday dress. European beaver pelts were used to create resilient, water-resistant hats of all sizes, styles and prices. By 1600, the European beaver had been trapped nearly to extinction. At the same time, Europeans began to exploit North America's natural resources. They found beaver in plentiful supply. They also found Native American societies who were very good at trapping beaver and willing to trade. Thus, from the beginning, North Americans were tied to the European economy through the trade in beaver pelts.

The French dominated the early fur trade. Their system relied upon the skill and expertise of Native American hunters. This system brought the French into conflict with the British. The French and Indian War changed the rules when it removed 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. The HBC dominated the fur trade in Canada and the Pacific Northwest until the middle of the 19th century. In 1822, John Jacob Astor formed the American Fur Company. He sold his business in 1834. The fur trade made Astor America's first millionaire. William Henry Ashley formed the Rocky Mountain Fur Company (RMFC) in 1822. He introduced a new system for obtaining beaver pelts. He did not rely on Native Americans. Ashley hired young men to go west to the Rocky Mountains and trap beaver for him. 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 packs 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. What remains today of the fur trade are the legends of the mountain men and the *rendezvous*.