

**MOUNTAIN MAN PROGRAM  
CLEAR CREEK CAMP PROFILE**

**Name of Camp:** Clear Creek

**Time Period:** 1831

**Camp Theme:** Rocky Mountain Fur Company (Fur Trapping)

**Significance in American and Local History.**

The fur trade was the largest industry in the United States for over a decade. It also facilitated the mapping of the American West and the settling of the Rocky Mountains.

**Background Information.**

The Rocky Mountain Fur Company was founded on the concept of the “skin trapper” -- who was outfitted by a company and then obliged to trade his furs only with that company retaining a percentage of the profits. The “skin trapper” was thereby more independent than the “hired trapper” who earned an annual wage for his work and more secure than the “free trapper” who had to outfit himself and often worked alone or in small groups. Members of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company went out each season in brigades of 60-80 men who then divided into smaller groups and scattered over a wide area to trap. They would meet again at a designated place and date.

**Characters.**

**Thomas “Broken Hand” Fitzpatrick.** Born in County Caven, Ireland, in 1799, Tom immigrated to the US in 1816 and eventually went to live in St. Louis. When Ashley’s ad went out for “enterprising young men” to join what became the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, Tom joined the original brigade of 100 men. In 1830 Fitzpatrick, Milton Sublette, Henry Fraeb, Jean Baptiste Gervais, and James Bridger purchased the company and Fitzpatrick became administrative head of the organization. In 1831 because of delays in getting back to Missouri, he made an attempt to get supplies to rendezvous by way of Santa Fe. This did not prove successful but it landed him and his associates in New Mexico until the season started that fall. He was known as “Broken Hand” because his left hand had been severely damaged in a firearms accident. Tom is an organizer and the kind of person who plans things carefully and meticulously.

**Jean Baptiste Gervais.** Born in Quebec, Canada, in 1790, Jean joined the North West Company in 1807 and was stationed at Red River until 1819 when he joined the Hudson’s Bay Company which sent him to the Columbia River in 1822. He was with Ogden’s Brigade on the Snake River in 1824 and continued to trap for the Hudson’s Bay Company for several seasons. By 1829 he was working for Smith, Sublette and Jackson who were then owner/operators of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company in the upper Rockies. He was one of five partners who bought out the firm in 1830. Almost a decade older than his other associates, he is also more experienced in the terrain and environs. He knows the entire Rocky Mountain region like the proverbial back of his hand --- every river, mountain, valley, Indian tribe, frontier fort or settlement. Jean would be bilingual – French-English and would likely speak with a French accent.

**Milton “Thunderbolt” Sublette.** Born in Somerset, Kentucky, the second of eight children in approximately 1801. The Sublettes were descendents of French Huguenot (French Protestant) refugees who first settled in Virginia in 1700. In the fall of 1817 his family moved to St. Charles, a small community west of St. Louis. Within a few years both parents died. Eventually four of the five Sublette brothers would participate in the fur

trade. By 1923 both William and Milton were “skin trappers” for the newly formed Rocky Mountain Fur Company. In the spring of 1926 Milton was recruited by Ewing Young for an expedition to the Southwest. While trapping illegally in the Mexican territory of what is now southern New Mexico on the Gila River, Sublette was shot in the leg in a skirmish with Apaches. This injury plagued him and eventually caused his death. Sublette was in and out of Taos and Santa Fe many times over the next few years. After purchasing the Rocky Mountain Fur Company in partnership with the four others mentioned above, he was a captain of one of the company’s two brigades during its first season 1830-31. Summer of ’31 finds him in New Mexico with his associates. His nickname “Thunderbolt of the Rockies” came from his dynamic and attractive personality with a strong tendency toward impetuous actions and speech.

**Joseph “Joe” Lafayette Meek** - Born in Washington County, Virginia on February 7, 1810, Meek was propelled westward at an early age by a disagreeable stepmother. He first went to Lexington, Missouri, where he joined two of his brothers. By 1829 he had signed on with William Sublette as a Rocky Mountain Fur Company trapper, and for the next eleven years he lived the strenuous life of a mountain man. In 1831 he was married to an Indian woman and he is missing her dearly. She is in Wyoming at this time and is the antithesis of the angry, controlling step mother of his youth. He is eager to get out of “Mexico” and move north to meet her.

**Henry Fraeb.** Henry is quiet and never revels much about his background. He is one of the partners who recently bought the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. He is of German heritage, perhaps an immigrant as a youngster or a first generation American of German parents. You can decide. He is at this point a seasoned trapper and brigade leader for “the company” who has worked the rivers from Utah and Idaho to Arizona and New Mexico. He is one of those people who does what needs to be done without a lot of fanfare or idle talk. He could be a bit of a bookworm and is meticulous about keeping his gear in tip-top shape.

**Ewing “Joaquin” Young.** Born in Tennessee to a farming family in 1799, “Joaquin” moved to what was then the Western frontier of Missouri and farmed briefly until he sold the farm and signed up to make the first official Santa Fe Trail crossing in May of 1822. Some think that he was also with the original Becknell crossing that opened the trail for trade in 1821. Regardless for the next twelve years, Young traversed the Southwest leading many of the first American expeditions into the mountains and watercourses of New Mexico, Colorado, Utah and Arizona. Young was a pioneer in trapping and fur trade in this area who set up a trading post in Taos in the late 1820’s. There he married Maria Josefa Tafoya of a prominent New Mexican family and was baptized into the Catholic Church. During the 1827-1828 expedition Young employed a teenaged Kit Carson. This became the first American trapping expedition to reach the Pacific Coast from New Mexico where they worked the streams of the San Joaquin and Sacramento Valleys. The nickname “Joaquin” came from this venture. Back in New Mexico the Mexican authorities were at this time imposing increasingly strict restrictions on trade and trapping by Americans and they were always looking over “Joaquin”’s shoulders to discover improprieties despite the fact that during this period of time he considered himself a transplanted New Mexican and had even applied for Mexican citizenship. He is constantly being called before the New Mexican Governor Manuel Armijo for various infractions of the ever-changing Mexican laws. “Joaquin” is reported as speaking Spanish well and even acting as an interpreter for Americans from time to time.

**Christopher “Kit” Carson.** Born on Christmas Eve in Madison County, Kentucky, in 1809 but moved to Howard County, Missouri, as an infant and grew up near the community of Boone’s Lick. He was the 9<sup>th</sup> of 14 children. When Kit was nine years old, his father died making work a necessity for him and many of his brothers and sisters. He remained illiterate for the rest of his life due to lack of education. At age 14 he was working as an apprentice to a saddle and harness maker, but the lure of the West captured him and in 1826 at the age of 16 he joined a wagon train heading down the Santa Fe Trail. He was hired by Young as a cook

for a trapping expedition in 1928. Again in 1929 he was hired by Young as a full-fledged trapper and part of his expedition from Taos to California. After many adventures and “two thousand pounds” of beaver pelts they returned to Taos in the spring of 1831 – the year depicted at Clear Creek. Kit will next be part of Fitzgerald’s Rocky Mountain Fur Company season in Colorado, Wyoming and parts north. Kit has been described at this time in his life as follows: “... a slight, modest, self-reliant youngster, with observant, penetrating, blue-gray eyes, silky flaxen hair; a voice as gentle as a girl’s, and muscles as tireless as those of the toughest of the wild creatures of the woods.”

#### **Past Events and Dates Revelant to Clear Creek:**

**1804** -- St. Louis changed from French into US control and opened the gateway for the trappers.

**1807** -- Manuel Lisa explored the Northwest United States.

**1809** -- The St. Louis Missouri Fur Company began.

**1821** -- Travel to Santa Fe began via the Santa Fe Trail from Independence, Missouri.

**1822** -- The Southwestern region of the United States was explored. Ashley and Henry placed an ad for "enterprising young men" in the Missouri Republican and from it formed The Rocky Mountain Fur Company that was incorporated in 1824.

**1825** -- The first rendezvous was held.

#### **Current Events:**

**1829-1833** -- Golden era of beaver trapping. Taos trappers dominate the fur trade of the Southern Rocky Mountains.

**1830** -- The Rocky Mountain Fur Company was purchased by the five partners – Milton Sublette, Jean Baptiste Gervais, Thomas Fitzpatrick, Henry Fraeb, and James Bridger.

**1831** -- Jedediah Smith, well-known mountain man and a former owner/partner in the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, was killed on an expedition to begin a southwestern fur company.

#### **Future Events/Extra Information:**

**1833** -- Beaver prices were at an all time high.

**1834** -- The Rocky Mountain Fur Company was dissolved.

**1835** -- First buffalo robes were sold at rendezvous. Samuel Colt invented the revolver.

**1836** -- The American Fur Company broke up.

**1837-8** -- This is the start of the decline of the fur trade. The President is Van Buren. In

1837 there was a major smallpox outbreak in Missouri.

**1840** -- The last rendezvous was held.

**1848** -- The Fur Trade gave way to the gold rush.

#### **Costumes/Appearance:**

Pants are broadfalls in gray, white, blue, red and brown.

Shirts are simple colors, in a solid, stripe, or two color plaid.

Buckskin, elk skin, buffalo skin shirts and pants can be mixed with these other clothes.

Shoes are moccasins.

Leather belt with large brass or wrought iron buckles, or sash.

Hat is broad rimmed felt.

Capotes often worn when cold.

Accessories: “possibles bag”, sheathed knife, "medicine bag", Native American style necklace.

**Hair styles:** Most trappers started out wearing their hair shorter than the styles of the time for safety reasons. As their time in the mountains passed and barbering was unavailable, it grew longer. Long hair was often

braided or pulled back. Beards were short when circumstances permitted shaving. Moustaches might distinguish certain nationalities, like the French.

**Language:** An extensive and unique vocabulary was used among these men. To use words as are relevant is essential to a good portrayal; however, the list is too long to include here. See the references at the end of this profile and do online research. See notes on each character for likely accents. Almost all spoke at least some of several languages...Native American languages, French, Spanish, and their own first languages by nationality and region. "Beverly Hillbillies" accents are not appropriate.

**Props:**

Tools and equipment for program activities  
Whittling tools, musical instruments  
Sewing tools for mending  
Tools and supplies for maintenance of equipment

**Program Activities for Campers.** Muzzle Loading Rifle shooting, tomahawk throwing, trapping demonstrations, fur trapper tall tales.

**Staff Roles and Responsibilities as Historical Interpreters:**

Greeting Crews: Mountain Man in character, first person interp  
Check-in: Mountain Man out of character, third person interp  
Black Powder Range: Mountain Man in character or out of character as feasible  
Trade Cabin: Mountain Man in character, first person  
Tomahawk Throwing: Mountain Man in character, first person  
Trapping Demo: Mountain Man in character, first person

**Camper Role:** Greenhorn Mountain "Men" (and women), just arrived to the camp.

**Positive Values:**

- \*Entrepreneurship
- \*Firearm safety
- \*Appreciation of diverse cultures and education
- \*Primitive outdoor skills
- \*Appreciation of dependence upon natural resources.
- \*Camaraderie and teamwork
- \*Reliance on own skills to survive and prosper.

**Relationship to the Goals of the BSA:**

This camp teaches the history of the American Fur Trade and Western Expansion. The Fur Trade Era represents entrepreneurship and the American philosophy of working hard, taking chances, and overcoming obstacles. It also demonstrates how the explorers learned from and appreciated other cultures. Finally, the mountain man theme emphasizes the use of outdoor skills for survival.

**References:**

**A Life Wild and Perilous** -Robert M. Utley  
**Broken Hand: Life of Thomas Fitzgerald** – LeRoy Hafen  
**Jedediah Smith and the Mountain Men of the American West** -John Logan Allen  
**Kit Carson's Autobiography** – Edited by Milo Milton Quaife  
**Trappers and Mountain Men** -Evan Jones and Dale L. Morgan  
**Mountain Men and Fur Trader of the Far West** -LeRoy Hafen  
**The Taos Trappers** -David J. Weber  
**Rocky Mountain Rendezvous 1825-1840** -Fred R. Gowans  
**Shadow on the Tetons** -David E. Jackson  
**The Claiming of the American West** -John C. Jackson  
**The Explorations of William H. Ashley and Jedediah Smith, 1822-1829** -Harrison Clifford Dale  
**Etienne Provost: Man of the Mountains** -Jack B. Tykal  
**The American Fur Trade of the Far West, Vol I and II** -LeRoy Hafen  
**Fur Trapper and Traders of the Far Southwest**-LeRoy Hafen  
**French Fur Traders and Voyageurs in the American West** -LeRoy Hafen  
**A Newer World: Kit Carson, John C. Fremont and the Coming of the American West** -David Roberts

**Mountain Man Sketchbook** (Available in the Seton)  
**Authentic Costumes and Characters of the Wild West** -E. Lisle Reedstrom

**Music: Bent's Old Fort Fur Trade Music Sheet (719) 384-2596**

**Many more online sources are available.**