**The Fur Trade and the West notes for Miranda, Clear Creek**

Rich Loosbrock, Ph.D.

[rdloosbr@adams.edu](mailto:rdloosbr@adams.edu)

@DrRichLoos

Feel free to email or message on Twitter any questions you may have over the summer, or any insights into the camps and roles that you play.

The fur trade is one of the most romanticized periods of history, and in particular the American West. The “wild” aspect is what captures the attention of the popular audience.

But fur trading was a capitalistic enterprise, and trappers and traders were there to make money. The dichotomy is often expectant capitalists vs. adventure seekers. Most fur trappers leaned toward the former.

Trappers are viewed as roamers, but they operated in a highly structured corporate environment. The rendezvous system was an efficient way to funnel supplies to trappers and furs to the market. And they were big companies; essentially the Hudson’s Bay Company and Northwest Company in Canada, and the Rocky Mountain Fur Company and the American Fur Company in the Rockies. Think Coke vs. Pepsi in both areas.

Trappers are always viewed as shaggy white men, but fur companies often required a clean shaven look when not in the wild. Jedediah Smith was the quintessential trader, and he was a pious and religious man who planned to retire from the trade in his 30s before he was killed while traveling the relatively safe Santa Fe Trail.

Often overlooked is the critical, and often dominant role, of Native Americans. They did most of the trapping or buffalo robe trade. The fur trade often transformed Native American lives ahead of contact with whites. In this sense, trappers often became more like Native Americans, particularly in the way they married for economic alliance. Note the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864 in Colorado; there were names such as Bent in the camp of Black Kettle that were attacked by white troops because they were, in theory, Indians.

In the modern day, Americans tend to see the fur trade through the lens of race and nationalism, but these, especially nationalism, would have been very different concepts at that time. Bent’s Fort on the Arkansas is instructive: it was a private fort that would have an incredible diversity of languages, tribes, and nationalities at any given time.