



CASTOR CANADENSIS

Newsletter of the Jedediah Smith Society • University of the Pacific, Stockton, California

SPRING 2015

The Fur Trade

BY HOWARD C. LEWIS

Howard was Treasurer and President of the Historical Society in the 1980s. He was a retired CPA and avid history buff. Howard researched and wrote this article. He gave a talk on this at one of the Society's General Membership meetings.

The Fur Trade is a much larger subject than it first appears. Most Americans tend to think of the fur trade in terms of the Rocky Mountain Rendezvous, when the immortal beaver trappers such as William Ashley, Jed Smith, Jim Bridger, Joe Meek, Tommy Fitzpatrick, Kit Carson, and many others became part of our American heritage.

Hundreds of books have been written about the fur trade era, which can be subdivided into at least ten primary subject areas. For instance:

1. The beaver era of Europe. Western Europe was virtually trapped out by 1600.
2. The arrival of Frenchmen in the St. Lawrence River about 1600, looking for another source of beaver to replace the depleted European supply.
3. The lives of Pierre Raddison (radishes) and Chouart Groseilliers (gooseberries), who found plentiful beaver in South Central Canada and went to England and helped found the Hudson Bay Company.
4. The history of the Hudson Bay Company which has been a major force in the beaver trade since the company was chartered in 1670.
5. The history of Canada, which was developed primarily as a result of exploration and settlements incident to the fur trade.
6. The history of the French Canadian trappers from Montreal who, as a loosely organized group, formed a large portion of the fur trade for many years.
7. The history of the American Fur Company, which would also be a study of the life of Ramsey Crooks as well as John Jacob Astor. Recall, it was Astor who organized and operated a virtual monopoly in the fur trade between approximately 1810 and 1840.
8. The history of the North West Company, based in Montreal, a group of rough, tough Scotsmen. They competed fiercely with both Astor and the Hudson Bay Company until 1821, when the company was merged into the Hudson Bay Company.
9. The history of the free trappers, Scots and French Canadians, and some Indians, who operated out of Michilimackinac. It was this group who, in their zeal, created some of the tensions, which lead the U.S. into the 1812 war with Great Britain. Confrontations with Indians were bloody and commonplace during the years of 1810 to about 1830. It was an unnamed war between the intensely-competitive groups of trappers, who were allied with the French, British, and Americans. History tells us the British and Americans used whiskey to encourage the Indians to raid the opponents; camps and forts. It was a bloody period of our frontier history.
10. The last few years of the fur trade, but probably the most romantic was when U.S. trappers worked their way up the Missouri River and west to and through the Rockies, to the Seeskidee (Green) River, and the rivers of California, Oregon, and Washington. It was this era when the mountain men organized the Rocky Mountain Rendezvous, which caught the imagination of American readers.

For purposes of these remarks, I've decided to cut across all of the major divisions of the fur trade, and limit my comments to a few of the economic and political aspects which had such an impact on the development of the United States and Canada.

Think about those topics I just reeled off. Major treatises can be developed on any of them. Hundreds of books have been written and many archives are stuffed with documents and diaries from the entire fur trade era.

If one attempts to discuss the overall economic, social, and political influences of the quest for beaver skins, then the story becomes so entangled in the fabric of the entire North American Continent, that the fur

The Fur Trade

trade topic gets lost in the shuffle. It deserves much more attention. The result is, I have tried to limit these abbreviated comments to certain economic logistic and economic aspects of the fur trade era.

The American beaver, or *Castor Canadensis*, is a non-migratory fascinating little character. Actually, it is a glorified water rat with a flat tail. The word, *Castor*, is from the Greek for *Gastro* or the stomach, which suggests self-centered gluttony. When roasted, beaver tail is largely muscle, not fat. When cooked, it is light silvery gray inside, like fine fresh pork, and is considered the finest of delicacy on the Plains or waterways, unless, of course, you've had beaver every night for the past month.

There is much evidence in geologic literature of *Castor's* great-great parentage back in geologic time, during the Pleistocene age though and after the Ice Age. Fossil evidence of *Castoroides* in the Ohio Valley suggests he was then 20 feet tall when standing on his back legs. A spinal column of 7 feet and an incisor 11-1/2 inches long.

By contrast, the 24-inch, 35-lb. beaver, as we know him today, can fell a 42-inch cottonwood all by himself. He can fell a 6-inch Aspen in approximately 5 minutes. It is estimated that, in the Rockies and Southern Canada, a pair of mature beavers will destroy over 200 trees per year.

This may be of interest only to another beaver, but, it is impossible for a person to tell a male or female beaver apart. Their sex organs are enclosed in a cloacal chamber.

With the retreat of the glaciers, man increased faster and the *Castors* learned to protect themselves. By 1103, a German Charter conferred an exclusive right to hunt the beaver. The history of Pope Lucius III in 1182 records the protection of beavers through exclusive rights granted to selected monasteries. By the 16th century, *Castor* reserves were being set up in France and Poland, but for practical purposes, the European beaver was extinct by 1600, except in remote areas of Scandinavia and Northern Siberia.

This near extinction of beaver in Europe by the late 16th century, explains why the French entered the St. Lawrence waterway in 1608 to find a replacement supply. The French came in large numbers to pursue the beaver in the areas of present-day Quebec, Three Rivers and Montreal. The French, later joined by Hudson Bay men and Americans, pursued the beaver so relentlessly

across the Continent that by 1840 the U.S. Territory had been pretty well trapped out.

Since the last Rocky Mountain Rendezvous of beaver trappers in 1840, the lack of demand for castor pelts has allowed the glorified water rat to make a significant comeback. In the meantime, the hardy trappers and mountaineers had to find other ways of earning a livelihood.

As a side light, today, the beaver is an active menace to our Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. He burrows into and undercuts levees, to the costly detriment of reclamation districts. In at least one instance, *Castor* got the blame for the flooding of a Delta island.

Let's take a quick look at some facts of the beaver area in North America.

- A. As I have already mentioned, the North American trapping industry was dominated by the French, who later became known as Canadians. Also, some of the Eastern Indians learned the trapping trade under the French teachers.
- B. The Hudson Bay Company, organized in 1670, they operated over an immense area, all of present Canada and portions of the U.S., including northern, central, the Pacific Northwest, and the West Coast. In 1846, the British (HBC) retreated above the 49th parallel.
- C. North West Company, a group formed in 1784 by Scots and Canadians. They primarily marketed their pelts through the Montreal traders. They competed head-to-head with the Hudson Bay Company. In 1813, they pressured John Jacob Astor to give up his grand plan of taking over the Oregon-Washington area. Such men as Alexander MacKenzie, Wilson P. Hunt, Peter Skene Ogden, Ramsey Crooks, John Work, Dr. John McLoughlin, David Thompson, and many, many others, were the spark plugs of the North West Company.
- D. Montreal dominated this group consisting of the free trappers or small independent French brigades which had trapped in the Great Lakes and Ohio Valley areas before and during the United States revolutionary years, and until approximately 1820. Competition and Indian hostilities forced them to become allied with larger groups.
- E. The United States. There was a smattering of small initial thrusts, but it was not until 1806, after Lewis

The Fur Trade

& Clark showed the way over the Continental Divide, that American trappers became active. Many trappers worked out of the Machihac region, using Canadian, British or American citizenship, depending on what they needed. History also tells us that Indians were used to evade the laws designed to regulate the fur industry. John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company was probably the most organized of the Americans. Manuel Lisa and his Missouri Fur Company was active for a few years. The most aggressive of the far western thrusts of U.S. activity occurred soon after 1822, when William Ashley recruited young adventurers into what became the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. They demonstrated that South Pass provided a practical roadway to the Pacific Coast river systems.

- F. The Spaniards. The poor Spanish. They were there first, had some of the strongest geographic and political positions, only to let it slip away through inept government. Really, it was lack of funds and no delegation of authority or local executives that caused Spain's problems. Her inability to act timely,

with authority and strength, led to her loss of fur-rich territories. As to beaver trapping, it has been said, the Spaniards had the first and best opportunities and were probably the least effective.

Now that we have looked at the territory and given thought to the groups that were active, let's look at the distances involved. It was an incredible feat for the early organizations to effectively control their far-flung operations. Water provided the primary method of transportation, and written letters provided the only means of communication. The transportation problems encountered in the Rockies and the western U.S., were the shallow rivers with extremely fast waters due to significant drops in elevation. By contrast, in north, central and eastern U.S. and Canadian territories, elevation changes were moderate, there was a proliferation of lakes, and rivers were slow: Overall, waterways provided an excellent means of transportation, except in the Rockies.

To Be Continued...Summer 2015



Jedediah Smith Society

Announcements



Scholarship Winner Siena Gerbert

The University of the Pacific is proud to announce **Siena Gerbert** as the **2015 Jedediah Smith Scholarship Award**. "It is my great honor to inform you that you have been selected by the History Department faculty for the 2014-2015 Jedediah Smith Scholarship." Congratulations!

The faculty praised your outstanding work in Fall 2014 in California History, for which you earned an "A." Your presentation on Jed Smith himself, your research paper on the impact of the Gold Rush on urbanization and your "A+" scores on both the mid-term and the final exam make you an ideal candidate for the award. The award is underwritten by the Jed Smith Society, a scholarly organization founded in 1956 dedicated to preserving the history of mountain men and the exploration of California. The award will be included as part of your financial aid package."

Greg Rohlf, Chairman
History Department, University of the Pacific



Jedediah Smith Society

Announcements continued

Joe Molter, Castor Editor Retires

We would like to express our appreciation to Joe Molter, Castor editor for his untiring contributions as editor, researcher and author for this great newsletter. Joe's work has kept this publication well received by its members throughout the United States and Canada. Jed would be proud of his excellent work.

Welcome New Members

Please welcome our most recent new members, **Paige and Steve Mair** of Sacramento.

Soler Graphics

Irene Soler Steiner of Soler Graphics has worked for a number of years on the formatting of the great Castor Newsletter. She will continue to work with us on format and publication of our Castor newsletter. We thank her for all she has done to make this newsletter outstanding.

Castor Publication

By now, most of you have received a member questionnaire to help update our mailing list. Thank you so much to those of you who have taken the time to respond. This new updated list will be assembled in time for the Summer edition of Castor. Your response has been overwhelming in favor of emailing your newsletters in order to save costs and paper. Those who are unable to receive email format will still be snail-mailed a printed copy. We will send it to you in a .pdf format requiring Adobe Reader which is available free for download. The current Spring Castor will go out as a printed edition to all members.

Articles for Publication

If you have an article that you would like published in Castor, please submit it double-spaced in an MS Word format to the Editorial Team:

Ed Sieckert at ed@sieckert.com or Wayne Knauf at wknauf@sbcglobal.net

Issues will be Winter, Spring, Summer and Fall. Until an editor is selected, the Team will work to get the Castor assembled. If there is anyone who is published, likes to write and has a good Jedediah Smith background and is interested in becoming editor please contact the Editorial Team

New Events

San Bernardino County Museum Exhibit

Joe Molter reports: "Turn Left at the Rockies" exhibit will introduce visitors to the "Mountain Men" who came to Southern California between 1826 and 1850. The exhibit runs Feb 7 to end of 2015. This museum is located at 2014 Orange Tree Lane, Redlands. For more information contact www.sbcountymuseum.org



Jedediah Smith Society
Spring Meeting May 16, 2015
Micke Grove Museum, 11793 N. Micke Grove Road,
Lodi, CA • 209 331-2055

- Cost** \$6.00 per car admission, Parking available, bring a lunch and enjoy the museum's new displays Settler's Exhibit, Trappers/French Camp Exhibit, Native American Exhibit.
- Time** Meeting will start at 1 PM. Presentation to be 30 minutes, 10 minutes for questions
- Opening** 1:00-1:15 Bob Shannon President of the Jedediah Smith Society
1:15-1:30 David Stuart, Museum Director, Welcome to the Micke Grove Museum
- Presenters** 1:30-2:00 Joe Molter, JSS Director. Jed's overlook Red Bluff to Platina.
2:10-2:40 Darrell Thomas, JSS Director, First to the West
3:00-3:20 Refreshments
3:20-3:40 Steve Mair, JSS Director, Henry Miller "Cattle King " of the San Joaquin alley
3:50-4:20 Ed Sieckert, JSS Director, University of the Pacific- Jedediah Smith Special Collections and how to use them.

Note: Projector and remote provided, PowerPoint available. Please bring presentation on Flash Drive.

Meeting Moderator : Wayne Knauf. If you have any questions regarding the meeting please send an email to wknauf@sbcglobal.net

Fall Rendezvous 2015

Dear Members,

Please mark your calendar for November 7th, 2015 for our annual member Rendezvous!

The Jedediah Smith Society (JSS) has secured the Sutter's Fort California State Park for the afternoon and evening of Saturday, November 7th for this event. The venue for the day will allow you to tour Sutter's Fort during the afternoon hours there will be Fort docents in period dress. You'll see cloth being made and dried, a blacksmith shop in operation and a contingent of free trappers in period dress.

At 4:00 p.m. there will be JSS Board of Director's meeting.

Prior to dinner, JSS members Eric Jung, Mike McWhirter and I will make brief slide presentation on the laying of the Jedediah Smith's Monument on the ridge overlooking Indian Valley commemorating Jedediah Smith's Sierra Nevada crossing in 1827. During the dinner, we will have a presentation by the Sutter's Fort State Park Docent on the California Fur Trapping industry use of the Sutter's Fort during that period.

The cost of the dinner is \$60.00 per person.

The good news is the JSS Board of Directors has voted to support the first 26 folks who commit to attending the JSS Rendezvous by offering you a \$30.00 discount per person for early sign up.

Early sign up ends June 1, 2015. No refunds after June 30, 2015.

First come first serve basis.

Make Checks Payable to: Jedediah Smith Society

Please send your checks to:

Mr. Ed Sieckert – Treasurer JSS, 1040 West Kettleman Lane #147, Lodi, CA 95240

Yours,

Richard S. Cimino, JSS BOD member and event coordinator • Email: rscimino@gmail.com

INVITE A FRIEND TO JOIN

Jedediah Smith Society membership is open to all who wish to join in support of research, preservation and information about the 1st American arriving overland 1826 and other California pioneers of the 18th & 19th centuries.

Student \$10.00	Individual \$20.00
Sponsor \$50.00	Patron \$100.00

NAME _____
ADDRESS _____
CITY _____
PHONE _____

Please make check payable to: JEDEDIAH SMITH SOCIETY.

Send to: Ed Sieckert, Treasurer JSS
1040 West Kettleman Lane #147, Lodi, CA 95240

Save these dates!

Spring Rendezvous and Meeting 2015

May 16, 2015

Micke Grove Museum - Lodi, CA

Fall Rendezvous 2015

November 7th, 2015

Sutter's Fort California State Park

(See page 5 for additional details)



Jedediah Smith Society
1040 West Kettleman Lane #147
Lodi, CA 95240

Dues will expire Jan 1st

