



CASTOR CANADENSIS

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Historical Use of the Term “Mountain Man”

By Jim Hardee

Historical use of this terminology for those hearty souls who braved the Rocky Mountains in search of beaver is scarce prior to the waning days of the beaver trade. One of the earliest consistent uses of the phrase comes from George Frederick Ruxton’s fictional story, *Life in the Far West*, first published in 1848.¹ Prior to that time, most sources seem to prefer the term “mountaineer.” As late as 1837, Washington Irving gave that name to what he called a totally different class of frontiersmen in the *Adventures of Captain Bonneville*.² These were undoubtedly the same fellows referred to today as “mountain men.”

Irving was not the first to use this nomenclature for the trappers of the Rocky Mountains. Nearly thirteen years earlier, William Ashley, made numerous references to his men in a report to General Henry Atkinson. Generally, Ashley regularly uses the simple phrase “my men” or “my party,” but in the early paragraphs of his letter to Atkinson, Ashley says:

I left Fort Atkinson on the 3d November 1824. On the afternoon of the 5th I overtook my party of Mountaineers (twenty five in number) who had in charge fifty pack horses, a wagon & team, etc. ³

Osborne Russell, who kept a journal of his daily affairs in the Rocky Mountains, typically related his life as a “trapper,” not a mountain man. However, he did refer to himself as a mountaineer once he was stationed at newly built Fort Hall in 1834.⁴ Warren Angus Ferris called the men in his party “hunters” but differentiated between company-hired, or engaged, men and “free men.” On several occasions, Ferris uses the term “mountaineers” and twice mentions “mountainers,” but never “mountain man.”⁵ Both of these diaries recount experiences of the early 1830’s. Rufus Sage, who traveled among these men for three years beginning in 1836, reported, “A genuine mountaineer is a problem hard to solve.”⁶

On the Missouri River, the term “montagnard” and its

translation, “mountaineer” continued in use even after the heyday of the fur trade had passed. Rudolph F. Kurz, a Swiss artist who lived among the frontiersmen on the Upper Missouri from 1846 to 1852, referred to a crew of boatmen carrying buffalo hides down river to St. Louis as “Mountaineers, a name associated with many dangerous adventures, much painful endurance, but also with much romance and pleasure.”⁷

In her introduction to *Robert Newell’s Memoranda*, Dorothy O. Johansen postulates the term “mountain man” may have originated among the trappers themselves. Those who had first come into the mountains with Henry/Ashley brigades and served their apprentice days under one of the successive partnership fur companies may have wanted a prestige not shared by latecomers to the Rockies.⁸ Matthew C. Field mentioned just such a group as late as 1843, calling them “Mountain Freemen.”⁹

Indeed, there is evidence of the occupational pride of fur traders. Henry Brackenridge noted as early as 1811 that men who had already been up the Missouri River were “exceedingly proud” and claimed a “kind of precedence over the rest of the crew.”¹⁰ He described the Platte River as “a point of much importance...All those who had not passed it before, were required to be shaved, unless they could compromise the matter by a treat.”¹¹ Later, at rendezvous, many new recruits were initiated thorough practical jokes and tall tales.

An interesting comment was made by the Reverend Henry H. Spalding at the Nez Perce mission at Lapwai in 1840. He notes that Craig and Larrison “two mountain men, have arrived, probably to spend the winter. I have seen enough of Mountain men.”¹² Historian T.C. Elliot believed this may have been the earliest recorded use of the term, at least in Oregon.¹³

As for the Rocky Mountain region overall, “mountain man” showed up a little earlier. In the spring of 1837, Sir William Drummond Stewart and his private escort accompanied the American Fur Company caravan headed

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for rendezvous. Stewart had engaged Alfred J. Miller as artist to his expedition. Miller made numerous sketches and watercolors, which were usually annotated. *The West of Alfred Jacob Miller* contains two hundred different examples of Miller’s paintings along with accompanying field notes.¹⁴ Miller predominately referred to the beaver men as “trappers.” He is careful to differentiate between hunters and trappers often describing the latter as beaver trappers, free trappers or Mountain trappers.

There are at least two times in this collection of art, however, where Miller used the term “mountain man.” In his narrative for *Auguste and His Horse*, Miller specifies Auguste is “one of the best of all our mountain men.” Similarly, field notes for *Rendezvous* explained that Captain Bridger was “a famous mountain man.”¹⁵ The context lends some credence to Johansen’s theory of the term’s use as evidence of occupational pride.

Interestingly, Miller only uses the term “mountaineer” one time and that is in the title for *Group of a Mountaineer and Kansas Indian*. In the body of the note’s text, though, he reverted to “trapper.”¹⁶

Going back several more years, on July 26, 1834, John K. Townsend wrote in his narrative:

*Captain W. [Wyeth] and myself supped with Mr. McKay in his lodge. I am much pleased with this gentleman: he unites the free, frank and open manners of the mountain man, with the grace and affability of the Frenchman.*¹⁷

This usage could also be viewed as a term indicating honor. Similarly, John C. Fremont referred to Etienne Provost as “L’homme des montagnes.”¹⁸ Clearly, Fremont’s use of the French version of the term singles out the distinct character of Provost.

Francis Parkman used the term “mountain man” in somewhat of a different manner. He said: “Frederic, also, stretched his tall raw-boned proportions close by the bourgeois, and ‘mountain men’ completed the group”¹⁹ By putting the words within quotations, Parkman may have been signaling a word unfamiliar to his readers or pointing out terminology with special meaning peculiar to the mountains.

A rather interesting use of these terms is found in the account of Joseph Meek’s adventures as a trapper, written by Frances Fuller Victor. In her introduction, she related that Meek “still prides himself most of all on having been a ‘mountain man,’” using quotation marks around the

word as Parkman did. However, the word never came up again in the text while “mountaineer” was used twenty-four times.²⁰ It is interesting to note that Victor wrote the book in 1870, well after “mountain man” was common.

Earlier fur hunters who kept journals or diaries, such as Wilson Price Hunt or Peter Skene Ogden, use neither mountaineer nor mountain man in referring to their men. Others who left a written record, such as John Wyeth, William Kittson and Zenas Leonard, also choose to not to call trappers by either of these designations.

Then, along comes George Frederick Ruxton who went to the mountains in 1846, several years after the last rendezvous, viewed by many as the close of the beaver trade’s heyday. Ruxton is considered the first to employ trappers as literary heroes, paving the way for writers such as James Fenimore Cooper. Ruxton spent most of the winter of 1847 with the trappers and hunters at a trader’s fort near present Pueblo, CO, absorbing the facts and flavor of mountain life.

Ruxton waited all the way to the sixth paragraph of the first chapter to introduce the term “mountain man” then never looked back.²¹ Ruxton’s use of the term became so common that many consider this the common jargon of the day. *The Dictionary of Americanisms, On Historical Principles* goes so far as to list Ruxton as the earliest source of this term, thus Ruxton has become the historical reference for this word’s authenticity.²²

Essentially, the use of “mountain man” may be a historical misnomer. At the least, it was no more prevalent (probably less so) in the written record, than other names and titles for the fur hunters. In terms of the early Rocky Mountain fur trade, “mountaineer” appears to be a far more widely accepted term for the men who trapped the valuable pelts of the beaver.

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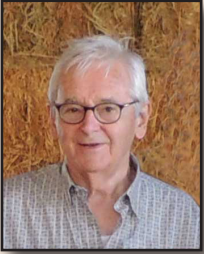
- ¹ George Frederick Ruxton, *Life in the Far West*, edited by Leroy R. Hafen (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964), 6.
- ² Washington Irving, *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville in the Rocky Mountains and the Far West*, 2 vols (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea & Blanchard, 1837), 1: 27.
- ³ Dale L. Morgan, ed. *The West of William Ashley*. (Denver: The Old West Publishing Co., 1964), 100.
- ⁴ Osborne Russell, *Journal of a Trapper*, edited by Aubrey L. Haines. (Portland: Champoege Press, 1955), 5.

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- ⁵ Warren A. Ferris, *Life in the Rocky Mountains*, edited by Leroy R. Hafen. (Denver: Old West Publishing Co., 1983), 196, 299, 361, 362, 385.
- ⁶ Rufus Sage, “Scenes in the Rocky Mountains and in Oregon, California, New Mexico, Texas, and the Grand Prairies,” in *Rufus Sage, His Letters and Papers, 1836-1847*, edited by Leroy and Ann Hafen, 2 vols (Glendale, CA: The Arthur H. Clark Co., 1956), 1: 127.
- ⁷ Rudolph F. Kurz, *Journal of Rudolph Freiderich Kurz*, translated by Myrtis Jarrel, edited by J. N. B. Hewitt (Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 15, Washington, 1937), 30.
- ⁸ Robert Newell, *Robert Newell’s Memoranda*, edited by Dorothy O. Johansen. (Portland; Champoege Press, 1959), 2.
- ⁹ Matthew C. Field, *Prairie and Mountain Sketches*, edited by Kate L. Gregg and John F. McDermott (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957), 138.
- ¹⁰ Henry M. Brackenridge, “Journal of a Voyage up the Missouri,” in Rueben Gold Thwaites, ed. *Early Western Travels*, 32 vols (Cleveland: The Arthur H. Clark Co., 1906), 6: 31.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 77.
- ¹² Henry H. Spalding and Asa Bowen Smith, *The Diaries and Letters of Henry H. Spalding and Asa Bowen Smith Relating to the Nez Perce Mission*, edited by Clifford M. Drury. (Glendale, CA: The Arthur H. Clark Co., 1958), 303.
- ¹³ T. C. Elliot, “Religion among the Flatheads,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (March 1936): 7.
- ¹⁴ Marvin C. Ross, *The West of Alfred Jacob Miller* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968).
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.* PLs 10 and 159.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.* PL 42.
- ¹⁷ John K. Townsend, *Narrative of a Journey across the Rocky Mountains* (Boston: Perkins and Marvin, 1839), in Rueben Gold Thwaites, ed. *Early Western Travels* vol. 21 (Cleveland: The Arthur H. Clark Co., 1905), 226.
- ¹⁸ John Charles Fremont, *The Expeditions of John Charles Fremont*, vol. 1, edited by. Donald Jackson and Mary Lee Spence. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970), 50.
- ¹⁹ Francis Parkman, *The Oregon Trail* (New York: New American Library, 1950), 62.
- ²⁰ Frances Fuller Victor, *The River of the West* (Hartford, CN: R. W. Bliss & Co., 1870), iv.
- ²¹ Ruxton, *Life in the Far West*, 6.
- ²² Mitford M. Mathews, *A Dictionary of Americanisms, On Historical Principles*, 2 vols (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951).



Society Happenings

- With sadness, we present this notice of John Parker Talbot’s passing on November, 10, 2013, at his residence in Shelburne Bay, Vermont. Previously of Lodi, CA, John was a close friend of many, active member and faithfully served for many years on the Board of Directors and past President of the Jedediah Smith Society. He will truly be missed! 
- The Society recently purchased from the Kansas State Historical Society, a copy of an unpublished manuscript titled: *The Life and Adventures of Jedediah S. Smith, A Knight of the West, Path Finder of the Mountain Country*, a biography written by Ezra Delos Smith sometime prior to 1914. E. D. Smith was the grandson of Jed’s older brother Ralph, who spent the major portion of his life researching and documenting his relation’s history. Even though E. D. makes some assumptions that are erroneous, which are the result of him not having pertinent documents we now possess, he does reveal many interesting facts about Jed’s life that are little known to most of us. Because this manuscript appears to have been overlooked in many bibliographies of prominent works and its high potential to contain unknown truths, we the Board of Directors have deposited this copy into the archives of Jedediah Smith Society, Holt-Atherton Special Collection, University of the Pacific, in Stockton, CA, to be available for further research.
- The Society is currently working on replacing several historical moments representing Jedediah’s exploits, which in past years have been vandalized and stolen. One is located east of Bakersfield, CA, and the other on the south side of the Great Salt Lake in Utah.
- We are currently laying plans for the upcoming Spring Luncheon that is tentatively being scheduled for March 15, 2014. It will include a lunch, speaker and fieldtrip to a local museum and historic spot involving the San Joaquin Valley, Jedediah Smith and the Hudson’s Bay Company. Mark your calendars!
- The Board of Directors is still in search for an editor of our newsletter, the *Castor Canadensis*. If you have interest, please contact the Society.

Jedediah Smith Society

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.

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Fall Rendezvous 2013 Recap

On September 14th of this year, the Society met for its Fall Rendezvous in the historic Gold Rush town of Murphys, located in the southern portion of the golden belt of the Mother Lode in the beautiful Sierra Nevada Mountains of California. This mining town still retains its early flavor with its locust tree lined streets and its historic brick, limestone and clapboard buildings of various shapes and sizes, some being survivors from the 1850's! We held our meeting in one of these buildings, the Orphir Bear Mountain Masonic Lodge No. 33, founded in 1853.

This area is also unique in that it lies close to the actual route that Jedediah Smith was traveling in 1827 as he progressed up the Stanislaus River canyon towards the crest of the Sierras to be the first Caucasian to cross this mighty range. The Masons were gracious hosts, giving us a tour of their structure, shared their history and cooking and serving us a mighty fine lunch. Our speaker, Don DeYoung, a local historian who has spent many years researching the unique life of the person called "Monte Wolf", rendered a fascinating story of this hermit trapper who lived his last years in the wilds above Murphys. All who attended this event went away filled, informed and happy to be in such beautiful surroundings. The Society would like to publicly thank one of our members, Eric Jung, who made the arrangements for the speaker and location, a possibility.



**Orphir Bear Mountain
Masonic Lodge No. 33**



**Jedediah Smith Monument
in Murphy's, CA**



**Don DeYoung speaking to the
Jedediah Smith Society**



Jedediah Smith Society
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Dues will expire Jan 1st

