

Why the Mountain Men Went West

“Why did the mountain men go west?”

It's a question that you'll hear from time to time. This is especially true of people after they begin to learn about all of the hardships the men faced while trapping. At first, students of mine seem to understand why they went west. I mean, why not? Who wouldn't want to feel like the first man to ever glimpse a mountain valley, or spend their nights camped underneath the brilliance of the Milky Way? Then, after learning about the freezing to death, the Indian fights, the starving times, the stories of men who nearly thirsted to death, the grizzly attacks, my students start to wonder.

It's true the mountain men led more perilous lives than most realize. One documentary I watched discusses this danger in great detail. Respected mountain man historian Fred Gowans relates how dangerous the life was for PBS's *The West* when he said:

"It was a very, very dangerous life. They were killed by Blackfoot Indians. They were killed by grizzly bears. And maybe most devastating of all, they were killed by Mother Nature. Can you imagine what it would be like... setting a trap in November... up to your armpits in water, and working a stream all day long in those kind of conditions? Those men died of fever, they died of pneumonia. How many men died on some unknown stream in the Rocky Mountains, never heard of again? You know, there was a common understanding in the fur trade, if you didn't show up at the rendezvous, you were considered dead."

So, the question remains, why did mountain men go west? Well, you can conjecture all you want, or you can hear it right from the horse's mouth.

Primary Sources

In fact, if you want to know the motivations for why the mountain men went west, there is an abundance of primary source material on the issue. After searching the online records of the American Mountain Men, I pulled several quotes from journals that noted their reason for leaving. As you can imagine, there were actually as many reasons as there was people. Here are the journal passages where it was clearly indicated why the person went west.

James Beckworth - Adventure - **1824**

"Being possessed with a strong desire to see the celebrated Rocky Mountains, and the great Western wilderness so much talked about, I engaged in General Ashley's Rocky

Mountain Fur Company. The company consisted of twenty-nine men, who were employed by the Fur Company as hunters and trappers."

William Craig - Running from the law - **1818ish**

"He was born in the Old Dominion, as he loved to call his native state (Virginia) in Green Brier county about the year 1799 or 1800. At the age of eighteen he became involved in an altercation or quarrel with one much older than he was and was forced to kill him in self-defense. Being quite young and somewhat alarmed at his act he made his "getaway" and he found himself in time in the city of St. Louis. This city at that time was the emporium for the fur traders, trappers and frontiersmen of the northwest. Craig soon joined a party of French Canadians who were on the eve of starting up the Missouri river on a trading expedition and their mode of transportation was with bateaus which made it a long tedious journey. When near Fort Benton they encountered a party of trappers, their destination being the Rocky mountains. Craig severed his connections with the Canadians, joined the trappers, and in time became a full-fledged trapper and plainsman."

James Clyman - For work - **1824**

"Haveing fomed a Slight acquaintance with Mr Ashley we occasionally passed each other on the streets at length one day Meeting him he told me he had been looking for me a few days back and enquiredd as to my employment I informed him that I was entirely unemployed he said he wished then that I would assist him ingageing men t for his Rockey mountain epedition and he wished me to call at his housse in the evening which I accordingly did getting instrutions as to whare I would most probably find men willing to engage which found in grog Shops and other sinks of degredation he rented a house & furnished it with provisions Bread from to Bakers -- pork plenty, which the men had to cook for themselves"

Warren Ferris - Adventure - **1830**

"Westward! Ho! It is the sixteenth of the second month A. D. 1830. and I have joined a trapping, trading, hunting expedition to the Rocky Mountains. Why, I scarcely know, for the motives that induced me to this step were of a mixed complexion, - something like the pepper and salt population of this city of St. Louis. Curiosity, a love of wild adventure, and perhaps also a hope of profit, - for times are hard, and my best coat has a sort of sheepish hang ~~atoghrisat~~tion to enco make me look upon the project with an eye of favour."

Thomas James - They were given false promises or were lied to - **1809**

“We Americans were all private adventurers, each on his own hook, and were led into the enterprise by the promises of the company, who agreed to subsist us to the trapping grounds, we helping to navigate the boats, and on our arrival there they were to furnish us each with a rifle and sufficient ammunition, six good beaver traps and also four men of their hired French, to be under our individual commands for a period of three years. By the terms of the contract each of us was to divide one-fourth of the profits of our joint labor with the four men thus to be appointed to us. How we were deceived and taken in, will be seen in the sequel.”

Charles Larpenteur - Curiosity - **1833**

“After two months' residence at the rapids I returned to St. Louis, with full determination to see more of the wild Indians. General Ashley, who was then carrying on great beaver trapping in the Rocky Mountains, was in the habit of hiring as many as 100 men every spring. They were engaged for 18 months, to return in the fall of the following year with the furs. Not long after I came from the rapids General Ashley's party returned from the mountains with 100 packs of beaver. A pack of beaver is made up of 60 average beavers, supposed to weigh 100 lbs., worth in New York at that time from \$7 to \$8 per lb. It is impossible to describe my feelings at the sight of all that beaver — all those mountain men unloading their mules, in their strange mountain costume — most of their garments of buckskin and buffalo hide, but all so well greased and worn that it took close examination to tell what they were made of. To see the mules rolling and dusting is interesting and shocking at the same time; most of them, having carried their burdens of 200 pounds' weight for about 2,000 miles, return with scarcely any skin on their backs; they are peeled from withers to tail, raw underneath from use of the surcingle, and many are also lame.

William Sublette and Robert Campbell had attended General Ashley on several trips to the mountains — Campbell as clerk, mostly on account of his health; he had previously been clerk for Keith and O'Fallon. Sublette was a farmer near St. Louis, but was more for trapping beaver than farming.

The sight of all this made me determined to take a trip of the same kind.”

James Pattie - To heal a broken heart - **1824**

“In this remote wilderness, Mr. Pattie lived in happiness and prosperity, until the mother of the author was attacked by consumption. Although her husband was, as has been said, strongly endowed with the wandering propensity, he was no less profoundly attached to his family; and in this wild region, the loss of a beloved wife was irreparable. She soon sunk under the disorder, leaving nine young children. Not long after, the youngest died, and was deposited by her side in this far land.

The house, which had been the scene of domestic quiet, cheerfulness and joy, and the hospitable home of the stranger, sojourning in these forests, became dreary and desolate. Mr. Pattie, who had been noted for the buoyancy of his gay spirit, was now silent, dejected, and even inattentive to his business; which, requiring great activity and constant attention, soon ran into disorder.

About this time, remote trapping and trading expeditions up the Missouri, and in the interior of New Mexico began to be much talked of. Mr. Pattie seemed to be interested in these expeditions, which offered much to stir the spirit and excite enterprize. To arouse him from his indolent melancholy, his friends advised him to sell his property, convert it into merchandize and equipments for trapping and hunting, and to join in such an undertaking. To a man born and reared under the circumstances [xi] of his early life — one to whom forests, and long rivers, adventures, and distant mountains, presented pictures of familiar and birth day scenes — one, who confided in his rifle, as a sure friend, and who withal, connected dejection and bereavement with his present desolate residence; little was necessary to tempt him to such an enterprise.”

Rufus Sage - Adventure - **1841**

“Yet, why did I go? —what was my object? Let me explain: Dame Nature bestowed upon me lavishly that innate curiosity, and fondness for things strange and new, of which every one is more or less possessed. Phrenologists would declare my organ of Inquisitiveness to be largely developed; and, certain it is, I have a great liking to tread upon unfrequented ground, and mingle among scenes at once novel and romantic. Love of adventure, then, was the great prompter, while an enfeebled state of health sensibly admonished me to seek in other parts that invigorating air and climate denied by the diseased atmosphere of a populous country. I also wished to acquaint myself with the geography of those comparatively unexplored regions, —their geological character, curiosities, resources, and natural advantages, together with their real condition, present inhabitants, inducements to emigrants, and most favorable localities for settlements, to enable me to speak from personal knowledge upon subjects so interesting to the public mind, at the present time, as are the above. Here, then, were objects every way worthy of attention, and vested with an importance that would render my excursion not a mere idle jaunt for the gratification of selfish curiosity. This much by way of prelude, —now to the task in hand.”

F.A. Wislizenus M.D. - Adventure (mostly) and science (just a little) - **1839**

“SOME human beings, like birds of passage, are ill at ease when kept for a considerable length of time under the same sky. They consider all Nature one great family; the whole world their home. I will not decide whether or not I belong to this class; but I do know that from time to time an irresistible fever for wandering seizes me, and that I find no better

remedy against the moods and crochets of hum-drum daily life than change of place and of air.

Chained for several years to an exacting medical practice, in which I had tasted to the full the sorrows and pleasures of the active physician, I felt the need of mental and physical recreation. An excursion to the cultivated part of the United States, through the greater part of which I had already traveled, suited neither my means nor my inclinations. The far West, with its wilderness and its aboriginals, was far more to my liking. Apart from the selfish purpose of personal enjoyment, I had another in view; perhaps I might contribute something, in proportion to my limited knowledge in natural sciences and my narrow means, toward a better understanding of this region, where as yet our information in many respects partakes of the fabulous”

Nathaniel Wyeth (recorded by James Wyeth) - To make money - **1832**

“Enterprising young men run away with the idea that the farther they go from home, the surer they will be of making a fortune.

Mr. Wyeth, or as we shall hereafter call him, Captain Wyeth, as being leader of the Band of the Oregon adventurers, after having inspired twenty-one persons with his own high hopes and expectations (among whom was his own brother, Dr. Jacob Wyeth, and a gun-smith, a black-smith, two carpenters, and two fishermen, the rest being farmers and laborers, brought up to no particular trade) was ready, with his companions, to start off to the Pacific Ocean, the first of March, 1832, to go from Boston to the mouth of Columbia river by land.”

As you can see, the mountain men went west for a variety of different reasons. What isn't here is all of the motivations for the countless men that didn't ever record it. Whatever their reason, many of them may not have fully understood the dangerous life they were agreeing to when they left. Over time, they would all come face to face with their mortality at one point or another.