Reader's Guide

to the Mountain Men

of the American West

Compiled by Stuart Wier

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This is a guide to the best books about the mountain men of the American west which I know about. Anyone can find a book here to suit them: casual readers, students, enthusiasts, reenactors, and historians. I include a few less distinguished books, too, when they are the only thing about a topic.

For some fifteen years -- roughly speaking, 1823 to 1838 and beyond -- the western U.S. was the domain of the mountain men, fur trappers who spent years traveling and living in the wilderness. Long before wagon trains, settlers, gold rushes, cavalry, Indian wars, cowboys, wild west towns, or railroads, mountain men were the first from the U.S. to see the Rocky Mountains and the lands from the plains to the Pacific. Their life was highly free and adventuresome, and often dangerous and short, lived in a shining wilderness.

Where to begin? Many books, many choices. For a readable and short introduction try *Give Your Heart to the Hawks* by Winfred Blevins. For detailed histories try *A Life Wild and Perilous* by Robert M. Utley or the classic history *Across the Wide Missouri* by Bernard DeVoto. Or try some of the best biographies, such as *Westering Man The Life of Joseph Walker* by Bil Gilbert and *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West* by Dale L. Morgan. For adventures or "camp fire tales" try the personal journals and narratives written by some of the mountain men themselves.
Histories of The Mountain Men


A Life Wild and Perilous: Mountain Men and the Paths to the Pacific. Robert M. Utley. Henry Holt 1997. A really excellent recent history of the entire era, based on extensive research which only a few have equaled. The emphasis is on key mountain men, the fur trade, and geographical discoveries. This is the big view; don't expect campfire stories. Also published as After Lewis and Clark Mountain Men and the Paths to the Pacific.


Journals and Personal Narratives by Mountain Men and Travelers in the Mountains

Journal of a Trapper. Osborne Russell. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965. "...perhaps the best account of the life of a fur trapper in the Rocky Mountains when the trade there was at it peak."


Across the Rockies to the Columbia. James Kirk Townsend. Intro. by Donald Jackson. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978. This is the account by a naturalist who traveled with Wyeth's train to rendezvous and the Pacific in 1834.


From Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains: Major Stephen Long's Expedition, 1819-1820. Stephen Long; Maxine Benson, ed. (Niwot, 1988). A one-volume abridgement of Long's account, with a bibliography. Long met a party of "French trappers" at Pikes Peak in 1820, and did not remark that this was unusual -- who were they?


A Narrative of Colonel Robert Campbell's Experiences in the Rocky Mountain Fur Trade from


Rocky Mountain Album A Fur Trade Sampler. Mike Moore. Macon Georgia: Historical Enterprises, 2004. A day by day account of a year in the mountain man's west, with journal entries for most days of the year from early writers on that day. (order from amm1616@comcast.net; 303 - 238 - 4656).


Journal of An Exploring Tour beyond the Rocky Mountains... in the years 1835, 1836, and 1837. Samuel Parker. Ithaca: 1842. Parker was a missionary who traveled across the west of the mountain men.


Prairie and Mountain Sketches. Matthew Field. Kate L. Gregg and John Frances McDermott, eds.
Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957. Field was one of a party of excursionists in William Drummond Stewart's last trip to the mountains in 1843.


The Oregon Trail, Sketches of Prairie and Rocky Mountain Life. Francis Parkman. 1849. Many editions. Account of Parkman's visit to Wyoming in 1845. Parkman was a top nineteenth-century historian, and thought highly of his mountain man guide Henry Chatillon.


Travels in the Interior of North America in the Years 1809, 1810, and 1811. John Bradbury. Liverpool: Smith and Galway, 1817; reprinted Thwaites, in Thwaites, Early Western Travels (next).


Biographies


Westering Man: The Life of Joseph Walker. Bil Gilbert. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985. Gilbert has distilled a very impressive range of knowledge into one of the top books of the western frontier. You are guaranteed to be impressed by new and important insights in frontier history. Along the way you meet one of the best mountain men "An excellent biography, perhaps the best biography of any mountain man"- Robert Utley


Ewing Young, Master Trapper. Kenneth L. Holmes. Portland Oregon: Binfords and Mort, 1967. (about Young, see also the article in Hafen's Mountain Men, below).


Kit Carson and the Indians. Tom Dunlay. Univ. of Nebraska, 2000. much longer than the biography listed above by Thelma S. Guild and Harvey L. Carter, and less on fur trade period.
Life and Adventures of George Nidever 1802 - 1883. Wm. Henry Ellison, editor. Nidever traveled through Texas and New Mexico in 1830. In 1832, he was at the rendezvous at Pierre's Hole and took part in the famous battle with the Blackfeet. The following year, he joined a section of Bonneville's company under command of Joseph Walker and crossed the upper Sierra Nevada into California. Several editions, all out of print now.
For more Robideaux books see http://www.clyderabideau.com/2robidoubooks.html
Jim Bridger Mountain Man a Biography. Stanley Vestal. Univ. of Nebraska, 1970. See also Cecil Alter's biography of Bridger; neither is entirely correct but there is no other Bridger biography. Vestal's book does make good reading.

Mike Fink King of Mississippi Keelboatamen. Walter Blaire and Franklin J. Meine, New York: 1933.

**Hafen's "Mountain Men"**

The Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West. Leroy R. Hafen, editor. Glendale: Arthur H. Clark, 1965-1972. 10 volumes. A fundamental reference for the lives of 292 mountain men. Individual biographies were written by Hafen and the leading historians of the time. The names of all 292 persons in the ten volumes are indexed online in the [Guide to the Hafen Biographies](#); which also lists which biographies are selected in the six books below. Selections from Hafen's "The Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West" are published in these books:

- Trappers of the Far West, Bison Books, 1983

**Mountain Men Exploring**


The Old Spanish Trail. Leroy R. Hafen and Ann W. Hafen. Glendale: 1954. Despite the name, the
"Old Spanish Trail" was neither old nor Spanish; it was largely opened by American mountain men in the 19th century.


**Histories of the Fur Trade**


When Skins were Money A History of the Fur Trade. James A. Hanson. Chadron Nebraska: Museum of the Fur Trade, 2005. Covers the entire period from the 16th to 20th centuries; not a great deal on the Rocky Mountain period. Many period illustrations.


Fur Trade and Empire. Frederick Merk. Cambridge: 1931. “one of the most significant contributions to the literature” - Dale Morgan.


For more, including historians' and archaeologists' reports, see Fur Trade Reference Books (http://www.digitalpresence.com/histarch/ref/furtrade.html; Megan Springate 1998-2009), The Fur Trade and Historical Archaeology (http://www.digitalpresence.com/histarch/furtrade.html; Michael Pfeiffer 1998), and the very extensive and complete Fur Trade Bibliography by Gerhard J. Ens. (online at http://www.members.shaw.ca/CanoeBC/heritage/biblio.htm).

**Forts and Rendezvous**

Most of the "forts" of the earliest west were private commercial trading posts, not military fortifications. The owners wanted to have good relations with the natives and peace between the tribes, since those were the customers. These posts looked like forts: they were walled with wooden stockades or high adobe walls, to discourage raids by Indians.


Rocky Mountain Rendezvous: A History of the Fur Trade Rendezvous 1824-1840. Fred R. Gowans. Layton Utah: Gibbs Smith Books, 2005. Maps and photos of all annual rendezvous sites as seen today. For first-person descriptions of rendezvous, see the personal accounts and narratives listed above. For the 1836 rendezvous see also William Gray, History of Oregon, 1870, pp. 121-129.

Library of Western Fur Trade Historical Source Documents

A remarkable online collection of original documents; accounts of the Rocky Mountain fur trade during the first half of the 19th century, assembled and provided by the American Mountain Men.

Library of Western Fur Trade Historical Source Documents
(http://www.xmission.com/~drudy/mtman/mmarch.html)

"These documents have been transcribed from printed or manuscript form. The resulting text files have been manually checked and edited to conform to the original source. In most cases, any spelling or grammatical errors from the original have been retained."

If the links don't work, copy the book title with a mouse drag, and insert it into Google, to see the book.

Documents include:

with additional links to:
Mountain Men in Colorado

Based on The Fur Trade in Colorado: A Selected Bibliography, compiled by Ben Fogelberg (online at www.coloradohistory.org/publications/Fur_Trade_Bib.pdf), with additions.

Books


Articles

____. "Fort Vasquez," The Colorado Magazine (Summer 1964): 198-212.

Primary Source Material in Colorado

Thomas Fitzpatrick collection, MSS #240, Colorado Historical Society, Denver, Colorado.
Lancaster P. Lupton collection, MSS #398, Colorado Historical Society, Denver, Colorado.

The Santa Fe Trail: Original Accounts

This is a short selection from a large literature.


The Canadian Fur Trade, Voyageurs, the Hudsons Bay Company, and the North West Company

See also the very extensive and complete Fur Trade Bibliography by Gerhard J. Ens, online at http://www.members.shaw.ca/CanoeBC/heritage/biblio.htm.


Tools and Skills of the Mountain Men

The Hawken Rifle the Mountain Man's Choice. John D. Baird 136 illus., 95 pages.
Indian Trade Guns. T. M. Hamilton, ed. 80 illus., 258 pages.
Success in the North American Fur Trade. Barry Conner. "picks up where Hanson left off and is what I consider to be the best in-depth book ever written on the trade gun." - Mike Moore
The following books and articles are used by reenactors for correct information about early western equipment. Good details are available from these sources.
"Writing the Old Fashioned Way" T. C. Albert. Muzzleloader, vol , no. , May-June 2010. 29-.
The Book of Buckskinning.i Book series. For example see. vols. III (hunting pouches, moccasins, shelters); IV (blankets, lighting devices, backwoods knives, smoothbores, blacksmithing, rawhide); V (trade goods); VI (horse gear, powder horns); VII (clothing of the Rocky Mountain Trapper 1820-1840, writing implements, trunks, wardrobe for the frontier woman 1780-1840, bark tanning); and VIII (gear of the Rocky Mountain trapper; beaver hunting; beadwork; Fort Hall ledgers). William H. Scurlock, ed. Scurlock Pub. Co., Texarkana, Texas, to 1995.
Sketch Book on the Tents of the Fur Trade. Samuel Darby. 1700s to early 1800s. 48 pages.
Diary of an Early American Boy. Eric. Sloane, 1975. circa 1805 life. Shows the life and tools on a pioneer farm around 1805, such as many mountain men would have known in their youth.
Excellent detailed drawings.
Accouterments. 3 volumes. James R. Johnson. Golden Age Arms, no date. [ca. 2000]. Excellent photos of all kinds of equipment of the fur trade era but oddly lacking any provenance: any indication of date or place of origin of the artifacts, which greatly reduces the usefulness of these books for answering any particular question.
The Kentucky Rifle Hunting Pouch: Its Contents and Accouterments as used by the Frontiersman, Hunter, and Indian. Madison Grant. 207 pages, published by the author, 1977
The Keelboat Age on Western Waters. Leland D Baldwin. 1941.
Steamboats on the Western Rivers: An Economic and Technological History. Beatrice Jones Hunter and Louis C. Hunter. 2008. The first steamboat up the Missouri was in 1820.

The Visual Record - Artists in the Early West

No photographs were made in the west of the mountain men. The first camera, for the Daguerreotype process, was taken west in 1842 by John Charles Fremont, and no photographs survive from that occasion. But by good fortune several excellent artists traveled to the west before 1840. Three greats were George Catlin, Karl Bodmer and Alfred Jacob Miller. Their sketches and paintings are historically valuable and personally satisfying.
Five artists of the Old West: George Catlin, Karl Bodmer, Alfred Jacob Miller, Charles M. Russell and Frederic Remington. Clide Hollmann, 1965,
Fur Trade History Journals

*Museum of the Fur Trade Quarterly*. Chadron, Nebraska. For information and contents of all issues see [http://www.furtrade.org/6quart.html](http://www.furtrade.org/6quart.html). "Begun in 1965, the quarterly has provided over 450 scholarly articles on virtually every aspect of fur trade history."


"Novels" based on personal experience with the Mountain Men

Two accounts, written by men who knew the mountain man's life, were published as what would today be regarded as novels.

Edward Warren. William Drummond Stewart. Missoula: Mountain Press, 1986. Introduction By Winfred Blevins. Stewart, the famous British captain, attended six rendezvous, from 1833 to 1838, and returned for another visit in 1843. Written by a man who lived the life and saw the times.

Life in the Far West. George Frederick Ruxton. ed. Leroy Hafen. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951. Reads like a first-person narrative, but it is fiction(several events did not occur as described). Based on life in the mountains. Not history, but many authentic details of life. "no work excels in color, charm, or authenticity."

Modern Paintings and Photographs


Rendezvous Country. Photos by David Muench; text by Donald G Pike. Palo Alto: American West Publishing Co., 1975. Excellent modern photos of the scenes in the mountains; also 32 high-quality prints of Alfred Jacob Miller paintings but only in sepia tones, not color, worse luck.

Modern Novels


Dance on the Wind; Buffalo Palace; Crack in the Sky; Carry the Wind; BorderLords; One-Eyed Dream; Ride the Moon Down; Death Rattle; Wind Walker. Terry C. Johnston. Bantam Books, 1996-2001.


Movies

Across the Wide Missouri. 1951. Clark Gable. Which is not based on the book of that name.
Fremds Land. Switzerland, 2003. An independent film about a Swiss conscript soldier in Napoleon's army who ends up as a mountain man. A DVD may be only available in Europe, if there, and only in German.

Good recent editions are listed, where more than one edition occurs, not the original or other old editions. Finding a copy of many these titles is not always easy. Your local book store may not have what you want on hand, but they can order some books in print for you. Some titles are out of print. For hard-to-find books I recommend the online book services ABE.com and Alibris.com. You also can try Amazon.com for in-print books and some second hand-books.

Have I read all these books? Nope, this is my reading list. I aspire to read many of these, some day. I have read enough to be sure that not too many strays are on the loose.

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Individuals are welcome to print a copy for their own use.