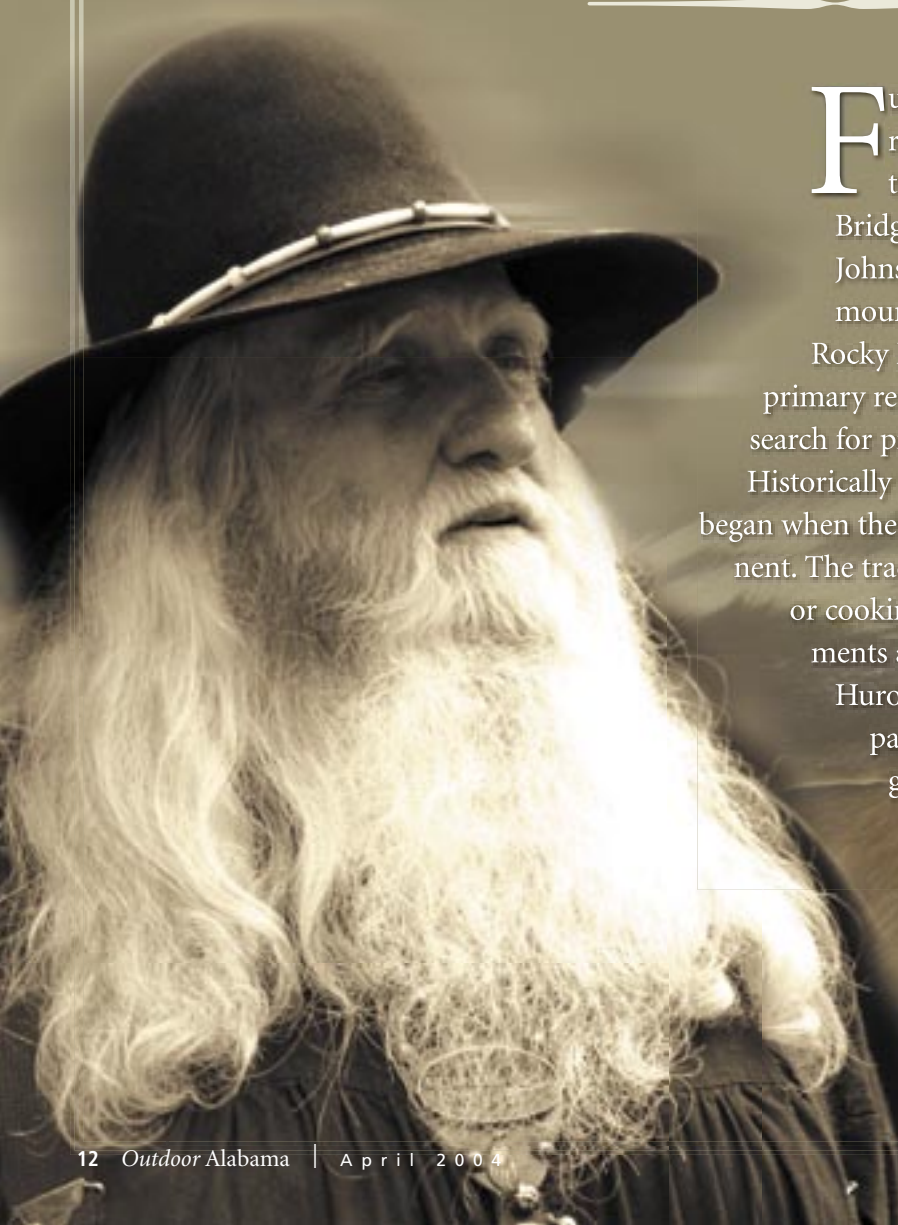




FUR TRAPPING & TRADING

An Important Industry to a Young Country

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Furbearers and the fur industry are partially responsible for the settlement of this country. Fur traders and trappers such as Jim Bridger, Jedediah Smith, Jeremiah “Liver Eating” Johnson, and Kit Carson were all well-known mountain men that blazed trails throughout the Rocky Mountain region of the American West. The primary reason for their presence in this region was the search for prime trapping territory.

Historically speaking, the fur trade in North America began when the first Europeans stepped foot on this continent. The trade of beaver pelts for ornamental items or cooking pots was commonplace in white settlements along the frontier. Tribes such as the Ojibwa, Huron, Iroquois, and Ottawa were common participants in the trading or bartering of goods for pelts. The seemingly endless supply of fur and fur resources was what led to European colonization of the continent.

PHOTOS BY BILLY POPE

Fur Traders Help Settle the West

Trading posts were scattered along the frontier in an attempt to monopolize on the increasing fur trade. Initially French, Dutch, and English colonists operated trading posts. It was not until 1670 when the Hudson Bay Company was established in Canada that a truly organized effort was made to capitalize on the fur industry in North America. The Hudson Bay Company, which was built by Englishmen, Frenchmen, Irishmen, Scottish Highlanders, and Native Americans, established trading posts all along the Hudson Bay and its tributaries. The primary concern of the company was the acquisition of beaver pelts in the area.

For nearly a century, the Hudson Bay Company monopolized the fur industry in the bay area. It was not until the late 1770s when the North West Company was founded that there was any competition for the fur resources in the area. Within several decades, the North West Company became North America's first transcontinental enterprise trading from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Due to the competition between these two companies, the exploitation and expansion into new trapping territory was constantly occurring.

Troops or companies of trappers consisting of 15 to 20 men would move into an area and establish a base camp or an outpost. These camps and outposts were generally established along rivers and streams to make transport of goods (furs) less difficult. Many towns and cities throughout the United States can claim roots as trapping outposts. Big cities such as St. Louis, Cincinnati, and Detroit all had a meager start as a remote outpost in a burgeoning frontier.

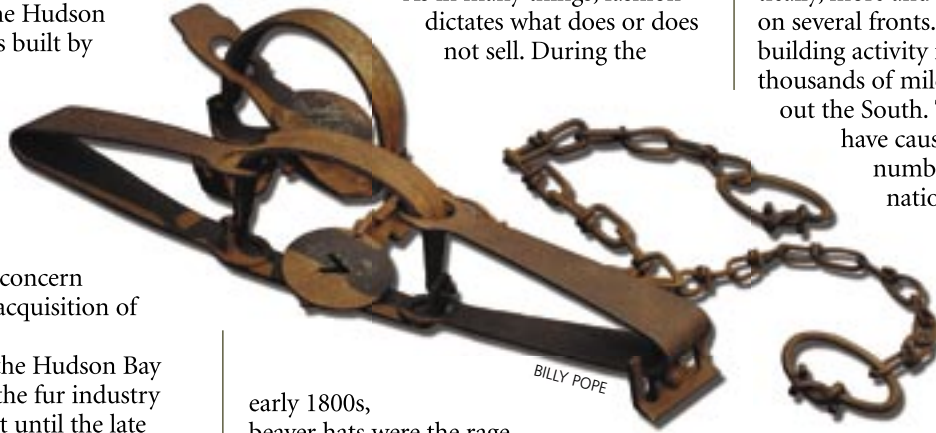
As trappers moved into the interior of the continent, the sale of pelts to fur companies became more and more difficult. In order to solve this problem, the rendezvous system was created. Between 1825 and 1840, the rendezvous system became the method of collecting fur from trappers in the west. Word was spread throughout the territory of a time and location when fur companies would purchase or barter for a trapper's yearly catch of furs. These rendezvous usually occurred in the spring and would last for approximately one week or until the whiskey ran out. During these rendezvous, trappers would obtain everything that they needed in the way of supplies for the next season. These

supplies would be obtained through the sale of beaver pelts.

The demand for beaver pelts during this time was high. In fact, beaver pelts became the standard upon which a system of values was based. Fortunes were made and lost in the business of trapping and trading furs at these events.

There is no doubt that the heyday of the fur industry was prior to 1830.

As in many things, fashion dictates what does or does not sell. During the



early 1800s, beaver hats were the rage in Europe. This fashion trend continued until around 1830 when the price of beaver fell as a direct result of competition from the silk hat manufacturers. By the end of the 1840s the "Beaver Era" was over.

Prior to the early 1800s, primitive trapping techniques, such as pitfall traps, dead fall, and snares were utilized to capture furbearing animals. These efforts were frequently necessary to protect crops and livestock from marauding predatory animals.

In 1823, Sewell Newhouse began manufacturing steel traps with interchangeable parts on an "assembly line" production basis. This allowed for the trapping of furbearers to become more economically feasible. The perfection of the leg hold trap greatly increased the trapper's effectiveness, especially in capturing beaver and other predators such as wolves, coyotes, foxes, and bobcats.

Declining Fur Market

Presently, there appears to be a reduced number of trappers and trapping interest nationwide has declined. The art of trapping is generally passed down from generation to generation. This art is being lost in time. Due to a declining fur market and reduced prices being paid for raw furs, there is minimal interest being shown in the use of traps and trapping techniques. The end result of this trend is increasing furbearer populations throughout much of the country.


With furbearer populations increasing in many parts of the country, it is inevitable

that conflict between humans and wildlife is increasing. Due to these conflicts, many trappers are now dealing with furbearers as nuisance animals. When population levels of certain wildlife species exceed the carrying capacity of their habitat, damage to the habitat is bound to occur. Take, for example, the current population levels of beaver in many parts of the country. Because their numbers have increased drastically, more and more damage is occurring on several fronts. The beaver's natural dam building activity is responsible for flooding thousands of miles of roadways throughout the South. Their gnawing activities

have caused damage to countless numbers of acres of timberland nationwide. The estimated damage associated with just this species reaches into the millions.

Summary

Over the past 350 years the fur industry and furbearers were largely responsible for the settlement of this nation. Many large urban cities today can claim their roots as a fur trading outposts that were established hundreds of years ago. Trapping and the fur industry hold a strong history in the development of this continent. Even though this history is strong, in today's society it is considered semi controversial by some. Trapping plays several important roles in wildlife management. It helps control overpopulation of some species and prevents or alleviates destruction of habitat.

Over the last decade significant study has been completed regarding trap effectiveness and trap design. Several innovations have been developed to make traps more humane and effective. Recently there seems to be a renewed interest in fur garments. Perhaps these things signal a continued future for the fur trappers in our country. 

For details on Alabama's fur trapping regulations, consult the "Open Trap Seasons on Fur-Bearers" regulation in the publication **Alabama's Regulations Relating to Game, Fish and Fur-Bearing Animals**. This publication may be found on the Department of Conservation's Web site at www.outdooralabama.com.