

THE MOUNTAIN MEN



THE DRAMATIC HISTORY AND LORE OF THE FIRST FRONTIERSMEN

For the fur trapper, the land beyond the Mississippi was filled with mystery. Stories of the hazards and the rewards of traveling there filtered back, but the only way a man could know the secrets of the plains and the mountains beyond was to go and see. The West sang a siren's song. Once the trapper tasted the wine of freedom, he could never erase the memories of the wilderness from his mind.

His trails had led him to the world's grandest scenery. He would recall the spectacular landscapes, the broad plains, towering mountains, rushing streams, and blue alpine lakes. The enchanted mountains and valleys he discovered would one day be the places people would set aside as national park to keep for their pure beauty. They would call them Yellowstone, Grand Teton, Rocky Mountain, Yosemite. These glimpses of the wilderness as it appeared to the first mountain man to come for the beaver are links with history. If, in these

remaining wild places, we turn our backs on the paved roads and close our ears to the modern sounds, we may still sense the wildness that the mountain men knew.

But to really see his world as he knew it we must view it through his eyes. Typically he came from farm or settlement where civilization was becoming entrenched, and turned westward to face the unexplored.

Over the plains and into the mountains he walked with a degree of freedom he had never known before. He could go where he pleased. There were no property lines. He could take the animals as he wanted. If he chose not to work, he was free to rest. If he worked hard there was the promise of wealth. The world was his as far as the eye could see, and there was no family or high sheriff to tell him otherwise.

The free trapper knew also that every day was the ultimate test; he could stay alive and prosper if he was man enough and shot straight. Out here he was master of his own destiny. He was some, he was! Maybe for the first time in his life, far from the crowds, he felt comfortable.

This attitude led him deeper and deeper into the unexplored valleys, over the ridges, and along the age-old game trails. For days, months, and years he camped in the shadow of the mountains. There was only one way to know what lay around the next bend in the trail or stream, or beyond the looming mountain pass. Awaiting him might be Blackfoot or grizz. Or Maybe just the yellow evening sun, soft against the distant snowy peaks. He had to go and see.

The Yellowstone River was of vital importance in the fur industry. From its headwaters south of Yellowstone National Park, to its confluence with the Missouri near the North Dakota border, this scenic stream remains the country's longest free-flowing river south of Alaska.

Yellowstone's Mammoth Hot Springs, geysers, and Firehole River, which draw millions of tourists today, were magic places to the Indians, and unbelievable to mountain men who first heard descriptions of them from exploring trappers.

At the confluence of the Missouri and the Yellowstone stood Fort Union, perhaps the most famous of all the fur trading posts, and for many, the last taste of civilization.

In Jackson Hole, in northwestern Wyoming, the early trappers discovered the Grand Tetons, as spectacular as any mountains in North America, rising abruptly from the valley floor. The Snake River, flowing through Grand Teton National Park, was a favorite stream with the mountain men, as it is with modern fishermen and rafters.

