Mountain Men
Who were the Mountain Men?

Inspired by the adventures of Lewis and Clark, thousands of explorers and fur trappers roamed the American Rocky Mountains from about 1810 to the early 1840s. Today we call them "Mountain Men."
What did the Mountain Men do in the Rockies?

Mountain Men were hired by companies like John Jacob Astor’s American Fur Company to trap and skin beavers.

It was a very profitable business because beaver pelts were in demand!
In the 1800’s beaver skin hats were very desirable and people would pay high prices for them!
Lifestyle of the Mountain Men

For the most part, the Mountain Men lived rugged, solitary lives.

They worked and lived alone or in small groups, traveling from place to place as they checked their traps. It was a dangerous life!

They explored unmapped areas. Bears and hostile tribes presented constant dangers. Mountain men had to use their senses of hearing, sight, and smell to keep themselves alive.
How to Dress Like a Mountain Man

- Buckskin shirt and pants with fringe
- Coonskin or otter skin cap
- Long, dirty, unkempt hair
- Long, dirty, bushy beard
- Dark, leathery unwashed skin
- Moccasins
- Buffalo robe coat
- Leather pouch for shot
- Powder horn
Weapons of the Mountain Men

Bowie Knife

Hawken Rifle
James Beckwourth (1800-1866) escaped slavery and moved to the American West. He lived with the Crow Indians for many years and eventually earned their respect enough to be made War Chief.

He is credited with the discovery of the Beckwourth Pass, located between Reno, Nevada and Portola, California. Thousands of pioneers would later follow his Beckwourth Trail on their way to the California Gold Rush.

Beckwourth is the only African American in the West who recorded his life story. It was published in New York and London in 1856.
Jim Bridger (1804-1881) came west at the age of 17. He was the first American to see the Great Salt Lake, and he discovered Bridger’s Pass, which shortened the Oregon Trail by 61 miles. Bridger was famous for telling “tall tales” and amusing stories.

After trapping for years, he built a trading post named Fort Bridger where pioneers on the Oregon Trail could buy supplies or fix their wagons.
Kit Carson

Kit Carson (1809-1868) left home at the age of 16 to work on a trading caravan in the Southwest, and later became a fur trapper.

He was chosen to be a guide for John C. Fremont, and together they traveled along the Oregon Trail, through the South Pass and into the Sierra Nevadas. He gained a reputation as a fearless guide and companion, and many books and comics were written about his exploits.

Carson was with Fremont in California later during the Mexican-American War, and also organized New Mexico volunteers for the Union in the Civil War.
Jedediah Smith (1799-1831) was an unusual sort of Mountain Man. He didn’t drink, smoke, or curse. He was a devout Christian and often said that his Bible and his rifle were his closest companions.

Jed Smith travelled more extensively than any other Mountain Man. He is famous for discovering the South Pass through the Rockies.

He was the first white man to traverse the rugged Sierra Nevada Mountains and the state of Nevada, and the first to explore the Pacific coast from San Diego to the banks of the Columbia River.
Jedediah Smith’s Pathway to Southern California

Jed Smith was also the first American to come to California by the overland route.

The path across the Mojave Desert that he discovered later became Interstate 15. If you’ve ever driven to Las Vegas, you were on Jedediah Smith’s trail!
The Mountain Man's life was ruled not by the calendar or the clock but by the climate and seasons. In fall and spring, the men would trap. The spring hunt was usually the most profitable, with the pelts still having their winter thickness. Spring season would last until the pelt quality became low.
Grizzly Attack!

One of the biggest dangers for Mountain Men in the Rocky Mountains was from grizzly bears. Grizzlies can weigh up to 1,500 pounds and can run as fast as 35 miles per hour. They can kill someone with just one blow from their paws!

Jedediah Smith was attacked by a grizzly bear, and his scalp and ear were almost torn off! There were no doctors around, so he had a friend loosely sew them on again.
In July, Mountain Men and their suppliers would gather at the summer Rendezvous. There, furs were sold, supplies were bought, and then the Mountain Men would socialize, tell stories, trade with other trappers, enter contests, drink heavily, gamble, and often spend all of the money they had made that year!
Bragging at the Rendezvous

In the edited words of Mountain Man Joe Meek: “Each claimed to have the best horse, to have had the wildest adventure, to have made the narrowest escapes, to be the greatest favorite with the Indian belles, the greatest consumer of alcohol, and to have the most money to spend.”
The Era of the Mountain Men ended in the 1840s. Beavers had been trapped almost to extinction, and fashions had changed. Now, silk hats had become all the rage! What kind of jobs could Mountain Men do using the skills they had – traveling through the Rockies, finding food and water, and dealing with wild animals and Native American tribes?
Mountain Men Become Guides for Pioneers on the Oregon Trail!

From the 1840s-1880s, former Mountain Men used their bravery and knowledge to help guide pioneers from the East to Oregon Country, California, and the Southwest.

Without their skill, many of the pioneers may have died along the difficult journey.

Wagon Train to Oregon