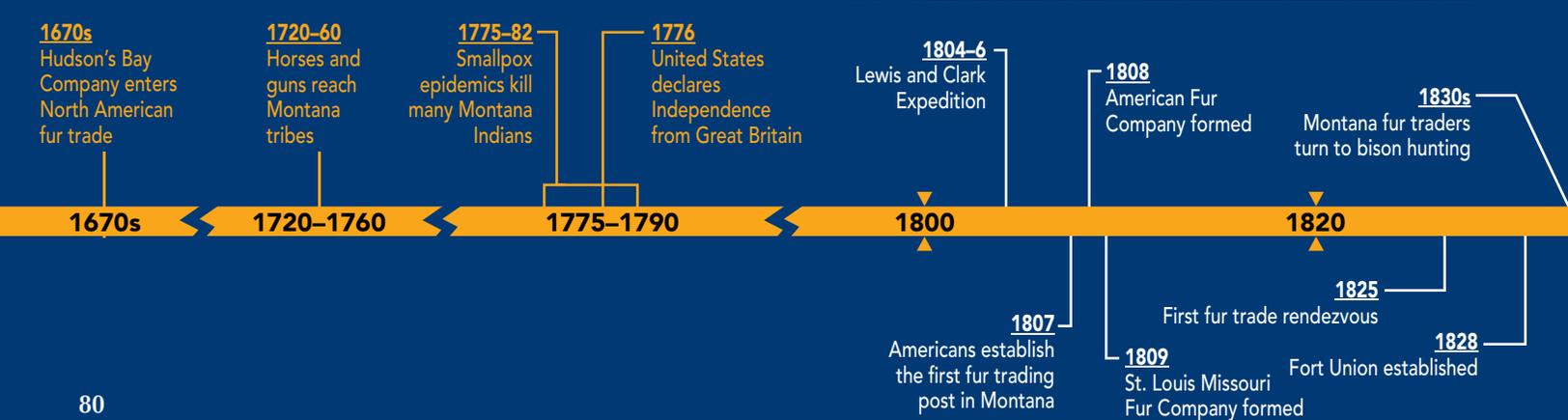


# 5 Beaver, Bison, and Black Robes: Montana's Fur Trade — 1800–1860



FIGURE 5.1: Fort Union on the Missouri, by Karl Bodmer, ca. 1845



## READ TO FIND OUT:

- How beaver changed the history of this region
- How Indian people helped the fur trade
- Why the market shifted from beaver to bison
- Who the “Black Robes” were and how they influenced Indian life

## The Big Picture

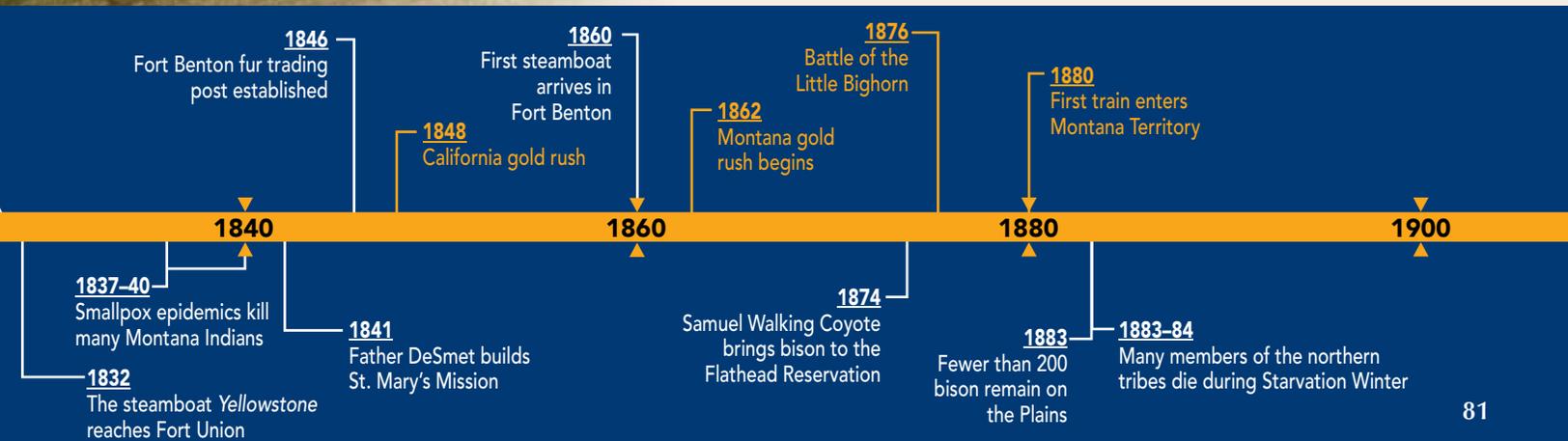
The fur trade was the beginning of a new economy based on exploiting natural resources mostly for the profit of people living far away.

**S**econd to humans, beavers change the landscape more than any other animal. They dam streams, create wetlands, and trim trees. They also create habitat for fish, turtles, frogs, and ducks.

In the early 1800s beavers changed the history of Montana, too.

When Lewis and Clark floated downriver toward St. Louis in 1806, they met eleven separate trapping parties heading up the Missouri River. Already, adventurers and fur traders were excited about making money in this region. By this time the fur trade was well established in North America, and eastern Indian tribes had been involved for more than 100 years.

The fur trade followed the Lewis and Clark Expedition into present-day Montana. It changed people’s economic activities and their travel patterns. It brought the first wave of outsiders drawn here by the natural resources of the land. It created new conflicts between tribes. And when the beaver trade shifted to the bison robe trade, it nearly destroyed the bison species altogether.



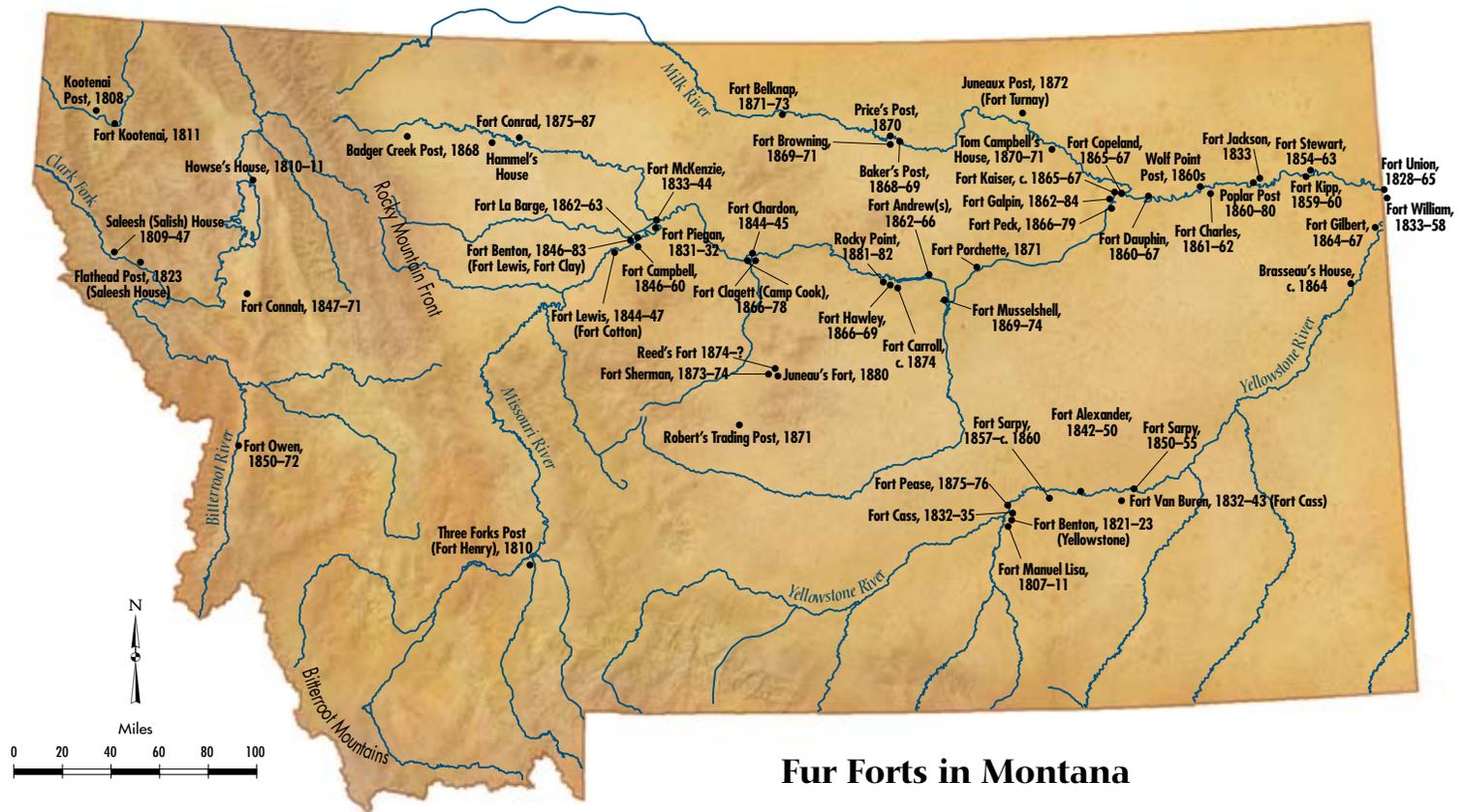


FIGURE 5.2

## Fur Forts in Montana

### At the Center of the Storm: North American Beaver

European people's demand for beaver fur began even before they set foot on North America. The beaver's durable, warm, elegant fur made the perfect top hat. Beaver hats, coats, and other fur items became very fashionable among high-class Europeans. But by the 1700s most of Europe's beavers were killed off. As demand for beaver increased, fur companies sent explorers out across Canada and North America to find more.

When explorers arrived in the Rocky Mountain region, they found that beavers were more abundant here than elsewhere. The fur from Rocky Mountain beaver was also thicker and more luxurious. Soon beaver pelts were so valuable that they became their own currency in the Rocky Mountain region. They were not only worth dollars, but they also could be exchanged as dollars.

#### Montana Joins the World Market

Indian or non-Indian, trappers were seldom paid in money. Usually they were paid in materials and supplies to last them another winter.

What they sold: furs of beaver, otter, and mink; skins of elk, deer, and bear; bison robes, tongues, and tallow.

What they bought: red, blue, and green cloth, glass beads, wide leather belts, clothing, blankets of various kinds, Spanish saddles, tin kettles, copper pots, fancy bridles, axes, hatchets, knives, rope, files, traps, guns, ammunition, sugar, tobacco, coffee, flour, and liquor.

### British Companies in Western Montana

Two main British-owned fur companies competed for North America's furs: the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company. The Hudson's Bay Company was the first corporation in North America. It started the North American fur trade in 1670 in northern Canada.

The Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company were bitter rivals for the profits of North American beaver. Wherever the North West Company built a trading fort, the Hudson's Bay Company would follow behind to build one, too.



FIGURE 5.3



FIGURE 5.4



FIGURE 5.5

But the high cost of competition—and a slump in the European fur market—ate up profits for both companies. After years of bitter rivalry, the two companies merged in 1821 into one business named the Hudson’s Bay Company.

The two British companies operated mostly to the north and west of present-day Montana. They built forts in northwest Montana, west of the Continental Divide.

Fur companies often sent **brigades** (teams) of Indian, Métis, and non-Indian trappers out of fur posts on long expeditions. This practice became known as the post-and-brigade system. The brigades commonly went out for a year at a time. They traveled through a specific region, camped together, often split up to cover more ground, and watched out for one another’s safety as they trapped an area and moved on.

The fur trade could not have happened without the American Indians. Assiniboine and Cree bands, who dominated present-day central Canada, were accomplished middlemen between fur traders and other tribes. They transported beaver pelts and bison robes to trading forts, where they exchanged them for manufactured goods. Then they traded those goods with other Indian groups for more pelts and robes.

Many tribes across the continent provided furs in trade, allowed fur companies to build forts, and helped the trappers and traders. They traded furs and hides for European items like guns, metal arrowheads, scissors, and iron pots that made their lives easier or gave them an advantage over other tribes.

### Bridge Between Cultures: The Métis in the Fur Trade

From the eastern Great Lakes region to the Rocky Mountains, the fur trade relied on the Métis people. The Métis were the mixed-blood descendants of early European fur traders who married native women. The French called them “métis,” meaning “mixed.” Over time they developed their own language and a separate identity as a people. They called themselves Métis.

Born into the fur trade, the Métis acted as a bridge between Indian and non-Indian cultures. They spoke both native and European languages and had family ties to both groups. By the middle of the 1700s, they had become as necessary a part of the fur trade as the beavers themselves.

FIGURES 5.3, 5.4, and 5.5: How did a beaver’s fur become a hat? Trappers stretched and flattened hides into **plews** (figure 5.4) to make them easier to transport. Each plew weighed at least 1½ pounds and was worth about \$6 (\$135 today). Transforming plews into top hats (figure 5.5) took time and skill. Europeans wore beaver felt hats for 300 years (1550 to 1850).

Many cities in the Great Lakes area, including Chicago, Detroit, Grand Rapids, and Milwaukee, began as mixed-blood communities in the early 1700s. By 1815 Métis settlements spread from present-day Detroit, Michigan, to Winnipeg, Manitoba (Canada). Many of Montana's Métis people trace their heritage back to these communities.

As the fur trade pressed westward, the mixed-descent people moved with it. They supplied furs, bison robes, and  **pemmi-can**  (a traditional Northern Plains food made of dried meat, fat, and berries) to trading forts from the lower Missouri River region north to central Canada. Many military forts and trading posts increasingly depended on the Métis.

The Métis delivered hundreds of thousands of pounds of supplies per year using Red River carts. These two-wheeled carts were made entirely of wood lashed together with bison hide and  **sinew**  (animal tendon). The axle was usually an unpeeled log. They did not grease the axle because in that dusty environment grease would attract enough grit to grind the axle off in a day's travel. As the ungreased wheels turned against the axle, they made a terrific screeching noise that echoed across the grasslands for miles.

Image removed due to copyright restrictions. To view the image, see the print edition of *Montana: Stories of the Land*.

## Americans Join the Race for Furs

Picture the British companies circling overland around Montana from the north and west, and American fur companies spreading up the Missouri River from the southeast. In 1807 Manuel Lisa, a Spanish American born in Cuba, built the first fur post in present-day Montana. Fort Manuel Lisa, also called Fort Ramon, stood at the confluence of the Yellowstone and Bighorn Rivers.

In 1809 Lisa and several partners formed the St. Louis Missouri Fur Company, the first American-owned fur company to operate in the region. It enjoyed a successful first year, operating mostly in Crow country. But the next year was a lot tougher.

In 1810 a group of 34 trappers left Fort Ramon for the Three Forks to build a trading post. They knew that a post at the Three Forks would give them access to the many tribes who used that area at different times. However, the Blackfeet fiercely protected this important area. They did not want the Americans supplying guns to enemies of the Blackfeet.

The Blackfeet soon surrounded the Missouri Fur Company post and began a series of attacks. The siege lasted for months and killed 20 fur men. The rest abandoned the fort.

FIGURE 5.7: Métis men often wore capotes—coats made from thick, wool Hudson's Bay blankets and tied with a colorful handwoven sash. They wore colorful leggings, and their moccasins often were beaded with elegant designs.

FIGURE 5.6: Alexander Ross led one of the biggest Nor'Wester brigades in 1823. He and 55 Indian and white trappers, with 89 women and children, traveled from Spokane House (near present-day Spokane, Washington) throughout western Montana, arriving at Saleesh House with 5,000 beaver pelts.





Manuel Lisa discovered that it was impossible to maintain and defend trading forts through the winter in places where the Indian tribes did not want them to be. Then he lost \$20,000 worth of furs and robes (worth \$338,000 today) in a fire. Soon the Missouri Fur Company was driven back downriver. It had lost too many men and too much money.

Lisa's experience in the Upper Missouri region confirmed that beavers indeed were more plentiful and higher quality there than anywhere else. There just had to be a better way to get them.

### **William Ashley and the Rocky Mountain Trapping System, 1822**

One spring morning in 1822, fur trader William Ashley placed an advertisement in a St. Louis newspaper: "TO Enterprising Young Men. THE subscriber wishes to engage ONE HUNDRED MEN, to ascend the river Missouri to its source, there to be employed for one, two, or three years. For particulars, enquire of Major Andrew Henry . . ." Within a few days a hundred men had signed up. Some of them are still remembered in Montana, including Jim Bridger, Jedediah Smith, and Daniel T. Potts. Some of these men operated in brigades. Others became a different kind of operator—the free trapper.

Free trappers fanned out across the landscape individually or with a few companions. They traveled the Indians' trails, built cabins, set traplines, hunted for food, and stockpiled as many furs as they could. About 80 percent of them married native women who knew how to tan hides and furs and taught the mountain men about the country. Instead of sweeping through a territory, as the brigade trappers did, the mountain man lived in his chosen spot for a year or more.

Ashley arranged for these trappers to meet once a year at a great

*FIGURE 5.8:* Métis people developed the Red River cart in the early 1700s. Red River carts could carry 600 to 900 pounds of meat, pemmican, or bison robes. These carts gave the Métis people a unique advantage as suppliers to the fur trade, before any other wheeled vehicles arrived on the Northern Plains.

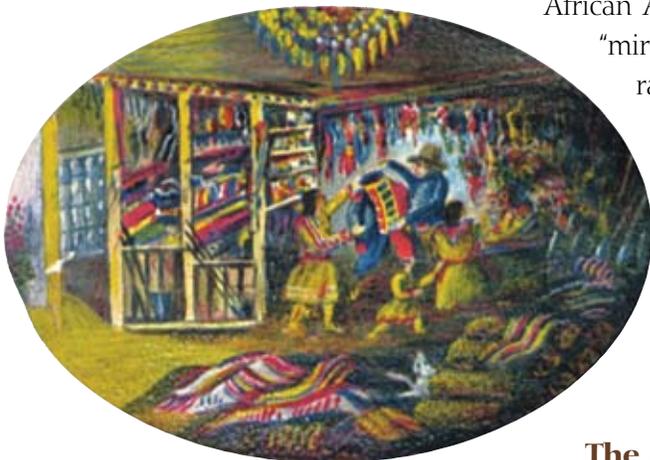


**FIGURE 5.9:** Traders, merchants, fur men, and their families gathered for the first fur rendezvous in 1820. Trappers sold furs, gambled, partied, danced, held horse races and knife-throwing competitions, and exchanged stories and music. By 1840 there were more trappers than there were beavers in the Upper Missouri region, and the rendezvous period ended.

annual gathering called a **rendezvous** (a French word that means a meeting arranged in advance). On a certain date, fur traders, mountain men, and Indian trappers would gather with their families, horses, and furs at a selected spot big enough to hold them all.

For the mountain men, the rendezvous was the social highlight of the year. Buyers from St. Louis brought trade goods, traps, equipment, food supplies, and plenty of alcohol to trade for furs. In some ways it was like the county fairs of today. There were competitions, races, music tents—and sometimes places where people could exchange books. One African American trapper later wrote that the rendezvous was a time of “mirth, song, dancing, shooting, trading, running, jumping, singing, racing, target-shooting, yarns, frolic, with all sort of extravagances that white men or Indians could invent.” When it was over, the trappers scattered back across the landscape for another year.

Fur companies thrived under the rendezvous system. It required no permanent buildings, it lasted only a few weeks each year, and it was incredibly profitable for the companies. They hauled in supplies by mule train, marked up prices 1,000 percent, and shipped back a wealth of furs.



**FIGURE 5.10:** When was the last time you really looked forward to buying something new at the store? This 1846 picture, by Jesuit priest Nicolas Point (1799–1868), shows customers shopping at a trading post for household items and perhaps a few luxuries for the family.

### The American Fur Company

John Jacob Astor was 20 years old when he sailed from Germany to America. He intended to sell musical instruments in America. But while still at sea, he heard about the riches to be made in furs from the American West. That night he made his plan.

Astor decided to set up one big corporation that would dominate the fur trade from the Great Lakes to the Pacific Ocean. He formed the

American Fur Company, in 1808, and then several other fur companies. He built a shipping port on the Pacific Ocean, in Oregon, and named it Astoria. Next he bought a fleet of ships to carry furs from Astoria to Europe and the Far East.

In 1828 Astor's American Fur Company constructed Fort Union trading post at the confluence of the Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers. He soon dominated the fur trade of the Upper Missouri River. He had access to the world's fur markets and owned his own transportation network. His company moved into other fur companies' territory and forced them out of business. None of his American competitors could match his resources.

But they tried. Competition between the American Fur Company and the rival Rocky Mountain Fur Company sometimes erupted into violence. Often the whites **bribed** (offered illegal payments to) or pressured the Indians to take sides. This only created more violence, and led to revenge killings by both Indians and non-Indians.

### Steamboats Expand the Fur Trade

In 1832 the steamboat *Yellowstone* paddled up the Missouri River to Fort Union, near the confluence of the Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers. It was the farthest a steamboat had ever come up the Missouri. Other boats quickly followed. Steamboat transportation allowed fur companies to ship far more beaver pelts to market faster than ever before.

Now the American Fur Company pressed even farther upriver. The company built Fort McKenzie, at the mouth of the Marias River, deep in



FIGURE 5.11: Free trapper James P. Beckwourth was one of many African Americans who came west escaping slavery and prejudice in the East. Beckwourth dressed up for this 1855 photo. He wanted to make sure viewers clearly saw his trapper's knife and his gold chain.

FIGURE 5.12: The American Fur Company built Fort Benton in 1846, deep in the heart of Blackfeet country. It became the most important post on the Upper Missouri River. Later, Fort Benton became a major transportation hub, funneling people and equipment from Missouri River riverboats into Montana.





**FIGURE 5.13:** The fur trade created a colorful new character who was unique to the Rocky Mountain West: the mountain man, or free trapper. He relied on his gun, a knife, and a couple of good horses—and, usually, an Indian wife—to help him.

Blackfeet country. A 24-year-old trader named Alexander Culbertson came west to run the fort. Culbertson quickly developed deep ties with the Blackfeet people. He married a Blackfeet woman, Natawista (Medicine Snake Woman), and became one of the most respected traders in the region. The Blackfeet tolerated Culbertson, but when he left Fort McKenzie they burned the fort down.

At first the Blackfeet tightly controlled the fur trade in their territory. They burned down forts and limited fur trapping activity on their lands. But as they lost access to commercial items they needed—and as disease undercut their military strength—they changed their strategy. In 1846 they allowed the American Fur Company to build Fort Benton right in the heart of Blackfeet country. The company built ten more forts over the next 20 years.

With a string of forts, a transportation network, and purchasing power at the rendezvous, the American Fur Company gained a **monopoly** (exclusive control) over the fur trade of the Upper Missouri.

John Jacob Astor established a pattern that would shape Montana's economy into the future. His was one of many companies to do business in Montana by taking its resources, investing the profits elsewhere, and making decisions from very far away that shaped life here.

## The Trapping Way of Life

By the 1830s there were several hundred free trappers in the Rocky Mountain region. Some were young, fit, restless loners who loved the outdoors and had little use for society. Others just hoped to make some money to buy their own farm or business. Adventure lured them from their hometowns to the hills. Hard times at home, lack of job prospects, and an ambitious and independent nature were reasons enough to head west.

Mountain men developed varied and complicated relationships with the American Indian people here. They gained Indian wives, partners, friends, and enemies. Unlike the gold prospectors and homesteaders who came later, the trappers saw this land as Indian country. They came only for the furs—not for the land itself. When their trapping years were over, many turned to farming or gold prospecting. Some became buffalo hunters, guides for settlers, or road surveyors in the West. Several returned east and became politicians and businessmen.

**“By the 1800s, the fur trade had extended around the world to bring together—in cooperation and in competition—different peoples, cultures, and civilizations. The fur trade may have been the first ‘global’ business.”**

—WWW.AUTRYNATIONALCENTER.ORG

## Women Were Cultural Go-Betweens

Women were as important as men in the development and success of the fur trade. In many ways Indian women acted as cultural go-betweens.

The women of the fur trade knew how to find and prepare food, make winter footwear, prepare skins, and tan hides. They knew how to fend for themselves when they were left alone. They taught the men which foods could be eaten, how to trade with native people, and how to heal wounds. They packed heavy loads, paddled canoes, and negotiated trades with tribesmen. Few of the fur men would have survived their first winter without the help of women.

Most traders married Indian or mixed-blood women. For the trader, the marriage strengthened trade ties with the wife's family and tribe and provided instant access to native knowledge, ways, and languages. In turn, the woman and her family gained increased access to trade goods.

In addition, these women were mothers of a new people. Their mixed-blood children became the Métis.

John Tod, stationed at Fort MacKenzie (in Canada) with Hudson's Bay Company, wrote to a friend in 1829 about his wife: "She still continues the only companion of my solitude—without her . . . life in such a wretched place as this would be altogether **insupportable** (unbearable)."

## From Beaver to Bison in Thirty Years

After the Lewis and Clark Expedition, the fur companies predicted that they could keep 300 trappers busy in the Upper Missouri region for 100 years. They were wrong. The trappers killed so many animals so fast that they nearly wiped out the beaver, mink, and otter in Montana and the surrounding region in 30 years.

By the late 1830s both the Indians and the company men could see that the beaver trade was declining. John Jacob Astor visited Europe and saw that the best-dressed people were wearing silk hats. Bulky beaver hats were no longer

### "Westward, Ho!" A Young Man Heads into the Wild

"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 . . . Curiosity, a love of wild adventure, and perhaps also a hope of profit, —for times are hard . . . Everything promises well. No doubt there will be two fortunes apiece for us. Westward! Ho!"—FUR TRAPPER W. A. FERRIS

FIGURE 5.14: Natawista poses here with her husband, fur trader Alexander Culbertson, and their son, Joe. Natawista helped create ties of understanding between cultures and became known as a peacekeeper between white traders and Blackfoot bands.





*FIGURE 5.15:* Efficient buffalo skimmers left the plains dotted with rotting bison carcasses. They took only the tongues and the hides, because bison meat was not worth the cost of transporting it across the Plains.

*FIGURE 5.16:* When the bison were gone, the market turned to the bones themselves. Homesteaders across the West gathered bison bones and delivered them to rail lines for shipment. Factories back east ground the bones into meal, animal feed, and plant fertilizer, or burned them for use in bone-black, a type of black paint.

fashionable. Beaver prices dropped from \$6 a pelt (about \$135 today) to below \$3.

With profits falling, the Rocky Mountain Fur Company sold out to the American Fur Company. Fur buyers held their last rendezvous in 1839. The beaver business continued until the 1880s, but it was never again as active as it was in the 30 years after Lewis and Clark came here.

As beaver declined, the fur trade turned to bison robes and hides. Factories in the East began using large machines to mass-produce products. Those machines needed belts to turn their wheels and mechanisms. The belts were made from the thick, durable bison-hide leather.

In the 1840s a new kind of hunter appeared in bison country: the mounted, professional bison killer. Hunters fanned out across the Plains on horseback to kill bison by the thousands. A keen **marksman** (person skilled in shooting) could shoot several hundred bison in a day. Good skimmers could skin 50 animals in a day and make \$50 a month—equal to about \$1,200 today.

Only the robes and tongues were valuable to the bison-hide trade. (People thought the tongues were delicious to eat.) The meat was not worth the cost of carrying it across the Plains. So non-Indian hunters left fields full of rotting meat for the wolves and the flies.

Indian people joined in the bison trade, too, just as they had in the beaver trade. Usually they traded the valuable parts like tongues and robes and kept other parts for their own use. When demand for hides became more intense, Indian hunters, too, became more wasteful. Every tribe's economy was as linked to trade as ours is today. The Indian people had two choices: either participate in the bison robe trade or let



it pass them by. As the buffalo hunting business turned into a wholesale slaughter of bison, it threatened the very center of Plains Indian life.

In 1840 the American Fur Company shipped 67,000 bison robes to market in St. Louis. In 1850 fur companies shipped more than 100,000 robes out of present-day Colorado alone. In the early 1870s the hunt may have reached 1.5 million bison per year.

At the same time, other changes in the Plains environment further endangered the bison. Diseases like **brucellosis** (an infectious animal disease), which spread from settlers' cattle, weakened some herds. Railroads farther south interrupted migration patterns. Settlers' cattle and sheep competed for grazing land. Bison soon became endangered.

Many people were disturbed by the destruction of the bison herds on the southern plains. During the 1870s Congress considered several bills to regulate buffalo hunting, but the bills were defeated. Most leaders in Congress simply could not picture the huge number of bison being killed or what the consequences would be if the bison disappeared.

And suddenly it was over. As the southern bison herds were wiped out (around 1878), hunters moved north into Montana Territory. Montana's buffalo hunt peaked in 1881, when a single Montana bison robe dealer shipped 250,000 bison hides east. In 1882 Montana and the Dakotas shipped 200,000 hides. The following year hardly a bison could be found on the Northern Plains.

“A couple of years before it was nothing to see 5,000, 10,000 buff in a day's ride. Now if I saw 50 I was lucky. Presently all I saw was rotting red carcasses or bleaching white bones. We had killed the golden goose.”

—FRANK H. MAYER, A BUFFALO HUNTER IN THE 1870s AND 1880s

FIGURE 5.17: In about 1874 Samuel Walking Coyote, a Pend d'Oreille Indian, brought two pairs of bison from east of the Rockies to the Flathead Reservation. This small herd became the foundation for the first bison preserve in Montana. Today about 290,000 bison live in public and private herds in the United States.



## The Impact of the Fur Trade on Montana's People

The fur trade brought many American Indians and whites face to face for the first time. Many of these encounters were peaceful, friendly, and mutually helpful. Indians and non-Indians built trade relationships, intermarried, and learned a little about each other's ways. Many tribes benefited by trading with the forts for supplies, tools, and medicine.

The fur companies knew that they could not succeed without the participation of native people. However, the fur trade was not an equal partnership. Fur companies pressured the Indians to deliver furs instead of hunting or getting food for their own people. Sometimes the companies deliberately caused trouble for the Indians just to make them depend more on the forts.

In 1810 Pierre Menard of the Missouri Fur Company wrote to one of his partners that he hoped to find Salish and Shoshone Indians that summer. "My plan is to **induce** (convince) them to stay here if possible and make war upon the Blackfeet so that we may take some prisoners," Menard wrote. He planned to use the prisoners to pressure the Blackfeet into letting the company build a fort in their territory.

The fur trade made American Indians more dependent on trade goods. It disrupted their traditional trade patterns and cultural practices. Meanwhile, fur companies trespassed to build forts on Indian lands and trapped huge numbers of animals. **Intertribal** (between tribes) violence increased as Indian people competed for access to the trading forts and the goods they provided.

The fur trade introduced **capitalism** (an economic system in which privately owned businesses carry on trade for profit) to Montana. The fur trade was conducted by companies that made money from the region's resources—beaver fur and hides of bison and other animals—and invested their profits far away from Montana. This was a big change for the hunter-gatherers of the Plains. In response, each tribe followed its own strategy and sought its own balance between new ways and the old.

### The Roar of the Empty Plains

"The destruction of the buffalo offers perhaps the most incredible example in all frontier history of environmental devastation . . . On a spring trip in 1880 Granville Stuart found the plains littered with rotting carcasses all the way from present-day Forsyth to Miles City."

—MICHAEL P. MALONE ET AL, *MONTANA: A HISTORY OF TWO CENTURIES* (1991)

### Encouraging Dependence on the Fur Trade

"As the beaver trade for the last three years has been regularly declining . . . it appears to me that our **sheet anchor** (last hope) will be the Robe trade and by encouraging the Blood, Blackfeet & others to make Robes, articles which they now obtain as luxuries will become necessities and they will be compelled to remain on the Missouri in order to **procure** (acquire) them."

—DONALD MCKENZIE OF THE AMERICAN FUR COMPANY, 1835

### Smallpox: Return of the Great Sorrow

The fur trade brought more than trade goods to the Upper Missouri. It also brought new rounds of infection. Throughout the 1800s smallpox and other European diseases swept through Indian country. Whole bands died, sometimes leaving only one or two scarred and terrified survivors.

In 1837 the steamboat *St. Peter*, owned by the American Fur Company, barreled up the Missouri River. On board were a few men with smallpox. The traders tried to deliver supplies and pick up furs without infecting the Indians. Instead they brought disaster.

The *St. Peter* anchored at Fort Clark, near the Mandan villages of North Dakota, spreading smallpox to the Mandan, who had hosted so many explorers. "I keep no [account] of the dead, as they die so fast that it is impossible," wrote the head trader at Fort Clark, whose own son died in the epidemic. Barely 20 years after the Lewis and Clark Expedition, smallpox had killed almost all the Mandan Indians. Of 1,600 Mandan people, perhaps 200 survived.

The *St. Peter* continued on its journey upriver. At Fort Union it was met by hundreds of Assiniboine, who carried smallpox north into Canada. The *St. Peter* continued to Fort McKenzie, at the mouth of the Marias River. Here the fort's agent, Alexander Culbertson, urged the Blackfeet to stay away so they would not get infected. But the Blackfeet were suspicious of his strange warning. They insisted on boarding the boat to trade.

After they finished trading, Culbertson did not hear from the Blackfeet again. That fall he rode out to the Three Forks area to look for them. He found a large camp of tipis full of dead bodies, with only two people still alive. In the next few years, half of the Blackfeet people died of smallpox.

Some of the fur agents were able to get smallpox **vaccinations** (medicine that makes people immune to a disease) and to vaccinate some of their Indian partners against smallpox. Historians say that the smallpox vaccine shifted the balance of power on the Plains. Vaccines allowed some tribes—like the Sioux—to remain powerful at a time when the disease devastated other tribes.

There is no way to know how many Indian people died of smallpox during the epidemic of 1837–40. Some estimate 16,000 people or 40,000 people; some say it was as high as 150,000.

### Alcohol: Drug of the Century

It did not take some traders long to learn that they could bribe some Indians with alcohol to get them to supply furs. Whiskey quickly became a tool the fur companies used to compete with one another. Whiskey traders were like the drug dealers of today. They knew that anyone who became addicted would be easier to control. Their

### No Language Can Picture It

"No language can picture the scene of desolation . . . The tents are still standing on every hill, but no rising smoke announces the presence of human beings, and no sounds, but the croaking of the raven and the howling of the wolf interrupts the fearful silence."

—HIRAM MARTIN CHITTENDEN, *THE AMERICAN FUR TRADE OF THE FAR WEST* (1902)

### Alexander Culbertson Finds a Blackfeet Village Destroyed by Smallpox

"A few days travel brought him in sight of a village of about sixty lodges. Not a soul was to be seen, and a funeral stillness rested upon it . . . Soon a stench was observed in the air, that increased as they advanced; and presently the scene with all its horror was before them. Hundreds of decaying forms of human beings, horses and dogs lay scattered everywhere among the lodges . . . Two old women, too feeble to travel, were the sole living occupants of the village."

—LIEUTENANT JAMES BRADLEY, WHO INTERVIEWED ALEXANDER CULBERTSON IN THE 1870s

whiskey was usually a cheap brew of raw alcohol mixed with molasses, red ink, chewing tobacco, ginger, or tea leaves. Sometimes people got sick, went into shock, or even died from it.

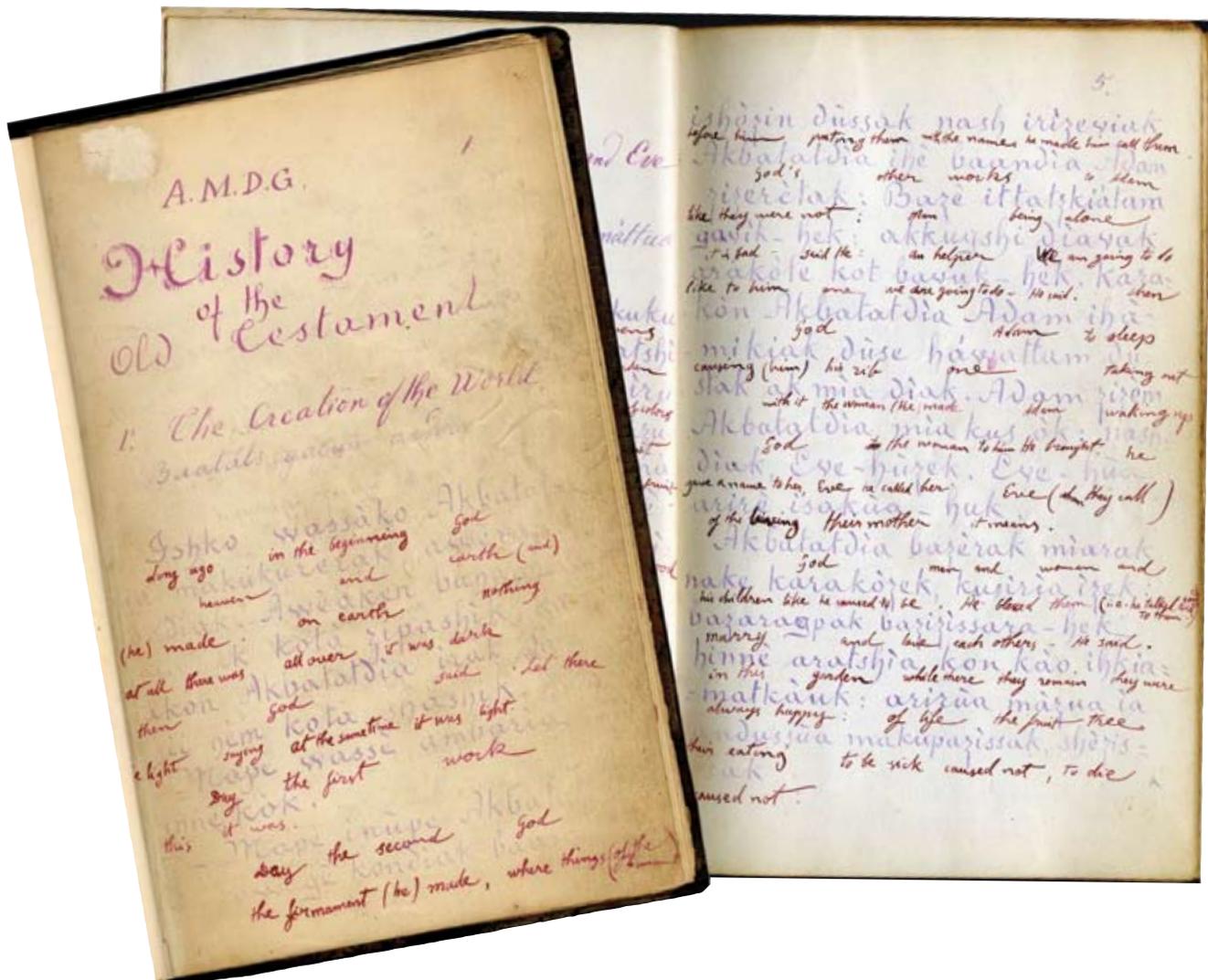
At first many Indians viewed alcohol as strong medicine—they saw it had power and were curious about it. Some became addicted very quickly. Those who did fought one another more, neglected their families, and fell under the control of the traders. Alcohol brought more grief to people already **traumatized** (extremely hurt) by disease and invasion.

Many Indian people refused to drink alcohol. In 1832 a U.S. law made it illegal to trade alcohol to Indians, but by then it was already a part of life on the Northern Plains. For the tribal cultures whose value system was built on vigor, cooperation, and honor, alcohol was devastating.

### Christianity: A Mixed Blessing to the People

Long ago, before horses came to the Plains, a Salish elder named Xall'qs (Shining Shirt, pronounced hal-ilks) had a vision. In it the spirits told Xall'qs, "When you grow up, there will come men wearing long black

FIGURE 5.18: Catholic missionaries and Crow people worked together to create this Crow/English translation of the Book of Genesis of the Old Testament. It shows English words in red and the pronunciation of Crow words in blue. This Bible, now housed at the Montana Historical Society, was produced about 1900.



dresses. They will teach you about ?Amotqn (ah-mot-kin), the man who sits on top [the creator], and about ?Emtep (Em-tep, the evil one) . . . From them you will learn to live your life on earth.”

Then one of the Iroquois Indian men brought west by the North West Company told the Salish about the spiritual power of the Black Robes—Catholic priests—who had influenced the Iroquois people. His story reminded the Salish of Shining Shirt’s prophecy. They wanted to learn more. They also hoped to get help against their enemies, the Blackfeet.

In the 1830s the Salish people sent four separate expeditions to St. Louis in hopes of bringing some of the Black Robes back to Salish country. The first two times they were refused. All members of the third expedition were killed along the way. Finally, their fourth try was rewarded. The Catholics agreed to send to the Salish a young Jesuit priest named Father Pierre-Jean de Smet.

In 1841 Father de Smet built St. Mary’s Mission at a place called Wide Cottonwood Trees, near present-day Stevensville in the Bitterroot Valley, with a huge chapel that seated 500. Then he settled in to teach the Salish people European farming methods, carpentry, and Christian principles. An Italian priest named Anthony Ravalli joined de Smet in 1845.

At first de Smet and Ravalli got along well with the Salish. De Smet wrote to his superiors that the Salish were honest, kindhearted, and

**“The Salish gradually realized that the missionaries were intent not just on bringing their teachings to the people, but on getting rid of the traditional Salish spiritual practices, which they called ‘the devil’s work’.”**

—A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SALISH AND PEND D’OREILLE TRIBES (1982)

*FIGURE 5.19:* Father Pierre-Jean de Smet and four other Jesuit missionaries built the first St. Mary’s Mission in the Bitterroot Valley (near Stevensville) in 1841. It was the first permanent settlement of non-Indians in present-day Montana. In 1866 the Jesuits built a second St. Mary’s Mission, shown in this 1884 photograph.



obedient to the Christian discipline. In turn, the Salish people expected that the priests would be powerful, honest, and honorable in their relations with the tribes.

Over time misunderstandings grew between the priests and the people. The Salish people expected to incorporate Christian principles into their traditional culture. But the priests expected the Salish to give up their traditional ways, become full-time farmers, and convert completely to Catholicism.

The priests interfered in tribal life, challenging tribal leadership and tribal values. Then, in 1846, Father de Smet said he was going to travel to the Blackfeet—who were enemies of the Salish—to share Christianity with them. To the Salish this was betrayal.

After that, most Salish decided they wanted nothing to do with the Black Robes. The people started practicing their traditional religion again, and many turned against the priests. In 1850 Montana's first Christian mission, St. Mary's, was sold, and the Jesuit priests departed. Sixteen years later, the Jesuits returned to the Bitterroot and reopened St. Mary's.

Many priests, ministers, and missionaries came to Montana in the 1800s. They worked hard to share their knowledge and expertise with the Indian people. As conflicts throughout this region increased, many Indian people turned to the missionaries for help and medicine.

The missionaries sometimes built strong friendships. They helped the Indians solve problems and heal sicknesses. But their goal was not to learn about Indian cultures, to adopt any of their wisdom, or to help strengthen the tribes. Instead, they demanded that Indian people turn away from their own cultures. As the 1800s progressed, Montana's Indian people struggled for their own survival.

## **A Century of Enormous Changes**

The fur trade of the early 1800s began 100 years of enormous change in the Northern Plains and Rocky Mountain region. It brought new people, new ideas, and new ways of being to the hunter-gatherer cultures of the Plains. For the first time, distant companies made immense profits by exploiting Montana's natural resources. This new economy defined the future of the region.

By the 1850s another natural resource would bring easterners to Montana, lured by the echo of a single cry: "Gold!"

# Expressions of the People

## *Métis Music and Design*

The Métis created their own unique arts and music that were a blend of Cree, Chippewa, French, Irish, and Scottish cultures. Because Métis were mixed blood, they were not completely accepted into either Indian or non-Indian societies. As a result they developed a cultural identity of their own that was reinforced in music, dance, clothing designs, and other arts.

Métis music and dance blended French folk songs, Scottish jigs, and Cree chants. Their primary musical instrument was the fiddle, borrowed from French and Scottish cultures. Fiddles were usually handmade of birch or maple and accompanied by spoons or the stomping of heeled boots. Métis songs combined French waltzes and reels with dances of the Plains Indians, and a person could hardly hear them without dancing.

Métis people incorporated singing into every activity—working, teaching their children, celebrating. Singing helped them keep time paddling canoes. They passed their history down in the songs they taught their children. There were many

“songs of separation,” expressing the sadness families felt when members left for long trapping or trading voyages.



FIGURE 5.20

FIGURES 5.20, 5.21, and 5.22: Personal items made by the Métis, like the pair of beaded gloves on the previous page and this sash (figure 5.21), shot pouch (figure 5.22, top), and shoulder strap (figure 5.22, bottom), show just a little of the artistry of the Métis culture. Some other Indian tribes called the Métis “flower beadwork people.”

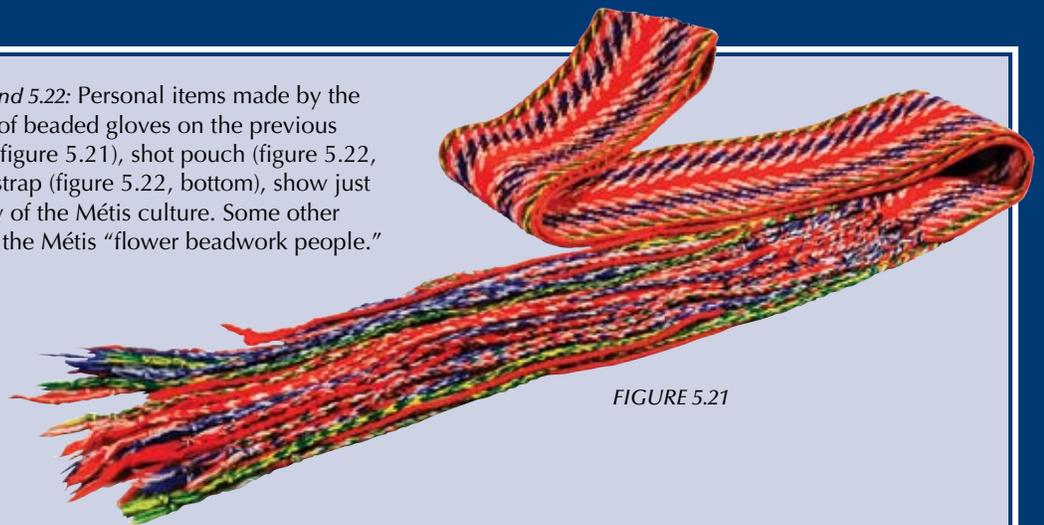


FIGURE 5.21

In their clothing the Métis combined the usefulness of Indian materials with European-style decoration patterns. For example, their beadwork on moccasins, pouches, gloves, and other goods incorporates flower designs that early Métis girls had learned at Catholic schools in eastern Canada.

Their most recognizable clothing item is the Métis sash—sometimes called the Assumption Sash, after the Canadian town of L’Assomption, where many were made. Trappers used the sash as a belt for their winter coats, as a **tumpline** (a strap slung across the forehead to support a load carried on the back), as a pocket to carry personal items, and as a wash-cloth or towel. The fringe at each end also provided thread for an emergency sewing kit.

Sashes came in many designs. Historically, different patterns represented different family groups. Today many of them use variations on the same symbolic colors. Red stands for the blood the Métis people shed while fighting for their rights as citizens; blue, for the strength of the Métis spirit; green, for the fertility of the Métis nation; white, for their connection to the earth and the Creator; yellow, for prosperity; and black, to represent the dark time of oppression when their traditional lands were taken away.

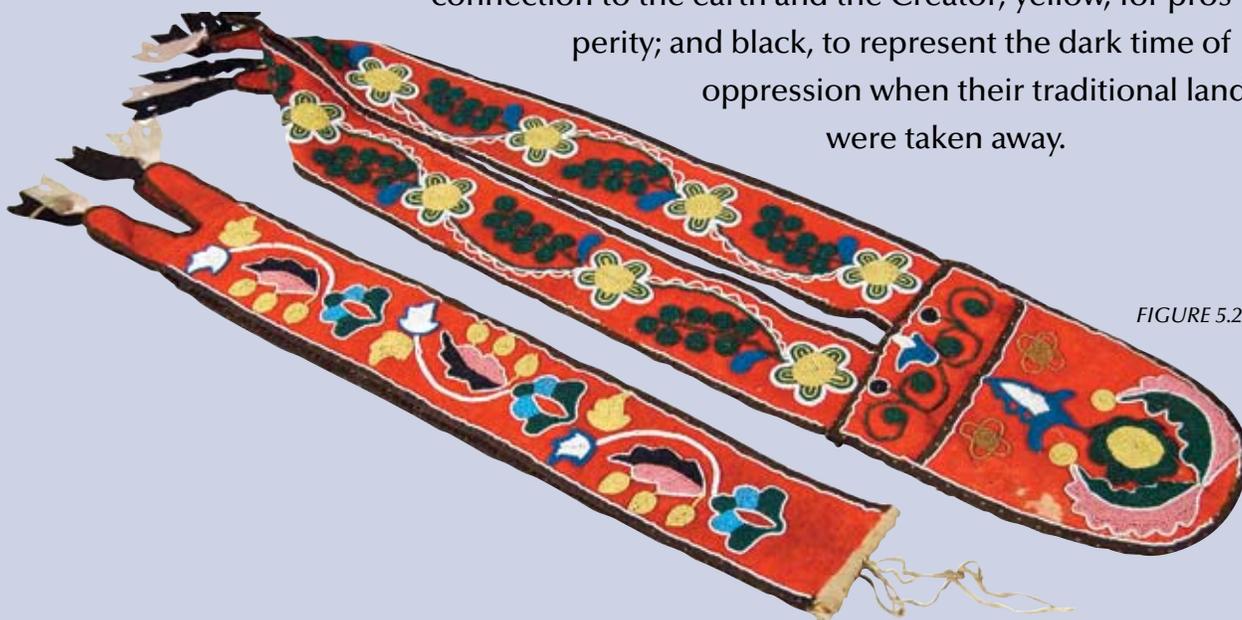


FIGURE 5.22

# CHAPTER 5 REVIEW

## ► CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. Identify: (a) Manuel Lisa; (b) William Ashley; (c) John Jacob Astor; (d) Alexander Culbertson; (e) Pierre-Jean de Smet
2. Define: (a) monopoly; (b) rendezvous; (c) brucellosis; (d) capitalism
3. What is the post-and-brigade system?
4. What role did the Métis play in the fur trade?
5. What is a free trapper?
6. What role did women play in the fur trade?
7. Why did fur traders turn from beaver to bison?
8. How did the fur trade spread smallpox?

## ► CRITICAL THINKING

1. Why do you think Indians participated in the fur trade? How do you think the fur trade benefited the tribes? How do you think it harmed them? Do you think the benefits outweighed the harm?
2. Although most Plains Indian tribes played roles in the fur trade, the Métis were especially important. What factors explain their importance?
3. Think about the kind of man who would want to be a free trapper. Describe his characteristics.
4. John Jacob Astor strongly influenced the history of this region, but there is no evidence that he ever traveled here. Do you think that matters? Would history be different if he had spent time here?
5. Both smallpox and the destruction of the bison were devastating to Plains Indians. Which of these two tragedies do you think had the greater long-term effect?
6. Why do you think the missionaries to Montana had limited success among Indians during the fur trade? What, if anything, do you think they could have done differently?

## ► PAST TO PRESENT

1. There is still controversy about the management of bison, particularly in the Yellowstone Park area. Investigate the issues and concerns today.
2. Research modern trapping on the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Web site and the Web sites of fur trapping organizations. Compare the trapping practices of today to the fur trade of the 1800s.

## ► MAKE IT LOCAL

1. How, if at all, do you think the fur trade affected your area? Does any evidence of the fur trade remain?

## ► EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Write a creative story about a day in the life of a fur trapper, his Indian wife, or one of her relatives involved in the fur trade.
2. Create an illustrated presentation on how people actually trapped beaver and readied the hides to ship east during the fur trade—and how hat factories converted the hides to hats.
3. Research one of the legends of the fur trapping days: Jedediah Smith, John Colter, Jim Bridger, or James Beckwourth.
4. Research modern trends, both in fashion and other kinds of consumer goods. Are there any animals that are endangered today because of human demands?
5. Research the clothing of the mountain man. Make a drawing of a mountain man with descriptions of his clothing.
6. Create a PowerPoint presentation on Métis art and culture.
7. Re-create a rendezvous with your classmates.

# Credits

The following abbreviations are used in the credits:

BBHC Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming  
GNPA Glacier National Park Archives  
LOC Library of Congress  
MAC Montana Arts Council, Helena  
MDEQ Montana Department of Environmental Quality, Helena  
MDT Montana Department of Transportation, Helena  
MFWP Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Helena  
MHS Montana Historical Society, Helena  
MHSA Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena  
MHSL Montana Historical Society Library, Helena  
MHS Mus. Montana Historical Society Museum, Helena  
MHS PA Montana Historical Society Photograph Archives, Helena  
MSU COT Montana State University College of Technology, Billings  
NMAI National Museum American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.  
MSU Billings Special Collections, Montana State University Billings Library  
NARA National Archives and Records Administration  
NPS National Park Service  
NRIS Natural Resource Information System, Montana State Library, Helena  
SHPO State Historic Preservation Office, Montana Historical Society, Helena  
TM Travel Montana, Helena  
UM Missoula Archives & Special Collections, The University of Montana-Missoula  
USDA United States Department of Agriculture  
USFS United States Forest Service  
WMM World Museum of Mining, Butte

## Chapter 5

- FIG. 5.1** *Fort Union on the Missouri*, Karl Bodmer, MHS Mus.
- FIG. 5.2** Fur Forts in Montana, map by MHS with information from Don Miller and Stan Cohen, *Military & Trading Posts of Montana* (Missoula, 1979), base map courtesy NRIS
- FIG. 5.3** *American Beaver*, J. J. Audubon, MHS Mus.
- FIG. 5.4** Beaver plew, MHS Mus. X86.01.06
- FIG. 5.5** Beaver-skin top hat, MHS Mus. X86.03.01
- FIG. 5.6** Alexander Ross, image A-01929, courtesy Royal British Columbia Museum, BC Archives
- FIG. 5.7** *Canadian Cree*, E. S. Paxson, 1905, MHS Mus.
- FIG. 5.8** Métis people on Red River cart, MHS PA, 950-580
- FIG. 5.9** *Rocky Mountain Rendezvous*, Denver Public Library, Western History Collection, F3970
- FIG. 5.10** Indians shopping at trading fort, Nicholas Point, S.J., from *Wilderness Kingdom: Indian Life in the Rocky Mountains, 1840-1847* (New York, 1967), p. 226
- FIG. 5.11** James P. Beckwourth, ca. 1855, courtesy Nevada Historical Society
- FIG. 5.12** *Fort Benton Looking West*, Granville Stuart, 1866, MHS Mus.
- FIG. 5.13** *Free Trappers*, 1911, C. M. Russell, MHS Mus.
- FIG. 5.14** Alexander and Natawista Culbertson and son Joe, ca. 1865, MHS PA 941-818
- FIG. 5.15** Buffalo Skinner, photo by L. A. Huffman, MHS PA 981-014
- FIG. 5.16** Buffalo Bones along the Northern Pacific, photo by Charles Spencer Francis, illustration from *Sport Among the Rockies: The Record of a Fishing and Hunting Trip in North-Western Montana* (Troy, NY, 1889), p. 15 MHS PA 945-968
- FIG. 5.17** National Bison Range, Moiese, Montana, photo by Donnie Sexton, TM
- FIG. 5.18** Crow/English Old Testament, Book of Genesis, MHSA SC 2400
- FIG. 5.19** St. Mary's Mission, Bitterroot Valley, 1884, photo by F. Jay Haynes, MHS PA, Haynes Foundation Coll. H-1328
- FIG. 5.20** Métis gloves, MHS Mus. X1982.35.27
- FIG. 5.21** Métis sash, MHS Mus. 1998.61.01
- FIG. 5.22** Métis shoulder strap and pouch, MHS Mus. X1969.17.14 (shoulder strap) and X1969.17.01 (pouch)