

The Epic of the Fur Trade

In the whole history of heroic exploits of strong men there is nothing comparable to the story of the American fur trade. For sheer courage, for indomitable determination, for elemental manhood, the hardy gatherers of peltries would put to utter shame the armored knights of old. Deep-chested, hairy, buckskin-clad fellows they were — those old trappers and voyageurs. They were the kind of men who could go far, eat little, and stay to the finish. In their eyes was that steady, alert gaze that comes of looking to the horizon. Fed upon wild, red meat and inured to exhausting toil, their bodies were sinewy and lean. And their souls were as lean as their bodies.

If heroic struggle against insuperable odds and the interplay of human passions is the stuff of which epics are woven, then the history of the far Northwest of the fur traders is epical. Certainly there was no dearth of fighting men, and the elements left no lack of superhuman impediments. Nature fashioned the setting of the tremendous story on a vast scale, for the characters were to be mighty men — “laughers at time and space.” Among them were noble figures like Father de Smet who carried the gospel into the wilderness;

some were renegades and desperadoes; and most of them were violent at times. "But they were masterful always. They met obstacles and overcame them. They struck their foes in front. They thirsted in deserts, hungered in the wilderness, froze in the blizzards, died with the plagues, and were massacred by the savages. Yet they conquered."

The annals of the American fur trade are full of episodes that make the epic tales of Greece and Rome seem like travesties. Too often sordid and brutal, the exploits of the trail makers are none the less fascinating. As told by John G. Neihardt, poet laureate of Nebraska, they will stir you. Think of old Hugh Glass who was horribly mangled by a grizzly bear and left to die by his companions. But finally he revived, got a drink of water, and crawled a hundred miles to the nearest fort. When he found his faithless comrades he forgave them.

Or recall Alexander Harvey, one of the most capable and desperate characters in the fur trade. Stationed at Fort Union on the Missouri River just above the mouth of the Yellowstone, he was discharged one winter at Christmas time and ordered to report in St. Louis if he wished to be reinstated in the service of the company. "I'll start in the morning," he said. "Give me a dog to carry my blankets, and by God I'll report before the ice goes out!" Afoot and alone, through hostile tribes

and blizzards, he negotiated the long journey of nearly twenty-five hundred miles and arrived early in March, just in time to return on the first steamboat up the river.

Nor is the story of the fur trade devoid of the glamour of kings, for the whole expanse of plains and mountains from the Great Lakes to the Pacific Ocean was the realm of the American Fur Company. At strategic places forts were built — the provincial capitals of the empire. John Jacob Astor in New York “spoke the words that filled the wilderness with deeds.” Far and wide he sent his subjects, the trappers and traders. The broad and eccentric Missouri River — which in some prehistoric age had fortunately changed its headlong course toward Hudson Bay and sought a warmer climate — became a great imperial thoroughfare that would have delighted Caesar. To-day it is “one long grave of men and boats,” and the kingdom of Astor is no more.

JOHN ELY BRIGGS



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