



“A Mountain Man” Life in the Far West, George Frederick Ruxton, 1951. “page 47”

## Afraid of Nothing-Personality Quirks of the Mountain Men

By Dr. Aaron Robert Woodard Ph.D.

As we examine the American fur trade of the 1830's and 40's, we come face to face with the main practitioner of this business, the mountain man. Mountain men shared many similar qualities that enabled them to endure and survive the harsh conditions of their chosen profession. This paper seeks to examine some of these characteristics in order to compile what in modern terms may be called a personality type.

### Vigilance

The first quality I wish to explore could be called vigilance, wariness, or alertness. This was of course essential if a trapper was to survive amidst the many pitfalls and hazards of the American wilderness of the 1830's. Many observers of the mountain men commented on this characteristic of their behavior. The foremost (and greatest) chronicler of the American fur trade, Hiram Chittenden, left this memorable description of the physical, and to some degree, emotional qualities, possessed by the typical mountain man:

He was ordinarily gaunt and spare, browned with exposure, his hair long and unkempt, while his general makeup, with the queer dress which he wore, made it difficult to distinguish him from an Indian. The constant peril of his life and the necessity of unremitting vigilance gave him a kind of piercing look, his head slightly bent forward and his deep eyes peering from under a slouch hat, or whatever head-gear

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he might possess, as if studying the face of a stranger to learn whether friend or foe.<sup>1</sup>

Other writers have commented on the look of ceaseless vigilance that characterized the mountain man and fur trader. Most possessed woodcraft that was at least the equal of the Indian; many were superior. They had to be to survive in the wild regions that they traveled in the never-ending quest for furs. Robert Glass Cleland noted, referring to observations by Frederick Ruxton, that mountain men were highly attuned to nature. They could read the behavior of animals and easily determine the meanings of the obscurest signals from the wild.<sup>2</sup>

These men had to also be able to anticipate their enemies, who, at most times were Indians. Ruxton observed an interesting scene that illustrates this quality. Ruxton was an English adventurer who had joined a group of American trappers traveling up the Platte River into South Dakota. His account is as follows:

“Our party crossed the south fork about ten miles from its juncture with the main stream, and then, passing the prairie, struck the north fork a day’s travel from the other. At the mouth of an ash-timbered creek they came upon Indian ‘sign’ and, as now they were in the vicinity of the treacherous Sioux, they moved along with additional caution...Gonneville, old Luke and La Bonte’ had started up the creek, and were carefully examining the banks for ‘sign’ when the former, who was in `front, suddenly paused, and looking intently up the stream, held up his hand to his companions to signal them to stop. Luke and La Bonte’ both followed the direction of the trapper’s intent and fixed gaze. The former uttered in a suppressed tone the expressive exclamation ‘Wagh!’-the latter saw nothing but a wood-duck swimming swiftly down the stream, followed by her downy progeny. Gonneville turned his head, and extending his arm twice with a forward motion up the creek, whispered-’Les sauvages’ ‘Injuns sure and Sioux

at that,’ answered Luke...’Injuns? He (La Bonte’) asked, ‘Where are they?’ ‘Whar?’repeated old Luke, striking the flint of his rifle, and opening the pan to examine the priming. ‘What brings a duck a-streaking it down the stream if humans ain’t behind her/ and who’s thar in these diggings but Injuns, and the worst kind? Ane we’d better push to camp, I’m thinking, if we mean to save our hair.’ ‘Sign’ sufficient indeed, it was to all the trappers who, on being apprized of it, instantly drove in their animals and picketed them; and hardly had they done so when a band of Indians made their appearance on the banks of the creek, from whence they galloped to the bluff which overlooked the camp at the distance of about 600 yards...The trappers had formed a little breastworks of their packs, forming a semi-circle, the chord of which was made by the animals standing in a line, side by side, closely picketed and hobbled...The Indians presently descended the bluff on foot...Then a chief advanced before the rest...Gonneville, who spoke the Sioux language, and was well acquainted with the nation, affirmed that they belonged to a band called the Yanka-taus (Yankton), well known to be the most evil disposed of that treacherous nation<sup>3</sup>...Divesting himself of all arms...he advanced toward the savage...’Howgh!’ exclaimed both as they met, and after a silence of a few moments, the Indian spoke asking, ‘Why the Longknives hid behind their packs when his band approached? Were they afraid or were they preparing a dog-feast to entertain their friends? The whites were passing through his country, burning his wood, drinking his water, and killing his game; but he knew they had now come to pay for the mischief they had done and that the mules and horses they had brought with them were intended as a present to their red friends’...The trapper answered shortly, ‘The Longknives had brought the horses for themselves-their hearts were big

1 Hiram Martin Chittenden, *History of the American Fur Trade of the Far West*, (New York, 1902) vol I, pp.59-60. Quoted in Robert Glass Cleland, *This Reckless Breed of Men*, (New York, Knopf Inc., 1950) p.52

2 Cleland, p.30, quoting Ruxton, *Adventures in Mexico and the Rocky Mountains*, p.235

3 Denig also noted that the Yanktons were considered to be treacherous. Edwin Denig *Five Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri*, (University Oklahoma, Norman, 1961) p.31.



Trappers (Alfred Jacob Miller). "A prominent feature in the character of the hunters of the far west is their quick determination and resolve in cases of extreme difficulty and peril." Courtesy Walters Art Gallery

but not towards the Yanka-Taus' ...Saying this the trapper turned his back and rejoined his companions."<sup>4</sup>

The trappers drove the Indians off, killing several, while losing one trapper to Indian fire-and they did not lose their horses and mules.

### **Contrarian**

Some, but not all mountain men, exhibited signs of what might be called "contrariness," or a general dislike of authority. As historian Alpheus Favour relates, "The average mountain man resented every effort of the government to exercise any control over his actions. These men, in some instances, had come from parents who were opposed to the established order, or in a number of cases were in the mountains to avoid the consequences of law violations back in their home communities. This class of men as a rule gave little emphasis to government and none at all to law. They wanted to be left alone, and as long as the constituted authorities did not interfere with their life as mountain men, they were satisfied."<sup>5</sup>

### **Capitalistic Drive**

Despite these hermit hard cases, there were many other mountain men who exhibited traits of what has been labelled "Jacksonian Democracy." A Jacksonian was an American of the 1820's and 30' as defined by historian Richard Hofstadter as "an expectant capitalist, a hardworking ambitious person for whom enterprise was a kind of religion."<sup>6</sup> Many trappers, at least those who classed themselves as free trappers, fit this definition. They were interested in moving up the economic ladder of success. As William Goetzman notes, "there were many like William Ashley or Thomas James who out of encouragement or desperation looked away to the Rocky Mountains, teeming with beaver and other hidden resources and saw a path to economic success and rapid upward

4 George Frederick Ruxton, *Life in the Far West*, (New York, Harper Brothers, 1859) pgs.78-81.

5. Alpheus Favour, *Old Bill Williams-Mountain Man*, (Oklahoma, University of Oklahoma Press, 1962) p.19.

6 Richard Hofstadter, quoted in William Goetzmann, "The Mountain Man as Jacksonian Man," (John Wilson (ed.), *Forging the American Character*, New Jersey, Prentice Hall, 1997) p.158

mobility.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Ashley went on to accumulate a fortune and become a member of Congress.

Another excellent example of this type of trapper is Jedediah Smith, who started out as a hired hunter for Ashley and “apprenticed,” if you will, in the wilderness college and later went on to buy out Ashley with partners William Sublette and David Jackson.<sup>8</sup> Smith was perhaps the greatest American mountain man and explorer on record. His explorations were done for adventure, but also for economic gain. He was seeking new, untrodden areas from which to reap a fortune in furs.<sup>9</sup> Jed sought material gain for himself but also for his family. As he wrote in a letter to his brother on Christmas eve 1829, “It is, that I may be able to help those who stand in need, that I face every danger-it is for this that I traverse the mountains covered with eternal snow...let it be the greatest pleasure that we can enjoy, the height of our ambition, now, when our parents are in the decline of life, to smooth the pillow of their age and as much as in us lies, take from them all cause of Trouble....”<sup>10</sup>

Smith and others who were desirous of capital gain also took an interest in international affairs, particularly the encroachments of the British government into American territory. The Convention of 1818 had set up a joint occupancy of the Oregon territory by both the United States and Great Britain. This agreement was renewed in 1827.<sup>11</sup> This joint occupation resulted in many complaints from American trappers that the Hudson’s Bay Company was engaged in frenetic trapping below the 49th parallel designed to deplete fur bearing animals in this area that was viewed as potentially American soil. In a letter from Jedediah Smith to the Secretary of War, Smith mentions this issue: “The inequality of the convention with Great Britain in 1818 is most glaring and apparent and its continuance is a great and manifest injury to the United States.”<sup>12</sup> Smith, in a letter to the Secretary of War, also mentioned that he felt

7 Ibid.

8 Robert Cleland, *This Reckless Breed of Men*, (New York, Knopf, 1963) p.63

9 Goetzmann, p.158

10 Letter from Jed Smith to brother Ralph Smith December 24 1829 located in Dale Morgan, *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West*, (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press,1953) p.353-354.

11 Sam Haynes, James K. Polk and the Expansionist Impulse (New York, Pearson Inc., 2006), p.129.

12 James Smith, “Jed’s Last Letter -- a Point of View,” quoting from letter from Jedediah Smith, David Jackson and William Sublette to Secretary of War, 29 October 1830 (*Castor Canadensis -- Newsletter of the Jedediah Smith Society*, University of the Pacific, Stockton, California, Fall 2008), pp.2-3.

obligated “to do all in my power to promote so desirable an object as that of developing the resources of our extended Western Territory.”<sup>13</sup> This remark certainly sounds capitalistic.

### Educated and Religious

Although many people associate mountain men with being ignorant savages possessing horrific manners and orgiastic appetites, I have not generally found this to be true in my research. There are many accounts regarding the education of these wilderness dwellers. Many observers commented on the well-read men they met in the fur trade. One trapper related that he had another trapper present him with a copy of an ancient and modern history that he carried with him. He also noted that most of the old mountain men were avid readers. He said that he thought it was humorous that mountain men were portrayed as savages because in his experience, they were as knowledgeable as anyone else.<sup>14</sup>

Other trappers commented in their own writings about their scholarly tendencies. Osborne Russell wrote that he and other trappers whiled away the winter nights by holding debates amongst themselves. He also noted that many of the trappers he met were scholars, well read and very able to communicate their ideas and opinions. They even called their meetings “The Rocky Mountain College.”<sup>15</sup>

Other mountain men were well known for their love of the classics, such as Joseph Meek, who was known to quote Shakespeare. As historian Harvey Tobie noted, “During periods of enforced activity these men taught each other. They had access to the Bible, to the works of Shakespeare, Byron, Scott and many other writers. They talked about these priceless works, recited passages (quite inaccurately at times), named each other and their children after characters in literature and joked in warped literary idioms.”<sup>16</sup>

13 James Smith, “Jed’s Last Letter-a Point of View,” quoting from letter from Jedediah Smith, David Jackson, and William Sublette to Secretary of War, 29 October 1830, *Castor Canadensis -- Newsletter of the Jedediah Smith Society*, (Stockton, California, University of the Pacific, Fall 2008), p.3

14 Cleland, p 50. Quoting W.T. Hamilton *My Sixty Years on the Plains*, (New York, 1905) p.68

15 Osborne Russell *Journal of a Trapper*, (New York, University of Nebraska Press, 1955) p. 51

16 Harvey Tobie “Joseph Meek,” (Leroy Hafen (ed.) *Mountain Men and Fur Traders of the Far West*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1982), p.158.

Religious tendencies are not usually commented on in regards to mountain men, but some of the most famous were also the most religious. Jedediah Smith was a noted Christian and frequently inserted Biblical quotes and references in his letters, such as this. "Next my brother comes the subject for which we live, are we ungrateful to that God in whom we live and move and have our being how often ought we on our bended knees to offer up our grateful acknowledgements for the gift of His dear Son. Is it possible that God 'So loved the world that He gave his only begotten son that whosoever believed on him Should have everlasting life,'" [this is a quotation from John 3:16]. Then let us come forward with faith, nothing doubting and He will most unquestionably hear us."<sup>17</sup>

Jed Smith's second-in-command on his 1826 California trip, Harrison Rogers, left us a theological recitation what would do any seminarian proud. Rogers wrote the following in his diary as a New Year's greeting to the Catholic father at the mission where the group was staying, "...Our Savior sir, after having spent His life in untiring benevolence and before He ascended to His native heavens, probably in allusion to the twelve tribes of Israel, elected twelve apostles or missionaries. To these, after having properly qualified and instructed them he left a part of his legacy, a world to be converted. He directed that 'repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem,' Rogers goes on to give a complete history of the Christian church, quotes from Justin Martyr, and discusses the geography of the early Christian churches as well as the numbers of Christian missionaries active in the world at the time."<sup>18</sup>

While it is of course true that Biblical literacy is perhaps at its lowest ebb in the United States since the nation was founded and it also true that if a child dares to utter a prayer in school the SWAT team will undoubtedly be deployed to quell this Constitutional violation, it is interesting to observe that supposedly ignorant mountain men had a better grasp of the main facets of the Christian faith than large numbers of our fellow citizens.

In conclusion, mountain men possessed unique personality

<sup>17</sup> Morgan, p.359.

<sup>18</sup> Harrison Dale, *The Ashley-Smith Explorations and the Discovery of a Central Route to the Pacific 1822-1829*, (Arthur H. Clark Co., Glendale CA, 1941), pp.210-212.

characteristics that stood them in good stead as they plied their hazardous trade in the wild reaches of the American frontier. Certainly, as their conduct demonstrated, they were afraid of nothing.