



## TRAPPER STATION

### I. GOAL:

The students will learn some of the skills required of the hunters and trappers of the 1840s.

### II. OBJECTIVES:

Students will learn about:

- A. The importance of fur and the fur trade in opening the American West.
- B. The importance of conservation.
- C. Basic tracking.
- D. Basic survival skills - shelter building and fire making.
- E. Basic leather work and Indian lore.

### III. THE PEOPLE:

On the whole, Sutter's trappers were a group of men between careers. In the 1830s, they were the princes of the mountains, the mountaineers of the Rockies. In the 1850s they would regain fame as guides, scouts and heroes of Penny Dreadfuls (Dime novels before inflation).

Yet in the early 1840s, the economy of the fur trade had put these men out of work. The American beaver trade of the last 150 years had nearly disappeared due to the new style of the silk top hat.

Captain Sutter, always looking for a way to make money, entered the weakened fur trade. The beaver was nearly worthless, but Sutter had his own hatter. The new money furs, part of the china silk trade, were otters and muskrats.

Sutter hired every experienced and inexperienced trapper he could find to field brigades. His brigades were never completely successful. Economics and the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) were major reasons. The HBC had created a buffer, a dead zone, between California and the Oregon Country. They did this by killing every fur bearing animal they could find in Northern California. This limited Sutter's Brigades to the "wilds," the swamp we now call the Sacramento - San Joaquin Delta. This limited territory plus Mexican economic policies hurt Sutter's profits.

The trappers for the most part were a coarse, hard living breed. Justice and vengeance were one and the same, usually issued from the barrel of a gun or the blade of a knife. Most of their employers looked down on them, but were prudently afraid, also. Most of the civilized workmen and ladies of the period were disdainful of these Indianized barbarians.



The clothing worn by the trapper was the best he could afford. When at the Fort, greasy buckskin trousers were replaced by wool, corduroy or canvas if possible. More Indianized trappers would keep their breechcloths and leggings. A cotton or homespun shirt with a vest or a hunter's coat of cloth or buckskin were normal. A wide leather belt or sash held a large butcher knife about his waist. A wide brimmed beaver felt hat on his head, moccasins on his feet, a shooting pouch on his shoulder, and a rifle in his hand completed his outfit.

#### **IV. THE PLACE:**

The trapper's station is a lean-to set up in the west yard of the Fort between the kitchen fire and the carpenter's shop.

In case of inclement weather, the station may be moved into one of the rooms. Check with the park staff in this case.

#### **V. THE CRAFTS:**

Looking at the list of objectives, your group could be very busy. But the crafts are fairly simple and the list can be edited by the parent / teacher. Following is a list of crafts in the same order as the objectives.

- A. Furs and Fur Trade**
- B. Conservation**

While passing around the sample furs, explain to the children the economic importance of the fur trade. Remember that every mountain route and most modern highways and railroads follow trade routes that the trapper blazed across the United States.

Explain how style change made the trade decline. Conservation can be addressed with the HBC kill zone.

- C. Basic Tracking**

The program supplies a footprint sample board. The names are on the frame, but are covered with leather to create a guessing game.

- D. Survival Skills**

The program supplies a lean-to. Ask the children how trapper might protect himself from the weather if he were not at a cabin – e.g., lean-to made of canvas or leather, a brush or tree-branch lean-to, etc.

In the trap basket, materials are available for starting fires with flint and steel. This is a big thrill for the children but the instructor may want to practice ahead of time. Flint and steel kits may



be purchased at the Sutter's Fort Trade Store so you can practice ahead of time. **Caution: you must have a bucket of water close by any time you start a fire.**

Basically you need four items to start a fire: flint, steel, charcloth and tinder. Charcloth is 100% cotton burned in an enclosed metal can. The easiest tinder to acquire is macramé jute (be sure it hasn't been treated with a fire retardant).

Unravel the jute rope and fluff it out to build a bird's nest. Hold the charcloth on the flint near a sharp edge. Hit the flint with the steel striker and sparks will fly. When a spark lands on the charcloth, it will stick and the spark will grow. Put the charcloth into the bird's nest of jute fluff and blow on it until it flames up. Easy, right?

### E. Basic Leatherworking and Indian Lore

The trappers and their Indian wives were often expert leatherworkers. Sailors, soldiers and travelers of the time often carried small mementos of home in pouches around their necks. This was from a superstition that as long as they had a piece of home with them, they would return.

Many Indian tribes had similar pouches of religious significance. The Americans called them medicine bags. Many "Indianized" trappers wore medicine bags.

Having your students assemble and decorate their own medicine bags will give them an understanding of simple leatherwork. Plus they will have a special keepsake from their time at Sutter's Fort.

## VI. SAFETY PRECAUTIONS:

In these days of over-protectiveness and class action suits, it is hard to imagine the dangers in a frontiersman's life. Trappers made their living by the gun, knife and trap. Your students, for the most part, won't be dealing with these. There are, however, a few points to consider.

With furs, conservation and tracking, there is little to worry about. However, **please, do not allow the children to pick up the footprint board.** It is heavy, breakable and not easily replaceable.

With flint and steel, a child or two will probably **cut their knuckles.** A near-by box of band aids may come in handy. **When starting fire, the two big things to watch out for** are clothes and hair. Most of your students' costumes, especially the girls, will be made of lightweight cotton. Cotton burns easily and with loose fitting clothing, a small flame may not be noticed right away. Long hair should be tied back during this exercise. Male instructors please watch your beards and/or mustaches.



The only foreseeable problems with the medicine bags are needles and awls. Pre-punching your leather medicine bags and having the children lace them is easier and safer, but the instructor should bring an awl along in case a hole needs to be punched or enlarged.

Keep an eye on your students and there should be no problems.

Safety, as always is 50% common sense. The knowledge your instructors can help with. The common sense is something your children will hopefully learn with experience.

## VII. GENERAL INFORMATION:

For fun, we are including a glossary of some of the trappers' colorful language. These may be used to add to your station leader's persona.

We are also giving you a bibliography. These books are fairly available, and can help you or your station leaders with your understanding of the trappers. Plus you can find some good "Yarnin" material for around the campfire.

### **Mountain Man Glossary and Related Terms:**

- **BIG MUDDY** - The trapper's name for the Missouri River.
- **BOOSHWAY** - A boss, the man who paid the trapper his wages if he worked as a hired trapper or skin trapper. This man directed the brigade. The name is probably derived from the French work bourgeois.
- **BULLBOAT** - A round boat made from buffalo hides stretched across willow boughs and lashed together with green hide strips to form a deep saucer-like boat.
- **CACHE** (pronounced cash) - A storehouse in the wilderness, where trappers hid beaver furs. They dug a pit 5 or 6 feet deep in a bank of solid earth, deposited their furs and concealed all traces of digging. This hideaway was temporary until they could return and collect the furs on their way to the rendezvous.
- **CAPOTE** (pronounced kuh-poa't) - A coat with a hood made from a blanket.
- **CASTOREUM** (pronounced cas-toh-ree-um) - A secretion taken from the gland of the beaver and used as bait when setting traps. The odor attracted beaver and gave the mountain man a "unique" smell too.
- **CHILE** (child) - A word used by a mountain man to refer to himself.
- **CRICK** - The westerner's term for creek.
- **FAT COW** - Good living.
- **FORTED UP** - Fighting Indians.
- **FOOFARRAW** (pronounced foo-fah-row) - Any unnecessary adornment, fancy thing, or anything beyond what was strictly needed. From the French word fanfaron.
- **FREE TRAPPER** - A beaver hunter who was a free agent. He trapped where and when he wanted and bargained with traders at the rendezvous.



- TO UNDER, GONE UNDER - An expression used when it was thought a fellow trapper had died or been killed.
- GREEN RIVER KNIFE, SCALP-TAKER, OR BUTCHER KNIFE - A weapon manufactured by John Russell in his factory on the Green River in Deerfield, Massachusetts. This knife was a favorite of the mountain man.
- HAWKEN RIFLE - A heavy (10-12 lbs.), 34 inch, octagonal-barreled rifle, about .53 caliber with low sights, set trigger, and percussion lock. Another favorite among the mountain men.
- HOSS AN BEAVER - Everything. "The works!" Through gambling, disaster or Indian raids the trapper might lose his horse and his beaver, thus hoss and beaver.
- HUMP RIBS - The meat of the buffalo's high shoulder hump, considered a delicacy by frontiersmen.
- PARFLECHE SOLE (pronounced par-flesh-soh) - The tough sole of moccasins.
- PELT, PELTRIES - The fur piece of a small animal such as beaver.
- PIROGUE (pronounced puh-roag) - A dugout canoe used in the early days of trapping.
- PLEWS - Prime beaver skins, from the French word plus.
- PLUNDER - The equipment or gear of the mountain man
- RENDEZVOUS - A summer fur fair, the meeting of mountain men and Indians in a particular place to sell and trade their beaver pelts to traders and large fur companies.
- SIGN - Anything which indicated the presence of Indians or animals, such as cut or broken trees, a blade of grass pressed down, etc.
- SOME PUNKINS - A good looking Indian girl or woman.
- SPOOK EM - To scare something.
- THAT'S THE WAY THE STICK FLOATS - That's the way things look.
- UP TO BEAVER - Rich in beaver pelts.
- WAUGH! (pronounced waw) – An emphatic exclamation comparable to "Wow!"

#### **Bibliography:**

- **Book of Buckskinning**
- **Indian Sign Language** by Tomkins
- **Journals of Lewis & Clark** by Devoto
- **Journal of a Mountain Man** by James Clyman
- **American Fur Trade of the Far West** by Chittenden
- **Adventures of a Mountain Man** by Zenas Leonard
- **Ewing Young** by Holmes
- **James Pattie's West** by Batman
- **The Mountain Men** by Laycock
- **Southwest Expedition of Jedediah S. Smith** by Brooks
- **Journal of a Trapper** by Osborne Russel
- **The Westering Man** by Gilbert
- **Mountain Men & The Fur Trade of the Far West** by Carter



- **Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West** by Morgan
- **The Taos Trappers** by Weber
- **Kit Carson** by Esther Green
- **Joe Meek** by Stanley Vestal
- **Chinook Jargon**
- **Wah-To-Ya and The Taos Trail** by Gerrard



## A BRIEF HISTORY OF TRAPPING AT SUTTER'S FORT 1840-1846

By Ken Falletti

Much of the history of Capt. Sutter's trapping activities in the Sacramento Valley prior to P.B. Reading's 1845 expedition is unknown to us. Records have been lost or destroyed or are scattered widely in bits and pieces of obscure journals and correspondence. However, we do know that, almost from its founding, trapping was as important to the Fort's economy as almost any other activity. It was a business for which Captain Sutter held high hopes and expectations, but also one that, for a variety of reasons, never quite lived up to its potential.

In 1840 Captain Sutter officially entered into the California fur trade by obtaining what he thought were exclusive trapping rights from the civil government. With these rights he believed that he had the power to exclude all trapping parties, except his own, from hunting the Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys. Sutter seems to have been unaware that in 1837 the California government had signed an agreement with the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) granting them rights to trap the valleys, an agreement which had never been invalidated. Vallejo had stated that he would not interfere with any trapping parties from HBC in the valley and so the basis for a continuing war of claims and counterclaims had been set. By late in the year 1840 Sutter seems to have been ready to jump into the fur business "with both feet," and visitors to the Fort noted that his fledgling establishment was a magnet for former Rocky Mountain trappers and sailors who had deserted their naval posts and had drifted into the Captain's service as trappers.

The year 1841 seems to have marked the first organized efforts to harvest furs by Sutter. Joseph Gendreau had been appointed as Chief of Trappers and Sutter's blacksmiths had manufactured enough traps to outfit 4 canoes. Unfortunately no notes can be found that would testify to either the success or failure of this early expedition. We do know that the valleys of the Sacramento and San Joaquin had yielded tremendous amounts of fur in previous years. During the 6 month trapping expedition of the HBC in 1830 4,000 hides had been taken. Beaver skins along with cowhides were the only form of legal tender in California during that time and it appears that yearly hunts by the HBC had netted an average take of 3,000 beaver per year. HBC had about 170 men employed in the area in 1841 / 42. In September of that year HBC purchased a building in Yerba Buena to serve as their headquarters in the valley as well as to function as a trading post. It is obvious from this that the Company did not plan to abandon its position in Alta California. In fact, James Douglas of the HBC visited Alvarado during 1841 and entered into an agreement that would pay Alvarado 50 cents for each beaver taken by the Company in California

By 1842 Sutter had built up a sizable trapping force and has some 8,000 traps ready for the field. In addition to his Rocky Mountain trappers and ex-sailors a large number of French Canadians had been hired. A new chief of trappers, Henry McVicker, led Sutter's trapping forces. In an interesting note one of the French Canadians, a man called Big Nicholas, had vowed to kill Sutter. The reasons for Big Nicholas's rancor are unknown. The harvest for the year is recorded as 193 lbs. of beaver plus 166 skins of unknown weight (approx. 210 lbs.) Sutter believed that McVicker had stolen a good part of the harvest and sold the skins to Dr. Marsh and others. Sutter also noted, in a letter to Sunol, that his trappers had taken deer instead of beaver because "it pleased them



more." How Henry McVicker became the Chief of Trappers is unknown but it is obvious that leadership was not his one of his major attributes.

1843 found Sutter full of confidence about the upcoming trapping season. In a letter to Sunol, Sutter confided that all of his regular trappers are out in the field. In addition Sutter stated that he had added about 40 men to his normal number of trappers and that he soon would equip another dozen. He also stated that he believed that the HBC would not be coming to the valley that year. Sutter's belief that HBC would not come to the valley in 1843 was mistaken. HBC brigades led by Michael La Framboise harvested some 650 otter and beaver skins during the year. Sutter's take from the valley is unknown but probably was less than HBC's. Since this hunt is the one portrayed by our Mobile Living History program it should also be noted that there seems to have been a plan by Sutter, to harass any HBC parties who were found and that Sutter's trappers seem to have hunted both north and south of the Fort that year. Since the area north of the Fort had been virtually hunted out in previous years this was probably done in an attempt to locate any Hudson's Bay parties in the valley rather than in any expectation of a lucrative harvest in that area. In the fall of the year Sir George Simpson of the HBC stated in various letters that Sutter had surrounded himself with "runaway sailors, vagabond trappers from the United States and other desperadoes who are risking violence by attempting to drive Hudson's Bay Company out of the valley." It is uncertain who acted as Sutter's Chief of Trappers during the year but evidence seems to indicate that it was the former Rocky Mountain brigade leader, John Gantt. At any rate the harvest for the year must have been a disappointment to the Captain who had invested so many resources in the endeavor.

Of the 1844 trapping season nothing is known. It would appear that John Gantt was still in charge of the trappers, but the harvest for the year, as well as any documentation as to the numbers of men employed, have not been found.

The 1845 / 46 trapping season is the one that we know most about. P.B. Reading's (Chief of Trappers) log book as well as correspondence between Sutter and Reading are available for study. What is apparent is that the nature of the trapping parties had changed. Trapping was mostly done by the Native American and Hawaiian employees of the Fort. Reading, in 1845, led an expedition into the area now known as the Trinity Alps. This expedition was the first known attempt by white men to harvest furs in that area. Again, most of the trapping occurred south of the Fort during those years. "The Fort Sutter Papers," a transcript of the Manuscripts and Commentaries published by Edward Eberstadt in 1922 contains some important information about the makeup of the trappers at the Fort. It contains, for instance, the following notations made during the fall of 1846:

A ledger entry showing that 20 Indian trappers were issued:

- A. 20 pea jackets
- B. 20 pair coarse shoes
- C. 20 blue cloth trowsers
- D. 20 fine combs
- E. 20 coarse combs





- A ledger entry showing the following goods bought for 9 white men and 20 Indians:
- A. Blue Flannel shirts
  - B. 48 Duck trousers (40 to Indians)
  - C. 24 Duck frocks (20 to Indians)

While it cannot be said with any certainty that these 9 white men and 20 Indians were the same as those named in Reading's log books it is true that his log books contains the names of 9 white men who were definitely part of the 1845 / 46 trapping parties.

We know that the harvest for the 1845 / 46 hunt totaled 323 beaver and 173 otter skins. Otter skins sold, at that time, for about \$3.50 each and beaver for approximately \$3.00 per lb. Since the average California beaver hide weighed from 1 ½ to 2 lbs. this harvest represented a cash income of about \$2100.00. While this certainly does not represent a fortune it would have been very welcome by the cash poor Sutter. Additionally many other animals whose hides represented cash money such as skunk, raccoon, coyote and wolves were also harvested during this hunt. Sutter made several statements in his various letters to Reading, expressing his delight with the harvest.

The job of trying to outfit this expedition appears to have consumed much of Reading's time. Reading's demands for blankets and Sutter's excuses for not delivering them appear over and over in the correspondence between the two men. Reading also asked on many occasions for other supplies such as clothing, cloth, flour, salt, needles, powder and lead. Sutter appeared to be doing his best to keep Reading supplied. At one point Sutter wrote to Reading that he hoped to obtain (apparently for the trappers) "beads, clothing, sheet copper, iron etc." Except for the clothing these supplies were apparently intended as trade items as sheet copper and sheet iron were, by that time, much in demand by the Indians in the valley. Reading's log book lists goods supplied to his trappers and the prices charged the trappers for them. Among his entries are:

Red Blanket	\$ 8.00	1 lb. of tobacco	\$ 1.00
Knife	1.00	3 ½ lbs. sugar	1.75
1 pr. pants	3.00	¼ lb . tea	1.00
1 strand beads	.25	1 pea jacket	15.00
1 shirt	3.50	1 wool shirt	4.00
1 pr. suspenders	.75	5 dz. fish hooks	2.00
6 spoons	2.00	3 hatchets	4.50
1 gingham box	.75	2 yds. blue drill	1.50



The following list contains the names of those men from Reading's logs. They were known to have been working for Reading during the 1845 / 46 expedition:

White Men

Moor, Wm. C.  
 Hinsley, S.  
 Merrit, Ezekial  
 La Framboise, Michael  
 Myers, John  
 Bidwell, John  
 Bercier, Francis  
 Jones, I.M.

Native Americans or Hawaiians

Holeboch  
 lahatche  
 Chabba  
 Mercado  
 Olympio  
 Osa  
 Ignace  
 Clemente

The following men were named in Sutter's letters to Reading and appear to have been involved in hunting or trapping during the same period, but who may or may not have been employed by Reading for the main expedition:

White Men

Bristow, Elijah  
 Gendreau, G. Francois  
 Rouell, Jean B.  
 Hicks, William  
 Hubbard  
 Green, Jacob  
 Mast  
 Coats, James

Native Americans or Hawaiians

Maintop  
 Dolohuck  
 Yauti  
 Chipcha  
 Wakino  
 Nuut

An interesting side note to that year's expedition is found in one of Sutter's letters to Reading. In this letter Sutter described an incident that occurred at the Fort in early March 1846 involving 3 free trappers. The three, R.K.Payne, Franklin Sears and Granville Swift were accused of stealing 3 blankets from Sutter's Indian employees. When Sutter and Francis Hoen confronted these men who, had been drinking heavily, to demand the return of the blankets, the hunters threatened to kill Sutter and Hoen. Sutter and Hoen retreated to the central building and were joined by Mr. Hannes and Mr. Dohling. Throughout the night the 3 trappers demanded, and were given, more liquor. They also continued their threats to kill the four men. By morning the "whiskey bravado" had worn off, the blankets mysteriously reappeared, and the three trappers left the Fort.

Hopefully more detailed information about trapping at Sutter's Fort during the early years of its existence will be found. It is apparent, however, that Sutter considered fur bearing animals as one of his greatest assets and harvesting them as one of his greatest challenges. Almost from the beginning of the establishment of his empire Sutter began to try to break the stranglehold



that HBC held on the business in the valley. The facts are that, because of apparent duplicity by the civil government, the lessening demand for the furs, the unavailability of trained and dedicated personnel, and the massive harvesting that had occurred in the valley prior to his arrival his success was less than he had hoped but still not insignificant to the life of his enterprise. I will conclude with some interesting information obtained from the previously cited work by Edward Eberstadt that was brought to my attention by Richard Steed, a dedicated historian of early California and co-author of several books and articles on Johnson's Ranch. While these entries of accounts from ledgers of the Fort during the fall of 1846 don't directly pertain to activities by the trappers I think they are interesting on their own.

### ACCOUNTS OF GOODS ISSUED AT SUTTER'S FORT SEPTEMBER AND OCTOBER 1846

Issued to:

Edmund Bray

1 blue cloth trowser  
2 blue flannel shirts  
2 duck frocks  
1 pr. woolen stockings  
1 pr. coarse shoes

Infantry Indians (30 men)

30 duck frocks  
60 duck trowsers  
30 coarse shoes  
90 lbs. soap

J.A. Sutter

1 pea jacket  
2 blankets  
1 blue cloth trowser  
6 woolen socks  
2 pr. woolen stockings  
1 mattress

Henry Marshall

1 pr. blankets  
1 pr. coarse shoes  
1 blue cloth trowsers  
1 blue flannel shirt

Indians (20)

1 ea. blue shirt  
1 ea. duck frock  
2 pr. ea. duck trowsers

J. McDowell

1 lb. tobacco  
1 blue flannel shirt

J. Gregson

2 lbs. tobacco  
1 blue flannel shirt  
2 pr. duck trowsers  
1 black handkerchief  
1 fine comb

H. Downing

1 blue shirt  
2 pr. duck trowsers  
2 duck frocks  
2 black handkerchiefs  
1 fine comb

J. Tylee

2 blue flannel shirts  
2 pr. duck trowsers  
1 black handkerchief

Wm. Northgate

1 duck frock  
2 pr. coarse shoes  
1 blanket

J. Smith

2 lbs. tobacco  
2 blue flannel shirts  
2 pr. stockings



## THE TRAPPER

(Information from the Sutter's Fort Mobile Living History)

The trapper is the central character of the fur trapping expedition. Trapping was back breaking work done by young men who were made old before their time from it. A good trapper, one wise in the ways of "making beaver come" was a skilled workman. He knew how to find beaver, how to set his traps in just the right way and how to stay out of the way of roving Indians. He practiced his vocation in freezing streams and ice cold rivers, carrying six to eight large steel traps each with 12 feet of heavy chain attached, and covered more than a mile of trap line several times per day. When he was successful in catching 3 or 4 beaver per day (a good day's catch even during the fur trapping heyday) he was further encumbered by the 60 to 80 pounds that each beaver weighed.

His day began before daylight and ended after dark, and he usually worked his line alone. Often trappers were stricken at an early age with crippling arthritis due to the hours spent in cold water. After a day's work, they could not feel their feet or legs which had to be rubbed to return circulation to them, and once the circulation was returned their legs throbbed with pain.

While the Native Americans of California were far less hostile than those of the Rocky Mountains, a trapper still had to be concerned with his personal well being while on the line. He represented a walking supply of things the Native American wanted. His metal knives, his gun, his horse, and even his items of clothing were a temptation to any Native Americans who might cross his path as these items were not easily had by the native. A trapper's horses, as well as the horses of the expedition were sometime stolen, taken up the trail that the expedition would be using, and their throats slit as a means of harassing the party.

Also, in 1843, the interpretive year of the Mobile Living History program, Sutter was using his trapping parties to find any parties of the Hudson's Bay Company who were trapping in the area. He had given orders that any such parties were to be harassed and run out of the area. So the trapper had to watch for signs that others had been in the area of his trap line.

A docent, teacher, parent or student interpreting the trapper should be prepared to explain the way that the traps were set by the trapper as well as to talk about the various animals taken by the expedition and the uses for the furs. He should also explain the job of the trapper and the background of his character. The reenactor should be prepared to discuss the demise of the trapper which was brought about most directly by the lack of demand for beaver that had once been used to manufacture the prized beaver hat and the effect that the new style for silk hats had on the profession.