



The Mitten

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The Great Lakes

FUR TRADE

Patrick Reed

In the 1600s the French explored the Great Lakes looking for a shortcut across North America. They never found the mythical Northwest Passage. Instead, they found an abundance of fur-bearing animals whose **pelts** were made into hats popular in Europe.

The Great Lakes fur trade was a **barter** system between Europeans and Native Americans. The Europeans offered blankets, guns, hatchets, knives, needles, liquor, and metal cooking pots. The Native Americans offered pelts.

All types of pelts were exchanged, but the most popular was the beaver. A beaver pelt, when properly treated, makes strong and attractive felt cloth. Beaver hats were so popular that the animal had been hunted into extinction in Europe.

The earliest Great Lakes fur traders came to Native American villages with trade goods. As the fur trade pushed farther into the interior of North America, permanent trading posts were built. One of the biggest fur-trading posts was at the Straits of Mackinac.

In the late fall and early winter, Native Americans trapped the animals. In the spring, fur traders left Montreal and headed west to Mackinac

with trade goods. At the same time, the Native Americans took the pelts to Mackinac.

At Mackinac, fur traders and the Native Americans **haggled** over the value of the pelts. Once a deal was completed, pelts were exchanged for trade goods. "Made beaver" was the term used to describe the value of furs. A made beaver was equal to one **prime** beaver pelt. A gun might be worth 14 made beaver or a blanket worth 7 made beaver. After the exchange, the pelts were shipped to Europe to be made into hats.

The fur trade became so important that France and Great Britain fought wars over the control of North America. After the Americans won independence from Great Britain, the two nations struggled over the North American fur trade.

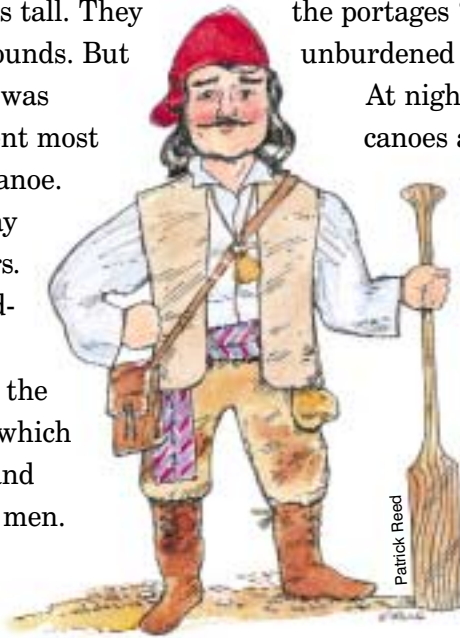
In 1808, German immigrant John Jacob Astor founded the American Fur Company. By the early 1820s, Astor's company dominated the Great Lakes fur trade. The company, whose headquarters were on Mackinac Island, employed hundreds of workers. In 1834, Astor sold the company and it moved to St. Louis, Missouri.



Voyageurs were the backbone of the Great Lakes fur trade. Voyageurs (a French word meaning *travelers*) were responsible for getting the pelts from the trading posts to Montreal. Voyageurs were usually under five feet, six inches tall. They weighed less than 150 pounds. But they were strong, which was important since they spent most of their day paddling a canoe.

A voyageur's workday lasted up to eighteen hours. When canoeing, they paddled 40 to 60 strokes a minute. They often used the larger Montreal canoes, which were up to 40 feet long and carried a crew of 8 to 10 men.

To help them get through the **mono-****tony** of a long hard day, voyageurs sang songs while they paddled. They also were allowed breaks to smoke their pipes.



When necessary, voyageurs **portaged** the packs of pelts and canoes. Each voyageur carried at least two 90-pound packs of furs. To avoid mosquitoes and black flies they usually moved at a trot. According to one observer, the voyageurs moved along the portages “at a pace which made the unburdened travelers pant for breath.”

At night, the voyageurs pulled their canoes ashore and prepared the day's second meal. Voyageurs ate lots of pemmican, which is a mixture of meat, grease and berries that has great nutritional value. Sometimes there was time for rubbaboo, a thick porridge made from pemmican, water and seasoned with maple sugar. After eating they sat around the fire, smoked their pipe, and “pulled the long bow” (bragging or telling exaggerated stories).

The next morning it was back to paddling.

the VOYAGEUR

the BEAVER

With his sharp teeth and powerful jaws, a beaver can chew through the base of a small tree in a few minutes. A beaver's webbed feet and a powerful tail also make him an excellent swimmer.

A beaver uses the small trees he has cut to build a dam in a small river or stream. When the dam is complete the water backs up and creates a pond. In the middle of the pond the beaver builds his home, called a *lodge*. A lodge is a pile of brush and mud shaped like a flattened cone. The inside is hollow and the beaver enters his home from underwater.

Beavers do not hibernate. They are herbivores (plant eaters) that store food for the winter. Beavers mate in January or February and baby beavers (called kits) are born in the spring. A kit weighs about one pound. An average adult beaver grows to three feet long and weighs 40 pounds.



Where to Take Your Family



Reenactment at Michilimackinac



Photos: Mackinac State Historic Parks



Michilimackinac

MACKINAC Crossroads of the Fur Trade

Historic Mill Creek is a reconstructed 18th century water-powered saw mill. Historic Mill Creek's nature program, *Creatures of the Forest* presents an entertaining look at the beaver. A volunteer from the audience is dressed up like a beaver, complete with waterproof eyes (goggles) and skin (a raincoat), claws, teeth and tail.

Colonial Michilimackinac is a reconstructed French fur trading village and military outpost later occupied by British military and traders. The arrival of the fur traders at Fort Michilimackinac is reenacted and volunteers from the audience can dress as voyageurs. School groups can spend an evening or the entire night at the fort living the colonial fur trade life; cooking, gardening, drilling as a soldier, making candles, fetching water from the lake, and sleeping in straw tick beds.

Fort Mackinac on Mackinac Island was built by the British to protect the valuable fur trade against the Americans. Hands-on exhibits allow you to feel furs and learn about making beaver furs into felt hats, and the struggle between the U.S. and Great Britain to control the fur trade. Also on Mackinac Island, don't forget to see the Beaumont Memorial/1820 American Fur Company Store.

Visit www.mackinacparks.com

other places to go ...

Voyageur National Park

Experience life as a fur trader with a canoe trip and exhibits at Voyageur National Park in Minnesota. Visit www.nps.gov/voya

Grand Portage National Monument

Grand Portage was the gateway to the West during the fur trade era. At the Grand Portage National Monument in Minnesota, the past is recreated with a trading post, stockade, great hall, surround palisades, and canoes. Visit www.nps.gov/grpo

TEACHERS: Visit us online for this issue's teacher supplement. www.michiganhistorymagazine.com/kids

What Did You Learn?

ACROSS

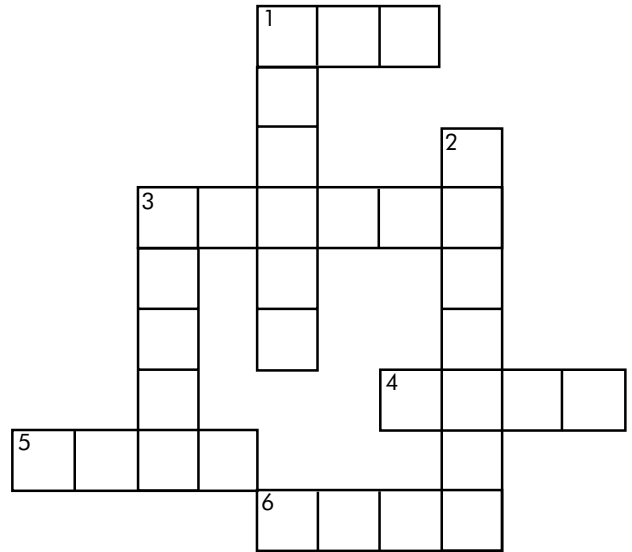
- John Jacob Astor founded the American _____ Company.
- A voyageur could paddle 40 to 60 strokes a _____.
- Baby beavers are called _____.
- Beavers are excellent swimmers because they have webbed _____ and a powerful tail.
- Beaver pelts were made into _____.

DOWN

- Voyageur is a _____ word, meaning traveler.
- Pemmican is made up of meat, grease, and _____.
- Rubbaboo is a thick porridge made from pemmican, water and seasoned with _____ sugar.

Word List (in random order)

FUR
MAPLE
MINUTE
BERRIES
KITS
FRENCH
HATS
FEET



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Vocabulary

Barter: trading things without using money

Haggle: to bargain over the price of something

Monotony: boring sameness

Pelt: the skin of an animal with the hair still on it

Portage: carrying boats overland between two waterways

Prime: first in excellence, quality and value

The Mitten is produced by the staff of Michigan History magazine, which is part of the Michigan Historical Center. The Michigan Historical Center is part of the Department of History, Arts and Libraries. Dedicated to enhancing the quality of life in Michigan, the department also includes the Mackinac Island State Park Commission, the Library of Michigan, the Michigan Film Office, and the Michigan Council of Arts and Cultural Affairs.

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