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Source: *California Historical Society Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (Dec., 1963), pp. 301-309

Published by: [California Historical Society](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25155578>

Accessed: 11/10/2011 12:45

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The Diet of the Mountain Men

By WILLIAM E. HOLSTON

THE AMERICAN FRONTIER, said Frederick Jackson Turner, was "the meeting place between savagery and civilization."¹ This hypothesis can be demonstrated vividly through a study of those American fur trappers and traders who were known as the "mountain men." The average mountain man was an unwashed, unlettered, and unwanted individual. He divorced himself from civilization for most of the year, preferring the solitude of a placid beaver pond to the confines of an Eastern city. Unlike most Anglo-Americans, he was not adverse to marrying one or two Indian squaws. Similar to the Indian, he distinctly emphasized his words, gestured often, and understood sign language.² The trapper's diet, in particular, mirrored the Indian way of life. Both the mountain men and Indians had to live off the land. Their diet was largely meat, especially the flesh of the bison. Elk was probably second in consumption for most of the trappers.³ Less frequently, the mountain men ate deer, bear, antelope, horses, dogs, beaver, and other small game. When food was scarce, as often happened in this hunting and gathering subsistence, the mountain men were reduced to

eating the grease in the rifle stocks, fringes, and unnecessary parts of buckskin clothes, gun and ammunition bags, and every scrap of edible material, boiled up in an Assinaboin basket with hot stones, and finally were reduced to [eating] buds and twigs.⁴

For lack of meat during the winter months, the Indians often were reduced to a starvation point. When meat became available, the Indians were prone to gorging. The mountain men, also living precariously off the land, adopted this primitive trait of overindulgence when food was obtainable. The mountain men often spent "this month luxuriating in

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the wealth of buffalo meat, and the next reduced to the very brink of starvation.”⁵

The major food of the mountain men was buffalo meat. Trappers claimed that fat buffalo meat was far superior to beef.⁶ Bison were usually butchered in the Indian manner.⁷ Turned on its belly, with the legs positioned on either side for support, the shaggy beast was opened down the spine. Peeling away the skin from both sides, the average white man would butcher a buffalo into about twenty pieces.⁸ When game was plentiful, however, only a few choice parts were taken, and the vast bulk of the meat was left to scavengers. The small and large humps were usually taken first. Overlying the hump, and extending along the backbone to the tail, were two broad, thick strips of fat called the *depoilles*.⁹ From just under the hide, the hunter took large sections of fat known as the “fleece.” The fleece from a large bull might weigh as much as two hundred pounds.¹⁰ A hatchet or tomahawk was used to chop free the hump ribs. Various other cuts of meat taken were the shoulders, the fillets or muscle underlying the shoulders, the thighs, and rump. The tongue was removed by “ripping open the skin of the lower jawbone and pulling it out through the oriface [*sic*].”¹¹ The heart and liver were added to the fare. A favorite appetizer was marrow from the leg bones. The bones were cracked and the marrow (about one pound to a bone) was extracted. Blood often was drained from the body cavity and saved. The testicles of a bull bison were cut from the body and were considered as choice pieces.¹² If the animal was a pregnant cow, the raw legs of the unborn calf were cut from the fetus. The udder was “held as hardly second to the tongue in delicacy.”¹³ Brains were removed by splitting open the skull and scooping out the bloody contents by hand.

If the trappers had enough time, they might make jerky or pemmican. Jerky was made from sun- and wind-dried strips of lean meat. Cut with the grain of the meat, the thin strips were hung to dry on cottonwood racks.¹⁴ A slow fire, under the meat, helped to speed up the drying process. If pemmican was desired, the gristle and sinews were removed from the jerky. The dried meat was pounded into a powder, poured into a buffalo hide bag, and mixed with melted fat.¹⁵ Dried berries were often added for flavor, and the product kept well on long trips into the Rocky Mountains.

When mountain men had been without meat for several days before slaying a buffalo, all traces of Anglo-Saxon civilization vanished instantly. Immediately, the bison's skull was hacked open, and the raw brains were wolfed down in great, bloody chunks. The blood was quaffed and usually spilled down the trapper's face, arms, and body. The liver was torn from the body cavity. Bloody and unwashed, it was seasoned with gunpowder, or by squeezing the gall bladder's contents over it, and then consumed without further preparation.¹⁶ The gall was drunk sometimes, for "a man could get quite a glow if he took it straight on an empty stomach."¹⁷ The greasy fleece was cut away from the ribs and eaten raw. Other strips of raw meat or fat were consumed if the group still was not satiated.

Arriving back in camp, the mountain men would build a fire from either quaking aspen, sagebrush, sunflower stalks, or dry buffalo chips. The buffalo dung was called *bois de vache*, literally, "wood from a cow."¹⁸ It burned well and was a favorite fuel of the mountain men.

Meat, cooked by the trappers, was seldom well done. It usually was bolted down in a nearly raw condition. Meat was often cooked *en appolas*, with alternating pieces of lean meat and fat on a sharpened stick.¹⁹ This stick was held over the fire or thrust into the ground beside the blaze. Bones were gnawed clean by the trappers and then thrown over their shoulders to the wolves. The buffalo marrow was boiled; however it sometimes was dropped into hot water, and buffalo blood was stirred into the mixture until it became a thick "soup."²⁰ Fats, especially the kidney fat, were popular at any meal. They were boiled briefly or eaten raw. The oily belly fat of a bison was a favorite but caused vomiting if taken in excess.

Perhaps the most unique food eaten by the mountain men were *boudins*. These were the small intestines of the bison. Cut into convenient lengths, the intestines were roasted on sticks until the heat caused them to become puffy. *Boudins* were tied sometimes to prevent the fat from leaking into the fire. The intestines quickly became distended, and little clouds of steam escaped from numerous tiny punctures.²¹ When crisp, the intestines and their contents were eaten with much gusto.

George F. Ruxton describes a feast that he observed between two Canadian trappers. The men had placed several yards of the greasy,

slightly roasted intestine on a dirty saddle pad which lay between them. The two trappers started eating at opposite ends of the coils. They ate as rapidly as possible toward the middle, each shouting to the other, "Feed fair!" Yards of intestine disappeared down their well-lubricated throats until one,

overcome by the unblushing attempts of his partner to bolt a vigorous mouthful, would jerk back his head, drawing out at the same moment, by the retreating motion, several yards of boudin from his neighbor's stomach (for the greasy viand required no mastication and was bolted whole) and, snapping up the ravished portions, greedily swallowed them, to be in turn again withdrawn and subjected to a similar process by the other.²²

Bison were incapable of traversing the high passes of the Rockies; therefore other food sources were essential. Of all the foods known to the mountain men, the flesh of the cougar or mountain lion, known as "painter meat," was said to be the best of all.²³ The meat of dogs was considered second in flavor to that of the cougar, and many early journals record the eating of dogs by trappers.

Horses were always a source of food. Charles Larpenteur, a fur trader, wrote that he could "assure the reader that horse meat makes excellent steaks."²⁴ Other men were not so enthused. After eating horse meat, one white man wrote that his party "belched up the old stud as strong as ever" for several days.²⁵ Mules were eaten also when food was gone.

Deer and elk were common food sources. Jedediah Smith described a feast on elk meat when "men could be seen in ev'ry part of the camp with meat raw and half roasted in their hands devouring it with the greatest alacrity."²⁶

Bears were hunted for food and sport. George Nidever wrote, "a person who is not a good shot, cool, and cautious, and has a good rifle, has no business to hunt bears."²⁷ Andrew W. Sublette, a retired fur trader, fell victim to a grizzly bear while hunting near Los Angeles in 1853.²⁸ His case was not unusual, for many mountain men suffered death or maulings because they loved the sport of bear hunting.

Lynx meat was considered extremely good by the trappers,²⁹ but beaver tail was also relished. The mountain men carefully observed the type of plants or bark that the beavers were eating. The flesh from beaver, which had been feeding on wild parsnip, caused men to become

violently ill.³⁰ Unless they were starving, the trappers ate only the tail of the beaver.

When food became scarce, both the Indians and mountain men would scrape the putrid flesh from animal corpses. One famous trapper, Thomas Fitzpatrick, in order to survive, peeled the rotting flesh from the bones of a buffalo.³¹ Similarly, roasted beaver skins provided sustenance for a group of trappers. Another band divided one raven among seven men. Rufus Sage and his companions were reduced to eating a buffalo hide. The hide was boiled for twelve or fourteen hours in an effort to make it palatable. It was of "so glutenous a nature it almost cemented the teeth employed in its mastication."³² Jedediah Smith, writing to Ralph Smith in December of 1829, remarked that he would go for days without eating, and am pretty well satisfied if I can gather a few roots, a few snails, or better satisfied if we can afford ourselves a piece of horse flesh, or a fine roasted dog.³³

Most trappers were annually placed in a similar predicament, since they seldom took food of any sort along with them.

Captain Bonneville was forced to eat wolves, roots, and muskrats in order to survive.³⁴ Joe Meek, another mountain man, was lucky enough to find a brass pin among his trappings. Fashioning a crude hook, he replenished his food supply with fat trout from the Snake River. He did, however, admit the following: "I have held my hands in an ant hill until they were covered with the ants, then greedily licked them off. I have taken the soles off my moccasins, crisped them in the fire, and eaten them."³⁵ Meek also collected large, black crickets for the cooking pot. When the insects stopped kicking, they were plucked from the boiling water and eaten.

When forced by drastic circumstances, trappers existed on a diet of frogs, snakes, and insects. An Indian village in the Great Basin was invaded by trappers searching for food. The raid yielded several sacks of sun-dried ants. In another crisis, a band of hungry trappers ate small cakes that were made of crushed, dried ants.³⁶

Trappers did not worry about drinking the blood of animals. One of the men with Captain Bonneville's trapping party, slit the throat of a wounded buffalo and drank the tepid blood.³⁷ James Ohio Pattie, famous trapper and trader, even went so far as to describe the blood of an antelope as "tasting like fresh milk."³⁸ Pattie also hinted that his

party drank their own urine in a vain attempt to refresh parched throats.³⁹

If the food situation became desperate, the mountain man might be reduced to one of mankind's most primitive dietary traits, cannibalism. Bill Williams, a mountain man who became a guide, was accused of eating some of his companions when the food supply ran out.⁴⁰ Perhaps the classic example of cannibalism was Charles Gardner, known as "Old Phil." On a trip to Fort Laramie, supplies were exhausted, but Old Phil solved the problem by eliminating his Indian companion. He amputated the legs at the hip joints and took them with him. Witnesses at Fort Laramie swore that they saw him throwing away the gnawed remnants, which Phil referred to as his "provisions." On another occasion, Gardner killed his own squaw, ate most of her, and left the remains unburied. Old Phil stated that if the human hands, head, and feet were cooked long enough, then they were as tasty as pork. The other parts of the body were "too gristly and tough."⁴¹ Such recorded instances of cannibalism, however, are very rare.

All the months of starvation and gorging ended for the mountain men when they met for their annual rendezvous. This was a noisy, drunken gathering. Fights were frequent and there was "a constant uproar from the hoards of Indian dogs brought along for the final grand feast."⁴² Indians, trappers, and traders drank diluted raw alcohol. Metheglin, a drink made from diluted raw alcohol and honey, was a favorite. Whiskey sold for five dollars a pint at the 1832 rendezvous. It was the only item which was sold for several days.⁴³

Following a few days of drunken living, the trapper traded his beaver skins for such luxurious commodities as tobacco, at three dollars a pound; coffee, worth two dollars a pound; and sugar, at two dollars a pint.⁴⁴ Typical of all of the mountain men, Kit Carson remarked: "once a year, I would have a meal consisting of bread, meat, sugar, and coffee. I would consider it a luxury."⁴⁵

After a few weeks of fighting, drinking, trading, and chasing Indian women, the mountain man was eager to leave "civilization" and return to his trap lines. His furs, the resultant product of long months of wading in icy streams, had been sold. His money had been spent on alcohol, Indian prostitutes, and gambling. He was often in debt to some trader, however he apparently did not regret his actions and enthusiastically anticipated next year's rendezvous.

The recorded, excellent health of the average mountain man has helped to disprove certain dietary theories. For many years scientists refused to believe that men could subsist on an all meat diet and remain in good health. Experiments by Vilhjalmur Stefansson, in the twentieth century, have shown this belief to be only partially true. Eating a lean meat diet will result in dietary deficiencies; however a predominantly raw, fresh meat bill of fare, supplemented with liberal quantities of fat, is one of the most healthful regimens that an individual can eat. To maintain good health, a person daily would need to eat six to eight pounds of meat.⁴⁶ Modern Americans would find the cost prohibitive. Also, most Americans would not be enthusiastic about eating almost raw meat, which was smothered in grease and chunks of fat.

All the mountain men attributed their health to meat and swore that it was "the only food" for a man. "If a man could always live on such didins," said one old trapper, "he would never die."⁴⁷

Unfortunately for the mountain man, his heyday lasted only about twenty years. The rendezvous of 1838 and 1839 were noticeably quieter than previous years. The beaver had become scarce as competitive fur companies depleted the supply. Silk hats had replaced beaver felt in style, and the trading fort had replaced the rendezvous. The West, as the mountain man knew it, vanished with the beaver. Never again would bearded men in greasy buckskins squat around a smokeless fire and gorge on hunks of rare meat, handfuls of fat, roasted *boudins*, and raw liver, amid exortations to "Feed fair!"

NOTES

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25. David H. Coyner, *The Lost Trappers* (New York, 1847), p. 134.
26. Maurice S. Sullivan, *The Travels of Jedediah Smith* (Santa Ana, Calif., 1934), p. 98.
27. W. H. Ellison, *Life and Adventures of George Nidever, 1802-1883* (Berkeley, 1937), p. 52. Jedediah Smith, for example, was badly clawed by a grizzly bear while hunting; see Sullivan, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
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