

Pre-Visit  
Lesson Plan



# The Fur Trade



Autry National Center

## **Introduction**

From the Great Lakes to the Pacific, and from the Great Plains to the desert, the West before 1850 was like a vast marketplace. This lesson accompanies museum galleries that explore the stories of merchants and hunters who met in trading posts and villages across the continent.

Traders learned each other's languages and cultures, and they married into each other's families. Some people made great profits, and others fell hopelessly in debt. Trade linked individuals, families, and communities in the West, and blended cultures.

## **Objectives**

Students will:

- Understand the exchange of ideas and beliefs between Native and non-Native people during the fur trade that began to create the culturally diverse West of today
- Identify aspects of trade during the Colonial and American fur trade of the 1700s and 1800s
- Explore roles within the fur trade and challenges people faced by developing a trade network within the classroom

## **Learners**

This lesson is designed for upper-elementary-grade students with a focus on third and fifth grades and suggested adaptations for other grade levels. Students will explore the roles of producer, consumer, and trader by developing a trade network in the classroom.

## Materials

- *Fur Trade Timeline*
- 3 x 5" cards that are hole-punched
- Yarn or string
- Markers
- Magazines, scissors, glue sticks
- Suggested product lists:

### Farming Community

Dried beans  
Dried squash  
Wild prairie turnip flour  
Dried corn

### Hunting Community

Bison meat  
Bison hides  
Beaver pelts  
Horses

### Trading Post

Copper kettles  
Beads/buttons  
Weapons  
Trade blanket

## Content Standards History–Social Science

**3.2** — Students describe the American Indian nations in their local region long ago and in the recent past.

- Discuss the interaction of new settlers with the already established Indians of the region.

**5.3** — Students describe the cooperation and conflict that existed among the American Indians and between the Indian nations and the new settlers.

- Describe the cooperation that existed between the colonists and Indians during the 1600s and 1700s (e.g., in agriculture, the fur trade, military alliances, treaties, cultural interchanges).

**5.8** — Students trace the colonization, immigration, and settlement patterns of the American people from 1789 to the mid-1800s, with emphasis on the role of economic incentives, effects of the physical and political geography, and transportation systems.

- Demonstrate knowledge of the explorations of the trans-Mississippi West following the Louisiana Purchase (e.g., Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, Zebulon Pike, John Frémont).
- Discuss the experiences of settlers on the overland trails to the West (e.g., location of the routes; purpose of the journeys; the influence of the terrain, rivers, vegetation, and climate; life in the territories at the end of these trails).

## Procedure

1. Begin the activity by asking students to define trade.
  - *Have you ever obtained something without using money?*
  - *What did you give in exchange for what they wanted?*
  - *What made the trade fair?*
2. Using the background material, begin a discussion about what trade was like during the fur trade.
  - *What types of things were produced?*
  - *What was needed to produce these things?*
3. Divide students evenly into three groups and assign each group a role (e.g., farming community, hunting community, trading post)
4. Give each group their product list and have students within each group create three product cards of their choice. They may draw or collage their commodities cards from magazines.
5. When the groups are finished, have them come together to review what they have and then come up with a list of what they need and don't have. Now have each student individually select one item to trade. Have them loop their string through the hole in that product card and wear it around their neck. The remaining cards will remain as their community's supply.
6. Now it is time to trade. Give students about five minutes to trade with other groups.
  - Note: While trading, students may need to return to their community for more items to trade.
7. After five minutes, have students come back together and as a group display and review their products.
  - *How did you do?*
  - *Do you have enough to survive the winter?*
  - *What are you missing?*

## Extensions

Extension 1: The fur trade was made up of Native and non-Native traders. Communication was extremely difficult—there are more than 100 Native American languages and dialects. It could take up to four people to interpret a message from one person to the next. For the next trading session, have students trade without using any form of verbal communication. When the session is over, bring students together to discuss how this influenced their trade. *What strategies did they use to overcome the communication challenge? Did trading take longer?*

Extension 2: While students are trading, incorporate environmental conditions that could have affected trading systems. Stop trade and read one of the following events. Have students react to how this event affects their products and trade network. Have traders affected by these events raise their hands so that the class can get a sense of how this affects their community.

EVENT A: Over-hunting (of animals) has decreased their numbers significantly. Have groups remove half of the appropriate items from their inventory and resume trade.

EVENT B: The steamboat ran into large river rocks and sunk. All supplies were lost. Have the groups remove half of the appropriate item(s) in their stock and resume trade.

EVENT C: An epidemic hits your community and your farmers/hunters become too sick to farm/hunt. Have the farming/hunting community remove half of their products and resume trade.

## Credits & References

### Books

Bettelyoun-Bordeaux, Susan. With My Own Eyes. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988.

Liptak, Karen. North American Indian Sign Language. New York: Scholastic, 1990. Pencil drawings of hand signals for vocabulary, counting, nature, animals, and food teach Native American sign language in this paperback.

Meyer, Roy W. The Village Indians of the Upper Missouri: The Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikaras. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977.

Wishart, David J. The Fur Trade of the American West, 1807-1840: A Geographical Synthesis. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979.

Wood, Raymond W., and Thomas D. Theissen. Early Fur Trade on the Northern Plains: Canadian Traders Among the Mandan and Hidatsa Indians, 1738-1818. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985.

### Websites

Encounters: The Fur Trade, Museum of the American West, Autry National Center  
[www.autrynationalcenter.org](http://www.autrynationalcenter.org)

The Lakshota Sioux Heritage, Culture, and Language Site  
[www.lakhota.com/stories/story.history.htm](http://www.lakhota.com/stories/story.history.htm)

The Louisiana Expansion Site  
[www.umsi.edu/~econed/louisiana/Am\\_Indians/7-Teton\\_Lakota/7-teton\\_lakota.html](http://www.umsi.edu/~econed/louisiana/Am_Indians/7-Teton_Lakota/7-teton_lakota.html)

Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Exhibition: Teaching Units and Lesson Plans  
[www.lewisandclarkexhibit.org/4\\_0\\_0/](http://www.lewisandclarkexhibit.org/4_0_0/)

Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara Nation  
[www.mhanation.com/main/history/history\\_fur\\_trade.html](http://www.mhanation.com/main/history/history_fur_trade.html)

Métis National Council  
[www.metisnation.ca](http://www.metisnation.ca)

## Background

The Mandan were one of the earliest farming people of the Northern Plains and were said to have taught other tribes like the Hidatsa how to build stationary villages and raise corn, pumpkins, and other vegetables. These were necessities among other tribes in the area. The Mandan were extremely successful traders and a powerful nation on the Northern Plains. They created a focal point of trade on the Missouri River. All of the Plains tribes came to barter for agricultural goods and products. Called the “Marketplace of the Central Plains,” the Mandan established what was to be the forerunner of trading posts that came later. At the end of the 1700s, farming people like the Mandan mostly depended on middlemen such as the Lakota (Sioux) for manufactured goods like metal tools, cloth, and guns. The Lakota brought these things from English and French traders to the north and exchanged them for beaver or bison pelts. When Lewis and Clark arrived at the Mandan villages in 1804, the Mandan welcomed the opportunity to open direct trade with Americans in St. Louis.

The Lakota dominated the Northern Plains region for many years. The arrival of horses created new social and trade relationships. With horses, some groups like the Comanche, Lakota, and Cheyenne could devote themselves completely to the bison hunt. Bison provided food, clothing, shelter, and raw material for many of their tools. The Lakota were skilled hunters who provided many furs for trade and came to control the supply of European goods to other Native groups, such as their neighbors the Arikara. Others, such as the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Wichita, farmed and hunted in the fertile river valleys of the Plains. Once a year, hunters and farmers came together in the farming villages to trade horses and exchange products of the land for the spoils of the hunt. In time, the powerful Lakota culture, with its feathered headdresses, nomadic lifestyle, and tipis came to create a stereotypical image of all American Indians. The French first used the word Sioux for the Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota. “Sioux” is a shortened version of the Ojibwa (Chippewa) word *Nadouessioux*, meaning “adder” or “snake.” Because the Chippewa were enemies of the Sioux, it is understandable that the people they were describing did not appreciate being called snakes. Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota—which all mean “allies”—are the names these people chose to describe themselves.

Ranging from small, temporary locations to huge forts, trading posts were run by large rival corporations such as the Hudson Bay, North West, and American Fur Companies. Many trading posts stood empty most of the year. The Bordeaux trading post, for example, was open during the wintertime only. Trading posts in the Northern Plains followed a very specific trading cycle that was mostly determined by the Missouri River’s freezing during winter and the thickness of animals’ pelts.

**Spring and summer:** Steamboats arrive with supplies and equipment for trading posts.

**Early fall:** Trade goods are given to Indians on credit.

**Winter:** Indians hunt bison and trade in robes to pay back earlier credit.

**Spring:** Bison robes, beaver pelts, and other furs are shipped to St. Louis.

At the trading posts European and American traders offered manufactured goods to Native peoples in exchange for beaver, bison, and other furs. Indian men and women exchanged a wide range of furs for utilitarian and decorative items. In turn, the growing European demand for furs was met. The exchange of ideas and beliefs between Native and non-Native people also began to create the culturally diverse West of today.

By the 1800s, the fur trade had extended around the world to bring together—in cooperation and in competition – different peoples, cultures, and civilizations. The fur trade may have been the first “global” business. Yet this was also a business of individuals, families, small-scale traders, adventurers, and mountain men. The fur trade demanded the work of many different people. From the European and American side, the fur trade was a true business enterprise. Merchants at urban centers carried out the international trade. Traders and clerks lived near Indian villages to buy and sell. Voyageurs carried goods back and forth. American Indians provided most of the furs; men did the hunting and trapping, and women produced most of the furs and hides using a variety of techniques such as scraping, stretching, rubbing, and curing the pelts. In the 1820s, Americans known as “mountain men,” or free trappers, began to trap and process furs and live year-round in the Rocky Mountains. Many trappers, voyageurs, and traders married Native women to help them find their way and negotiate with local tribes.

The Métis people were voyageurs in Canada. Métis means “mixed” in French and refers to people with mixed European and Indian heritage. In the spring, as soon as the ice broke on the northern rivers, Métis voyageurs left Montreal in canoes loaded with trade goods. The goods—guns, copper kettles, or calico cloth—were packed in bales that weighed as much as 90 pounds. When voyageurs came to rapids, they would have to unload the canoe and carry the bales uphill to the next smooth stretch of river. White traders and trappers would not have survived or prospered without marriages to Native women, and Native women used their marriages to control the terms of work and trade to benefit their people. Given popular images of the lone hunter, such marriages were surprisingly long-lasting and stable. Their children often acted as go-betweens, equally at home in Indian or Euro-American culture. But with the end of the fur trade, they lost their unique role. In Canada, the Métis are recognized today as a distinct nation, but in the United States, people of mixed heritage are usually identified as either Indian or white.

American Indians and Euro-Americans killed many kinds of animals for fur, food, and other uses. These included deer, elk, muskrat, and bear. However, the three most important animals to the fur trade were beaver, sea otter, and bison. The hides of each of these were valuable for clothing to both the Native peoples and other people around the world. Beaver and otter fur were highly prized in China. All three of these animals were hunted nearly to extinction. In 1800 more than 245,000 beaver pelts (hides) were shipped from the U.S. One ship was known to arrive in Canton, China, with more than 20,000 beaver pelts.

Bison, commonly known as buffalo, were one of the most important animals in the fur trade. They were an essential source of food, clothing, and shelter for Native people for thousands of years. In the 19th century, bison hides were in great demand for American and European fur and leather goods. Preparing a single bison fur could take three to five days of labor. The hide was carefully cut away from the carcass and then stretched on stakes or across hoops. Then the muscle, fat, and sinew (tendons) were tediously scraped from the hide. If the hide was to be turned



into leather or rawhide, the hair was then scraped from the other side. Women did this work almost exclusively. On average, one woman might be able to prepare twelve hides in a typical winter season.

The European demand for beaver fur almost drove this animal into extinction. Along with bison and sea otter, the beaver was one of the most important animals to the fur trade. The animal's thick fur was highly prized for hats. Before the arrival of Europeans, there may have been as many as 60 million to 100 million beavers in North America. From 1800 to 1850, about 100,000 to 500,000 beavers were killed each year. By 1850, they were almost extinct in the West. Today, there are 6 million to 12 million beavers in North America.

European and Indian people alike valued silver, a rare and costly metal. Silver can be molded into many shapes, engraved with patterns, and polished to a bright shine. Important Indian leaders wore silver they had received as gifts from European officials. Native people insisted on ceremony and gifts to bind trading partners as allies, friends, and family. Although Europeans and Americans saw trade strictly as a business, they learned to adapt to Indian ways of thinking.

## **Vocabulary**

### **Mountain men**

Unlike traders, mountain men were free trappers who lived in the Rocky Mountains and relied on American Indians to supply them with furs. Mountain men hunted and processed beaver pelts themselves. They would meet annually with suppliers at the Green River to exchange furs for needed goods.

### **Traders**

People who operated trading posts for large trading corporations would negotiate with Native hunters for animal hides. Some items they traded were glass beads, guns, tobacco, and blankets. In the Pacific, ships served as floating trading posts, and captains traded for sea otter pelts from Native hunters.

### **Trade blankets**

With "points" or short bars indicating their size, weight, and value in beaver or other animal pelts, trade blankets were used as coverings. Larger blankets had more bars and cost more, larger or better quality furs. Native people in the southern parts of the Pacific Northwest preferred white blankets, while blue was more popular in the north.

## Fur Trade Timeline

750-1540	Mississippian Indians build temple mounds and trading cities and trade pottery, weavings, copper, obsidian, mica, crystal, and conch shells. Trading took place from the Atlantic Ocean to the Rocky Mountains and from Great Lakes to Northern Mexico
1492	First contact takes place between Europe and the Americas
1608	French establish first fur trading post at Quebec (Stadacona)
1670	Hudson's Bay Company is chartered by King Charles II of England.
1760-1825	Height of trade silver production
1762	St. Louis is founded as a French trading post and becomes a center for trade on the Great Plains
1762	Spain acquires Louisiana from France, but France regains control by 1801
1784	North West Company is founded in Canada
1802-1803	U.S. buys Louisiana Territory from France
1804-1806	The Corps of Discovery expedition sends Lewis and Clark to find a river route to the Pacific Ocean. On their journey, they encounter more than 40 tribes with whom they establish relations and trade

1807	First trading post on the upper Missouri River is founded by Manuel Lisa
1808	John Jacob Astor founds the American Fur Company in New York
1815-1818	Russians send Otto von Kotzebue on a scientific expedition to the Pacific Coast to search for new resources and trade routes. Russians were particularly interested in the pelts of sea otters, which they sold at a great profit in China
1817	First steamboats boost trade in St. Louis
1821	Mexican Independence opens fur trade between Mexico and the United States
1825-1840	Mountain men and traders meet to trade furs at the annual "Rendezvous" on the Green River
1829	Depletion of sea otters occurs in southeastern Alaska
1835	More buffalo robes than beaver pelts are transported down the Missouri River
1837	Smallpox epidemic devastates Indian peoples on the Plains
1840	Plains Indians process more than 90,000 bison robes for the fur trade