

THOUGHTS ON CLOTHING IN THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS

1800-1840

by Gene Hickman

The type of clothing worn by a man 160 to 200 years ago depended on several factors. These factors include the part of the country he came from, his occupation, his ethnic background, his nationality, his station in life and even current fashions. Consequently, company owner/partners like Manuel Lisa who went into the field, visiting noblemen or wealthy men out for a big adventure or hunt, the Canadians, Frenchmen, or Mexicans, mixed bloods or half-breeds, Creoles, ex-military, the “Euro-Americans” from the states: all have distinctions to their dress. The part of the states or North America they came from, the traders, trappers, clerks, engages, voyageurs or boatmen, and all the other folks had some distinctive clothing items, styles, fabrics and colors particular to their situation. Although a little later than our time period (1845-47), The Sutter’s Fort costume Manual by Rickman does an excellent job showing the great diversity in clothing and accoutrements of the various groups that were coming west. This manual is highly recommended as a further resource for developing your persona. Specific articles in this clothing and accoutrement series, will further discuss the particular clothing and accoutrements for many of these personas.

All that said, much would still be the same, based on what was popular at the time and of course what the companies issued to the men in the brigades as they departed for the west. Many of these were relatively poor young men with few resources, consequently they relied on the company to outfit them with what they had. Additionally the men would have had to rely on what they could make, have made, or had available at rendezvous and trade forts for replacement items. What clothing was available at forts would also have varied as to whether they were HBC, AFC, or other companies and where the forts were located. These forts were mainly stocked for the Indian trade and there was some variation depending on some individual tribal preferences. Indians in particular areas had certain color and item preferences, although many of the goods were the same in a given time period. So a mountaineer had to settle on what the fort or trader had to choose from. Fashions for some items changed about every 20 years, some less, so outfits also depend on the time period being depicted. Some items were rare, some items just coming into use or going out of “vogue,” and of course some items that were the dominant or fashionable items for that period.

If you are going to portray a Euro-American trapper in the 1820-1840 time period then I highly recommend the article by Allen Chronister and Clay Landry, Clothing of the Rocky Mountain Trapper 1820-1849, in the *Book of Buckskinning VII* (BOB VII) as a source. If doing late 1830s, also consider Shawn Webster’s *In the Image of A.J. Miller*. Other excellent sources can be found in the Northwest Journal (<http://www.northwestjournal.ca/>), the Museum of the Fur Trade sketchbook series, and Robert Wheeler’s *A Toast to the Fur Trade*. You should also study journals, trade lists, fort documents and other period fur trade records. An excellent source for some of these

is Dean Rudy's *Mountain Men and the Fur Trade; Sources of the Fur Trade in the Rocky Mountain West* (<http://www.xmission.com/~drudy/amm.html>). Study of period paintings and sketches by artists such as A.J. Miller, Rindsbacker, Krieghoff, Bodmer, Kurz, Renney, Bingham, Point and others give us further information about what was worn or used. (Caution should always be used when viewing art as a historical source. Some painters used "artistic licenses" more freely than research would deem accurate.) A.J. Miller is the only artist known to have painted and sketched at an actual rendezvous in the Rocky Mountains (1837) and portrayed other daily activities of the mountaineer during this time period. However, for all the artists, you must consider the place and time period closely. Some of these sketches and paintings are right after our time period or done later in the artist's life. Not all of the artwork is taken from the Rocky Mountains. So you need to differentiate what was sketched or painted during the time period and those that were painted some years later from field sketches. Often these later paintings have been altered from the original sketches. Additionally, an artist who was never there may only be portraying his conception of the Rocky Mountains with no first hand experience.

An example of painting done later and altered from field sketches is cited by Chronister & Landry in BOB VII, concerning some Miller's paintings.*Differences between some of the field sketches and later paintings based upon them can be demonstrated. The original field sketch of Joe Walker and his Indian wife shows a clean shaven Walker wearing a floral beaded "Red River-style" shoulder bag and plain, fringed hide clothing (Parke-Bernet 12). In the later and better known versions of the scene (some done as late as 1858-1860), Walker loses the floral bag and gains a beard and painted stripes on his hide trousers (Tyler pl. 81;289-29). In Picketing the Horses-At Evening...the two central figures in the 1837 version are barefoot and wearing plain knee breeches (Tyler pl. 38). In the later finished painting of the same scene (c. 1858-1860), a number of details are altered and the two central figures are wearing fringed long trousers and moccasins (Tyler 220: DeVoto, Across pl. XLIII). The differences in both of these scenes are critical to an analysis of trapper's clothing (Chronister & Landry 4-5)*

All of this gets even more confusing when we see all of the items worn at modern rendezvous. Many of these items cover a broader time and place in history than we in the AMM depict. A large portion are modern rendezvous items, many are just "old-timey" stuff or what the buckskinner thinks looks "cool," or what was back in the settlements. Unfortunately, most do not fit into our AMM personas. It is my general perception that the more you see an item being worn or used at modern rendezvous the more likely that it has no historic precedence and it is just what is "cool" now. To say that "they would've used it if they'd had it" or "this works better," is either an ignorant or lazy answer to justify your stuff. Choose a persona for the Rocky Mountains from 1800-1840 and you'll be much more successful in authenticating and accurately representing our historic period.

References:

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