

Fur Trade Opened North America

Thursday, 18 June 2009

The fur trade was one of the earliest and most important industries in North America, playing a major role in the development of the United States and Canada for more than three hundred years. Fur trade itself has been around for as long as people have been wearing clothes, but in North America, it goes back to the early 1500s when French explorers and fishermen arrived and offered the Indians kettles, knives and other gifts as a means to establish friendly relations.

The Indians in turn gave pelts, and by the late 1500s, a great demand for the fur had developed in Europe. This demand encouraged both the further exploration of North America and the rapid increase of furs such as fox, marten, mink, otter, and ever popular beaver. Beaver was considered to be one of the best furs for making felt, and therefore became very valuable, as the trend of felt hats swept across Europe.

European business companies handled a large number of furs shipped from North America during the 1600s and 1700s. The most famous of these firms, the Hudson Bay Company, was established in 1670. The English government gave the company sole trading rights in what is now the Hudson Bay region.

The fur trade contributed to the development of the British and French empires in North America. Traders and trappers explored much of North America in search of fur. They built trading posts in the wilderness, and settlements grew up around many of these posts.

Some of these settlements later became major cities such as Edmonton, Montreal, Quebec, Winnipeg, Detroit, New Orleans, and St. Louis. The Lewis and Clark expedition to the Pacific Ocean in 1805/06 led to the development of fur trading in the west, with several companies competing heavily for this western trade.

Many Indians of the west had little interest in trapping, and so to the fur-trading companies hired White frontiersmen to obtain pelts. These trappers became known as "Mountain Men" because they wandered through the wild areas of the Rocky Mountains in search of fur.

Rendezvous started as an annual trapper's gathering where furs were sold and supplies bought for the next year. The rendezvous saved the men the time and trouble of travelling long distances to various trading posts.

The fur trade prospered until the mid 1800s, when fur-bearing animals became scarce as more and more land was cleared and silk hats became more popular than felt hats made with beaver hides. By 1870, most fur trading activity had ended.

If you have a topic of interest you would like to see in Aboriginal Voices, contact the Aboriginal Business Development Centre at 562-6325 or e-mail an article to abdc@abdc.bc.ca