

Mountain Men Museum Education Kit

Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- analyze a primary document
- develop their own skit to share with the class of the events from the autobiography

Connection to Colorado Social Studies Standards:

- 4th grade: 1.1.a, 1.1.c, 1.1.d, 2.2.c

Materials: Copies of Jim Beckwourth's Autobiography

Time: 1-2 class periods

Background

Jim Beckwourth was an African American Mountain Man. In his autobiography, he tells the story of his trans-continental adventure as a trapper. James Beckwourth was born into slavery in Virginia in 1805. His mother was a slave and his father was an Englishman. His father, unlike many white people of the time, treated Jim like a legitimate son and was able to emancipate him. He moved to St. Louis with his father. In St. Louis, Beckwourth learned to be a blacksmith. But Jim was unhappy with the low wages and he wanted to be his own boss. In 1822 he decided to head west.

In 1824 Beckwourth joined an expedition to explore the Rocky Mountains. In the following years, he became a famous fur trapper and mountain man. Beckwourth worked with the Rocky Mountain Fur Company and was an Indian fighter. He was well known for telling lore about his adventures.

In 1828 Beckwourth claimed he was captured by Crow Indians while trapping. The Crow thought he was the lost son of a Crow chief. So, the Crow allowed him into the nation. For the next six to eight years, Beckwourth lived with a Crow band. Beckwourth married the daughter of a chief. He rose in their society to the level of War Chief.

In 1859 Beckwourth settled in Denver, Colorado, where he became a storekeeper and also worked as an Indian agent. Beckwourth died in a Crow village near the Big Horn River. He was the only African American in the West to record his life story. His book, *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth*, was published in 1856.

Suggested Procedure:

This activity should be done in groups of 5 or more.

1. Provide Students with copies of Jim Beckwourth's Autobiography excerpt. Have them read the excerpt in small groups.
2. Students select characters and plan their own skit of the events in the excerpt.
3. Have students use artifacts from the trunks in their plays.
4. Give them time to develop their skit then have them perform for their classmates.

5. Have student discuss what they think of Beckwourth's story. His he telling the truth? Is he embellishing his tale?

Characters:

- Jim Beckwourth
- Baptiste
- Castenga
- 1-4 members of Beckwourth's party
- 1-4 members of Castenga's party

Jim Beckwourth' s Autobiography

Excerpt

While thus running the gauntlet, the balls and arrows whizzed around us as fast as our hidden enemies could send them. Not a man was scratched, however, though two of our horses were wounded, my horse having received an arrow in the neck, and another being wounded near the hip, both slightly. Pursuing our course, we arrived soon in the open ground, where we considered ourselves comparatively safe.

Arriving at a small rise in the prairie, I suggested to our leader that this would be a good place to make a stand, for if the Indians followed us we had the advantage in position.

“No,” he said, “we will proceed on to New Mexico.”

I was astonished at his answer, well knowing - though but slightly skilled in geography - that New Mexico must be many hundred miles farther south. However, I was not captain, and we proceeded. Keeping the return track, we found ourselves, in the afternoon of the following day, about sixty miles from the scene of murder.

The assault had been made, as we afterwards learned, by three young Indians, who were ambitious to distinguish themselves in the minds of their tribe by massacre of an American party.

We were still descending the banks of the Green River, which is the main branch of the Colorado, when, about the time mentioned above, I discovered horses in the skirt of the woods on the opposite side. My companions pronounced them buffalo, but I was confident they were horses, because I could distinguish white ones among them. Proceeding still farther, I discovered men with the horses, my comrades still confident I was in error; speedily, however, they all became satisfied of my correctness, and we formed the conclusion that we had come across a party of Indians. We saw by their manoeuvres that they had discovered us, for they were then collecting all their property together.

We held a short council, which resulted in a determination to retreat toward the mountains. I, for one, was tired of retreating, and refused to go farther. Baptiste joining me in my resolve. We took up a strong position for defense,

being a place difficult to approach; and having our guns, and ammunition, and abundance of arrows for defense, considering our numbers, we felt ourselves rather a strong garrison. The other three left us to our determination to fall together, and took to the prairie; but, changing mind, they returned, and rejoined us in our position, deeming our means of defense better in one body than divided. We all, therefore, determined to sell our lives as dearly as possible should the enemy attack us, feeling sure we could kill five times our number before we were overpowered, and that we should, in all probability, beat them off.

By this time the supposed enemy had advanced towards us, and one of them hailed us in English as follows:

“Who are you?”

“We are trappers.”

“What company do you belong to?”

“General Ashley’ s.”

“Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!” they all shouted, and we, in turn, exhausted our breath in replying.

“Is that you Jim Beckwourth?” said a voice from the party.

“Yes. Is that you, Castenga?” I replied.

He answered in the affirmative, and there arose another hurrah.

We inquired where their camp was. They informed us that it was two miles below, at the ford. Baptiste and myself mounted out horses, descended the bank, plunged into the river, and were soon exchanging salutations with another of the general’ s old detachments. They also had taken us for Indians and had gathered in their horses while we took up our position for defense.

The night was spent in general rejoicing, in relating our adventures, and recounting our various successes and reverses. There is as much heartfelt joy experienced in falling in with a party of fellow-trappers in the mountains as is felt at sea when, after a long voyage, a friendly vessel just from port is spoken and boarded. In both cases a thousand questions are asked; all have wives, sweethearts, or friends to inquire after, and then the general news from the States is taken up and discussed.