



*The Mountain Man*,  
by Paul Calle (1928-2010)  
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# THE MOUNTAIN MEN OF MONTANA

**EVEN WITH THE CONSTANT DANGER,  
PHYSICAL HARDSHIP, AND ENDLESS ISOLATION,  
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DREAM OF HAVING.**

**BY PJ DELHOMME**

In an Oscar-winning performance by Leonardo DiCaprio in the 2015 movie *The Revenant*, mountain man Hugh Glass crawled, swam, and hobbled across the winter wilderness of today's western South Dakota after barely surviving a grizzly attack and being left for dead by his companions. Outdoorsmen and outdoorswomen in movie theaters everywhere watched and wondered: "How would I fare in his frozen moccasins?"

Americans have been fascinated by early hunters, explorers, frontiersmen, and trappers for nearly as long as the country has existed. Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett became folk heroes starting in the 18th century, their fame continuing well into the mid-1900s with films, radio broadcasts, and TV shows. Today reenactors decked in authentic drop-front pants and pullover shirts gather at tent-filled trapper "rendezvous" for

mountain man activities like shooting muzzleloaders, tossing tomahawks, and swapping tanned furs and hides. Even bearded, plaid-shirted craft-beer urbanites of Brooklyn and Seattle are paying homage to men who, 200 years ago, trapped and traded beavers for a living.

In a modern life increasingly constrained by deadlines, text messages, and traffic, the appeal of frontier life is broad and deep. Mountain men (a category that includes some women) appeared to live simple, unrestricted lives, beholden to no one. As one character says in the 1980 movie *The Mountain Men*, "I can still walk for a year in any direction with just my rifle and a handful of salt and never have to say 'Sir' to nobody. I reckon that's free."

Mountain men come from a time in which many of us wish we had played a part. They saw the West before highways, cities, and farm lands obscured so much

of its grandeur. They had discovered some- place special, and they knew it.

Frontier life wasn't easy. To survive took grit, skill, and luck. Many who came to a place like Montana Territory were buried not long after leaving the cobbled streets of St. Louis or Chicago. But some of those who survived became the stuff of legend.

Many accounts of mountain men in Montana Territory are of dubious origin. Few frontiersmen wrote books or even kept journals. Many tales are just that, embellishments of overly imaginative novelists and reporters more than willing to accommodate eastern readers eager for stories of western adventure and heroism. Yet whether the accounts are fact or fiction, it's fun to imagine what it must have been like to be a mountain man—and how and even if we would have survived as one ourselves.

Here, to feed your imagination, are a few of the more famous mountain men who spent time in today's Montana.

### JOHN COLTER 1774-1813?

Colter was as mountain man as a man could be. By all accounts, he should have perished a dozen or more times while exploring the area now known as Montana, including one incident in which he had to wade into the Missouri River to outmaneuver a pursuing grizzly.



Colter enlisted in Lewis and Clark's Corps of Discovery while in his early 30s and proved himself a competent hunter and interpreter. On his way back east from Oregon with the corps, Colter received permission to leave the expedition and join two trappers in Montana and Wyoming. In the winter of 1807-08, he traveled solo into the Grand Tetons. He became the first person of European descent to see that mountain range and the area that later became Yellowstone National Park.

Colter helped build Fort Raymond, or Fort Lisa, at the confluence of the Bighorn and Yellowstone Rivers in present-day Montana. He made the first English language reports of geysers and fumaroles, later dubbed Colter's Hell, near today's Cody, Wyoming.

The frontiersman is best known for his barefoot escape from Blackfoot Indians. In 1809, Colter and his partner John Potts canoed up the Jefferson River into prime beaver country. The pair encountered several hundred Blackfeet. Potts tried to paddle away and was instantly riddled with bullets and arrows. Colter put his paddle down and came ashore. He was then stripped of clothes and shoes and told to run, which he did. Warriors gave chase and he managed to escape by outrunning all but one, whom he was able to kill. He eventually jumped into the Madison River, five miles from where his run began. Wrapped in a blanket he'd taken from the man he'd killed, Colter hid in a beaver lodge, only his nose breaching the water surface, as the Blackfeet searched for him. After his pursuers gave up, Colter walked 200 miles back to Fort Raymond. After returning to Missouri and settling down into family life, he died of jaundice around age 40.

### GEORGE DROUILLARD 1775-1810

Lewis and Clark's backcountry Renaissance man, George Drouillard helped the Corps of Discovery navigate, scout, interpret, and, of course, hunt on their exploration west and back again. In his journals, Lewis wrote of Drouillard, "I scarcely know how we would

subsist were it not for the exertions of this excellent hunter." Drouillard hunted all of what would later become Montana, from the breaks of the upper Missouri River to the dense thickets of the Bitterroot Mountains. He was confident, bordering on cocky, and



that's likely what caused his downfall.

The son of a French Canadian father and Shawnee mother, Drouillard had a foot in both cultures. He was fluent in the sign language used by many tribes, making him invaluable for Lewis and Clark's long trip up the Missouri. He was 28 when hired by the explorers in 1803. After the Corps returned to St. Louis, in 1806, Drouillard turned right around and headed west again. For four years he trapped the upper Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers. In 1810, trader and entrepreneur Manuel Lisa sent a team, including Drouillard and John Colter, to establish a fort where few others dared: at the Three Forks of the Missouri. The land was rich with beaver but patrolled by members of the Blackfeet and Gros Ventre tribes. After continual attack by Indians, the trappers gave up and abandoned Fort Henry. Colter settled in Missouri and became a farmer. Not Drouillard.

In early May 1810, he and 21 other trappers set their traps up the Jefferson River, the same river where Colter had nearly been killed the year before. Drouillard did especially well and boasted of his spoils. Not long after, two miles from camp, Drouillard was ambushed by Indians and killed.

### JIM BRIDGER 1804-1881

Jim Bridger spent only a short time in Montana Territory. But he left a permanent mark on both the landscape and all who heard his stories of the frontier.

Born in Virginia, Bridger was destined for the West. Before his parents died, when he was 13, they'd moved him and his sisters to St. Louis. Boats laden with beaver pelts, buffalo hides, and bearded mountain men regularly streamed down the Missouri River into town. Bridger first worked as a blacksmith's apprentice. When he saw an ad in the local paper calling for young men who yearned for adventure out West, he joined future frontiersmen legends Hugh Glass, Jedediah



Smith, Jim Beckwourth, and others as a member of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. The other members were expert trackers, hunters, and trappers. A young man couldn't have asked for a better apprenticeship.

Bridger's stint as a blacksmith had honed his muscles, making him stronger than his tender age would warrant. The boy was smart, too. A rival fur-trading company followed Bridger and his companions to their coveted fall trapping grounds. Bridger realized this and led his company into hostile Blackfeet territory, where the party following them was promptly attacked.

Word of his grit spread too. Once, during a struggle with several Blackfeet, he

took two arrows in his back. Bridger left one of the three-inch-long arrowheads in for three years. He finally had it removed (without booze to deaden the pain) by a doctor at a mountain man rendezvous. A week later, he was back on his horse guiding a group into Jackson Hole.

Though one of the youngest scouts called upon by the Army to lead wagon trains out West, Bridger was considered among the best. After gold was discovered in Alder Gulch, in today's southwestern Montana, Bridger was assigned to lead a wagon train to mines in nearby Virginia City. The Bozeman Trail, which at the time went from Fort Laramie in southeastern Wyoming north along the east side of the Bighorn Mountains, was considered too dangerous. The route went through lands guaranteed by the Fort Laramie Treaty to the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne Indians, who defended it fiercely. So Bridger blazed a new trail that went up into Montana Territory along the west side of the Bighorns. With 300 immigrant miners and 62 wagons, Major Bridger led his party to Livingston and then west up and over what was then Bridger Pass, now known as Bozeman Pass.

At the end of the Civil War, Bridger was in his 60s and left the mountains for a farm in Missouri. He died at 77, leaving behind children, grandchildren, and innumerable stories of the American frontier. South-central Montana today contains several "Bridger" references, including a mountain range, ski area, and town.

### JEREMIAH "LIVER-EATING" JOHNSTON 1824-1900

As a boy, I watched the 1972 classic, *Jeremiah Johnson*, over and over until the tape eventually was consumed by the VCR. The movie is loosely based on the life of John Garrison, whose life—much of it spent in Montana Territory—is an even greater bundle of lore, fantasy, and downright fairy tale than what the film presented.

What we know for fact is that Garrison was born in New Jersey to a surly, alcoholic

father who worked his six children to the bone. To escape, Garrison fled to a whaling schooner, where he worked for more than a decade. After enlisting in the Navy, he punched an officer and fled West. Because he



had deserted, he changed his name to Johnston. That's when the tales begin.

The best-known centers on a quest for vengeance. Legend has it that Johnston married Swan, daughter of a Flathead chief. Johnston left his bride behind one winter to trap, only to return to find her murdered by the Crow. He went on to kill dozens of Crow warriors, carving out their livers (which he is rumored to have eaten). When the Blackfeet captured him for the bounty the Crow had put on his head, Johnston chewed through his rawhide handcuffs, beat up a guard, and cut off the guard's leg, which he supposedly used as a food source during the following winter as he traveled 200 miles back to his cabin.

It's an amazing story. Except that some documents indicate that Johnston was still serving in the Navy when this adventure supposedly took place.

Either way, we know Johnston eventually moved to Coulson (now Billings) to work as a deputy sheriff. He built a cabin in the woods near Red Lodge, where he spent all but the last year of his life. He died in 1900 at the National Soldiers' Home in Santa Monica, California.

## STAGECOACH MARY FIELDS 1832-1914

Drinker, brawler, baseball fan, restaurateur—the list of adjectives and occupations for Montana’s liveliest pioneer woman is long. A former Tennessee slave who found her freedom after the Civil War, Mary Fields was a six-foot-tall, 200-pound solid mass of pure force. She got her name because she would always deliver (on time) the mail in and around the town of Cascade, regardless of weather or road conditions. She was the first African American and only the second woman to manage a mail route in the United States, a job she had earned by hitching a team of six horses faster than all the other applicants.

She came to Montana Territory to nurse back to health her good friend Mother Amadeus, whom she’d met in Ohio and who had been sent West to establish a school for Native American girls at St. Peter’s Mission,



west of Cascade. After the nun recovered from pneumonia, Fields settled in the town. At a time when women (other than prosti-

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tutes) avoided saloons, Mary loved to drink at the bar alongside the men. If one got wise or gave her a hard time about being in the bar, she’d be more likely to punch him in the face than ask for an apology. Legend has it that while having a drink, she saw a fellow out on the street who owed her money. She ran him down, grabbed him by the scruff, broke his nose, and declared, “His debt is now paid.”

As rough as Fields appeared and behaved, she could be sweet, too. She was the Cascade baseball team’s biggest fan, placing flowers from her garden in the players’ buttonholes. Big hitters would get a bouquet. She cared for nearly every child in town at some point, many times spending her earnings on treats for the kids. One of the children Mary influenced was Gary Cooper. The famous actor later recalled the meeting in a 1959 article for *Ebony*, writing, “Mary lived to become one of the freest souls ever to draw a breath, or a .38.”

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## ANDREW GARCIA 1853-1943

Perhaps Montana’s “last best” mountain man, Andrew Garcia saw the curtains close on the western frontier while he was still playing his part. He recorded his wildest days on thousands of pages stashed away in old dynamite boxes at his ranch near present-day Alberton, northwest of Missoula. Unlike other mountain men and women of the frontier, he could read and write, leaving us with more than just tales of dubious validity and origin.

Garcia was born in the Rio Grande Valley of south Texas. At 23 he made his way north to Montana Territory as a U.S. government packer and herder at Fort Ellis in Bozeman. There he met a raging alcoholic trapper named Beaver Tom. Garcia saw no need for drink and didn’t know how to gamble, which, as he wrote, was the only thing to do in the West on your time off. As a result, he had saved quite a bit of his salary. Beaver Tom was an experienced trapper who needed someone to bankroll his trapping habit. He talked Garcia into venturing east into Montana’s Musselshell country to trap and trade. Garcia’s autobiography, *Tough Trip Through*

*Paradise*, begins that year, 1878.

The book is a colorful, no-holds-barred romp through the last of Montana’s frontier. Garcia recounts his time trading with, running from, chasing after, and marrying into Native American tribes across today’s central Montana.

But before he can actually trap or trade,



Garcia struggles to keep Beaver Tom from drowning himself in whiskey. In one passage, Tom had gone on a three-day bender, replacing food with whiskey. After Garcia watched the drunk trapper crawl around on all fours and toss imaginary rattlesnakes out of camp, he decided to sober the man up. In a skillet, Garcia boiled up a tonic made of several scoops of old bear grease, pepper, and whiskey and forced Tom to drink the concoction under threat of murder.

In addition to his medical “wisdom,” Garcia shares in his autobiography snippets of sage frontier advice such as, “They say in case of fire, it is always good to go to bed wearing your pants.”

Apparently, Garcia didn’t especially want to see his tales published. His white family disapproved of his previous Native American wives, as did Gladys, his final wife. Yet thankfully for anyone later interested in frontier life, the 75-year-old mountain man sat down in 1928, at the urging of a historian, and wrote of his time on Montana’s frontier. 🐾