President Thomas Jefferson’s curiosity about what lay beyond the Missouri River prompted him in 1803 to quietly order an expedition to explore the land west—land held by France. Twenty years had passed since the Revolutionary War, and the infant United States was feeling growing pains. Jefferson’s plan to send Captain Meriwether Lewis and Lieutenant William Clark clandestinely into a powerful, but friendly, foreign nation’s territory could have been embarrassing. Then an odd coincidence occurred. While negotiating with France for the purchase of the port of New Orleans, the American envoy was told his nation could have the seaport—if it took all of Louisiana with it, for $15 million! Napoleon was stretched to the limit supporting two armies, one in San Domingo in the Caribbean and another policing Louisiana Territory. The French treasury was feeling the pinch and in need of replenishment; the sale would benefit both countries.

Jefferson was roundly criticized at home for agreeing—even at the bargain price—yet when the purchase treaty was signed in March 1804, America doubled in size at the stroke of a pen. Louisiana added 800,000 square miles to the nation. France was ceding land north up to the British possessions, south to New Orleans, and west to the Rockies and the Continental Divide. However, territory west of the Divide—including what was to be Utah—still belonged to Spain. Nevertheless, the acquisition of Louisiana transformed what would have been a reconnaissance of foreign territory into an official and quite proper survey of U.S. land.

Lewis and Clark’s mission was to follow the Missouri River to its headwaters and then forge west in search of a passage to the Pacific Ocean. The Corps of Discovery departed May 14, 1804, and returned to St. Louis September 23, 1806, having journeyed 7,690 miles. The trove of information the group collected made possible the first detailed map of the Northwest, setting the stage for continued exploration and western expansion. However, the expedition left another, less fortunate, legacy as well. When, on the homeward journey, Lewis became embroiled in a scrape with Piegan braves and one was killed, the tribe, part of the Blackfoot confederation, became implacably hostile to white explorers, trappers, and traders and remained so for decades, at the cost of many lives.

On the last leg of the return trip, one of the party, John Colter, was granted permission to leave the corps to join a pair of trappers headed into Teton country. This hardy independent spent another four years in the mountains, and in 1807–8, traveling alone, he roamed the Wind River Valley of west central Wyoming, crossed the Continental Divide, descended the Pacific slope,
and recrossed the Snake River to the Teton range. Colter thus became the first white to see and report the marvels of Yellowstone. And in 1808, he was involved in one of the most talked-about incidents in mountain man annals.

Colter and another trapper were working the upper Missouri when they were jumped by Blackfeet. In minutes, Colter was taken prisoner and his partner killed, riddled with arrows. Colter was stripped to the skin and challenged to run—for his life. The mountaineer began sprinting. He was allowed a minute head start, then the warriors, whooping and yelling, bounded after him. Colter ran, ran, ran. His bare feet cut and bleeding, his body torn, his flesh scratched and scraped as he crashed through the underbrush, John Colter somehow kept going.

After three miles he had outdistanced all but one of the braves, and as Colter would later tell it, he turned on the Indian and in a ferocious struggle managed to kill the Blackfoot with his own spear. A week later, naked and more dead than alive, Colter stumbled into a trapper’s fort 150 miles away. His ordeal has been told and retold as one of the most astonishing escapes in frontier history.

Trappers in search of beaver, fox, and other peltry now were becoming increasingly familiar with the land beyond the hundredth meridian. The era of the fur brigades was dawning. Until the Treaty of Ghent ended the War of 1812 between Great Britain and the United States, though, the risk of venturing into the beckoning new territory for commercial purposes was too great. So long as the British conspired with the tribes of the upper Mississippi and the Missouri, fur parties kept their distance. With the war over, St. Louis companies looked seriously to the West. The Hudson’s Bay Company sent men deeper south, and American traders turned their attention to Santa Fe and Taos as well.

In St. Louis, William Henry Ashley and Andrew Henry spoke of mounting an expedition to the Rockies, and Ashley hit upon a brilliantly simple idea to recruit men for his new company: he would use newspapers. His now celebrated want ad first appeared February 13, 1822, in the Missouri Gazette and Public Advertiser, seeking one hundred “enterprising young men” to ascend the Missouri to its source, “there to be employed for one, two or three years.” The annual pay would be $200 a man.

The advertisement attracted free spirits and stalwarts such as Jedediah S. Smith, Thomas “Broken Hand” Fitzpatrick, the brothers Sublette (William and Milton), Jim Bridger, James Clyman, Hugh Glass, Moses “Black” Harris, and Jim Beckwourth. These and other “Ashley men,” along with Taos trappers the likes of Etienne Provost and engagés in the employ of Peter Skene Ogden and the Hudson’s Bay Fur Company, would in the decade to come roam the country west of the Rockies and trap the waters of Utah, Wyoming, Idaho, and Colorado. Their names would be indelibly linked with trails, rivers, streams, and landmarks long after their deeds had faded from memory. Though they may not be as easily brought to mind as those mentioned in the lyrics of the popular melody “Route 66,” most western travelers will recognize the names attached to Fort Bridger, Colter’s Bay, and the cities of Ogden, Logan, and Provo, as well as Beckwourth Pass, Weber Canyon, Weber River,
Sublette County, Henry’s Fork, and Clyman Bay of the Great Salt Lake.

The discovery of the Great Salt Lake has generally been attributed to Jim Bridger, but his partner Louis Vasquez made claim, in an October 1858 interview in the New York Times and the San Francisco Bulletin, that he and several other trappers had first seen the lake in 1822. Vasquez confused his dates and could not have been in the region until the winter of 1825-26. He was known to have been in St. Louis the season previous to when Ashley’s party first reached the Great Salt Lake Valley.

Etienne Provost, however, was trapping the Utah Lake outlet (Jordan River) in October 1824 when a Shoshoni war party attacked and killed eight in his company of ten men. Provost’s camp placed him in sight of the Great Salt Lake several months before Bridger reached the valley with Ashley’s outfit. Years later, mountain man William Marshall Anderson added his voice when he wrote the National Intelligencer insisting that to Provost belonged the credit for having first seen and made known the existence and whereabouts of the inland sea. And in July 1897, J. C. Hughey of Bellevue, Iowa, wrote to the Salt Lake Tribune claiming John H. Weber, a onetime Danish sea captain, had been in the mountains in 1822 as a fur trapper and had in later years often told Hughey he had discovered the lake in 1823. And, Hughey wrote, the captain also discovered Weber Canyon and Weber River, both of which bear his name. Weber described the lake as “a great boon to them, as salt was plentiful around the border of the lake, and for some time before they had used gunpowder on their meat, which was principally buffalo.”

In 1824, a trapping party, including Thomas Fitzpatrick and James Clyman, led by Jedediah Smith along the Continental Divide pushed through a swale in the Wind River country and crossed to the western slope. This remarkably gentle twenty-mile saddle in the central Rockies was the South Pass; it would open the Oregon Trail to the fur trade as never before and serve as a gateway for wagon traffic west to the Pacific.

With Americans now in the mountains, it was only a matter of time before a confrontation would occur, and that time was May 23, 1825, when a brigade of Hudson’s Bay Company trappers under Peter Skene Ogden bumped into Canadians and Spaniards from Taos led by Etienne Provost. They had come up from New Mexico and were supplied from St. Louis by way of the Santa Fe Trail. As Dale L. Morgan remarked, “trappers were swarming from everywhere.” Indeed, before nightfall, still another band, this composed of two dozen or more Americans, “rode up brazenly with 12 or 15 of Ogden’s Iroquois.” They made camp within a hundred yards of the British outfit, hoisted an American flag, and shouted to Ogden’s men that as they were in U.S. Territory, “whether indebted or engaged,” all were now free.

Next morning, Johnson Gardner strode from the American side to Ogden’s tent and announced that Britain had ceded its rights to this country, and as Hudson’s Bay had no license to trade or trap, Ogden would be wise to leave. Ogden replied they would depart only if ordered by the British government, not before. “Then remain at your own peril,” Gardner snapped. In the harangue that

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followed, twenty-one of Ogden’s trappers deserted to the Americans—taking with them their furs—and Ogden retreated with Gardner’s taunts ringing in his ears: “You shall shortly see us in the Columbia, and this Fall at the Flat Heads and Kootenais, as we are determined you shall no longer remain in our territory!” The locale of this showdown is generally considered to be Mountain Green, in Weber Canyon southeast of the city of Ogden. Peter Skene Ogden had reached the spot by crossing the divide now traversed by the Trapper’s Loop highway from the mountain valley that has been known from the time of the fur brigade as Ogden’s Hole.

By the 1830s, these intrepid trappers and traders had ventured throughout the West’s mountains and valleys, leaving their blaze on Indian and game trails as they searched for pelts. Hugh Glass survived his legendary encounter with a wounded grizzly, which chewed and mauled him so severely his companions left him for dead—only to have Glass crawl from the grave and eventually reach a Sioux village, where he was nursed back to health.

As the decade ended, beaver was largely trapped out and the beaver hat market in Europe ruined by the introduction of the tall silk topper. The last fur rendezvous was held in 1840. The era of the mountain men and the fur trapper was on the wane. Utah trading posts such as Fort Davy Crockett and Fort Robidoux were about to become relics of a bygone day.

South Pass now represented the gateway to western expansion. It was time for the covered wagons and the settlement of the far frontier.