Mountain Men Foods

General Information

Trapper’s diet mirrored the Indian diet (Holston 301)

Unlike most Anglo American, he was not adverse to marrying one or two Indian Squaws (Holston 301)

Both the mountain men and the Indian had to live off the land (Holston 301)

For lack of meat during the winter months, the Indians often were reduced to a starvation point.

When meat became available, the Indians were prone to gorging. The mountain men, also living precariously off the land, adopted this primitive trait of overindulgence when food was obtainable. (Holston 301)

The mountain men spent one month luxuriating in the wealth of buffalo meat, and the next reduced to the very brink of starvation. (Holston 301-302)

Studies show that a man could live healthy if they ate 6-8 lbs of meat today. (Holston 306)

Lewis and Clark and other trappers would bring portable dried soup. The men could mix this dried or paste like mixture with hot water to make soup. (Gunderson 10)

The explorers mixed the portable soup with water and a little bear’s grease. (Gunderson 26)

The explorers boiled seawater for nearly one month to collect about 4 bushels of salt. (Gunderson 29)

Cooking techniques

The mountain men would build a fire from either quaking aspen, sagebrush, sunflower stalks, or dry buffalo chip. The buffalo dung was called boix de vache, literally, wood from a cow. It burned well and was a favorite fuel of the mountain men. (Holston 303)

Meat cooked by the trappers, was seldom well done. It usually was bolted down in a nearly raw condition (Holston 303)

Meat was often cooken en appolas, with alternating pieces of lean meat and fat on a sharpened stick. The stick was held over the fire or thrust into the ground beside the flame. (Holston 303)

Bones were gnawed clean by the trappers and then thrown over their shoulders to the wolves. (Holston 303)

Trappers would bring salt, cinnamon, pepper, and red pepper. These spices can be used with spoiled meat to make it taste better (Gunderson 10)

Buffalo

The Corps saw their first herds of buffalo in August of 1804, after they reached the middle Missouri River. AS many as 60 million buffalo lived on the plains. More buffalo than people lived in North America at that time. (Gunderson 14)

American Indians used buffalo skins to cover tepees, line boats, and make clothing. They carved utensils out of buffalo bones. They ate buffalo meat fresh, roasted, dried, boiled and stewed. (Gunderson 14)

But by 1895, settler and soldiers had killed so many buffalos that only about 800 wild buffalos still survived in the United States. (Gunderson 15)

Diet of the mountain men were largely meat, especially the flesh of the bison.(Holston 301)

The major food of the mountain men was buffalo meat. (Holston 301-302)

Trappers claimed that fat buffalo meat was fat superior to beef. (Holston 302)

Bison was usually butchered in the Indian manner. Turned on its belly, with the legs positioned on either side for support, the shaggy beast was opened down the spine. Peeling away the skin from both sides, the average white man would butcher a buffalo into about twenty pieces (Holston 302)

When game was plentiful, however, only a few choice parts were taken, and the vast bulk of the meat was left to scavengers. (Holston 302)

The small and large humps were usually taken first. (Holston 302)

Overlying the hump, and extending along the backbone to the tail, were two broad thick strips of fat called the depouilles. From just under the hide, the hunter took large sections of fat known as the fleece. The fleece from a large bull might weigh as much as two hundred pounds. (Holston 302)

A hatchet or tomahawk was used to chop free the hump ribs. (Holston 302)

Various other cuts of meat taken were the shoulders, the fillets or muscle underlying the shoulders, the thighs and rump. (Holston 302)

The tongue was removed by “ripping open the skin of the lower jawbone and pulling it out through the oriface. (Holston 302)

A favorite appetizer was marrow from the leg bones. The bones were cracked and the marrow (about one pound to a bone) was extracted. (Holston 302)

The heart and liver were added to the fare (Holston 302)

Blood was often drained from drained from the body cavity and saved. (Holston 302)

The testicles of a bull bison were cut from the body and were considered as choice pieces. (Holston 302)

If the animal was a pregnant cow, the raw legs of the unborn calf were cut from the fetus. The udder was held as hardly second to the tongue as delicacy. (Holston 302)

Brains were removed by splitting open the skull and scooping out the bloody contents by hand. (Holston 302)

If the trappers had enough time, they might make jerky or pemmican. Jerky was made from sun-and wind-dried strips of lean meat. Cut with the grain of the meat, the thin strips were hung to dry on cottonwood racks. A slow fire, under the meat, helped to speed up the drying process. (Holston 302)

If pemmican was desired, the gristle and sinews were removed from the jerky. The dried meat was pounded into a powder, poured into a buffalo hide basket and mixed with melted fat. Dried berries were often added for flavor and the product kept well on long trips into the Rocky Mountains. (Holston 302)

 When mountain men had been without meat for several days before slaying a buffalo, all traces of Anglo-Saxon civilization vanished instantly. Immediately the bison’s skull was hacked open and the raw brains were wolfed down in great bloody, chunks. The blood was quaffed and usually spilled down the trapper’s face, arms, and body. (Holston 303)

The liver was torn from the body cavity. Bloody and unwashed, it was seasoned with gun power, or by squeezing the gall bladder’s contents over it, and then consumed without further preparation. (Holston 303)

The gall was drunk sometimes, for a man could get quite a glow if he took it straight on an empty stomach. (Holston 303)

The greasy fleece was cut away from the ribs and eaten raw. (Holston 303)

Other strips of raw meat or fat were consumed if the group still was not satiated. (Holston 303)

The buffalo marrow was boiled, however it was stirred into the mixture until it became a thick soup. (Holston 303)

Fats, especially the kidney fat, were popular at any meal. They were boiled briefly or eaten raw (Holston 303)

The oily belly fat of a bison was a favorite but caused vomiting if taken in excess.(Holston 303)

Perhaps the most unique food eaten by the mountain men were boudins. They were the small intestines of the bison. Cut into convenient lengths, the intestines were roasted on sticks until the heat caused them to become puffy. Boudins were tied sometimes to prevent the fat from leaking into the fire. The intestines quickly become intended and little clouds of steam escaped from numerous tine punctures. When crisp, the intestines and their contents were eaten with much guesto. (Holston 304)

Bison were incapable of traversing the high passes of the Rockies, therefore other food sources were essential. (Holston 304)

Canadian trapper story of eating the intestines. (Holson 303)

Trappers did not worry about drinking the blood of animals. One of the men with Captain Bonneville’s trapping party, slit the throat of a wounded buffalo and drank the tepid blood. (Holston 305)

The explorers hunted buffalo for food as often as possible. When buffalo was plentiful, each man ate up to 9 pounds of meat per day. Lewis reported that the roasted hump was especially delicious. (Gunderson 14)

The explorers ate a great deal of buffalo jerky. To make the jerky, they coated strips of fresh meat with salt and other spices. They threaded the meat on sticks to dry over the campfire. The meat cooked and became chewy as the moisture in the meat evaporated overnight. If the meat was not dry in the morning, the explorers tied the strips to the keelboat mast to finish drying as they traveled. (Gunderson 14)

Elk and Antelope

Elk was probably second in consumption for most of the trappers (Holston 301)

Deer and Elk were common food sources. Jedediah Smith described a feast on elk meat when “men could be seen in every part of the camp with meat raw and half roasted in their hands devouring it with the greatest alacrity. (Holston 304)

James Ohio Pattie, famous trapper and trader, even went so far as to describe the blood of an antelope as “tasting like fresh milk” (Holston 304)

Lewis and Clark expedition Christmas dinner consisted of “pore Elk, so much Spoiled that we eate it thro’ meat necessity. (Gunderson 28)

Miscellaneous Meat

Less frequently, the mountain men ate deer, bear, antelope, horses, dogs, beaver and other small game. (Holston 301)

Of all the foods know to the mountain men, the flesh of the cougar or mountain lion, known as “painter meat,” was said to be the best of all. (Holston 304)

The meat of dogs was considered second in flavor to that of the cougar, and many early journals record the eating of dogs by the trappers. (Holston 304)

Horses were always a source of food. Charles Larpenteur, a fur trader, wrote that he could assure the reader that horse meat makes excellent steaks. Other men were not so enthused. After eating horse meat, one white man wrote that his party “belched up the old stud as strong as ever” for several days. (holson 304)

Mules were eaten also when food was gone. (Holston 304)

Bears were hunted for food and sport. George Nidever wrote, “ a person who is not a good shot, cool, and cautious, and has a good rifle, has no business to hunt bears. Andrew W. Sublette, a retired fur trader fell victim to a grizzly bear while hunting in 1853. His case was not unusual, for many mountain men suffered death or maulings because they loved the sport of bear hunting. (Holston 304)

Lynx meat was considered extremely good by the trappers(Holson 304)

Beaver

Beaver tail was also relished by the trappers (Holston 304)

The flesh from beaver, which had been feeding on wild parsnip, caused men to become violently ill. Unless they were starving, the trappers ate only the tail of the trapper (Holston 304-305)

Fishing

The men would fish for catfish and other fish. They were plentiful in the Missouri River. To catch the fish, the explorers cut a tree branch to use as a pole. They tied a fishing line with a hook to the tree branch. The men fried the fish they caught in a pan or roasted fish on sticks over the fire. (Gunderson 12)

“in a few minits, Caught three very large Catfish one nearly white. Those fish are in great plenty on the Sides of the river and verry fat, a quart of oile came out of the Surpulus fat as one of those fish. Willam clark July 29th, 1804 (Gunderson 12)

Lewis also packed a supply of fishing line and 2,800 fishhooks that also were valuable as trade goods. (Gunderson 10)

Berries and Vegetables

Lewis and Clark expedition spent the winter with the Mandan Hidatsa villages. They were expert farmers. They grew many varieties of corn, squash, and beans for soups and stews. They picked wild June berries and sand cherries for sauces. (Gunderson 16)

The Indians mixed chokeberries with her water for medicine. (Gunderson 16)

The Indians dried fruits and vegetables to use during the winter. (Gunderson 16)

Lewis and Clark traded trinkets for vegetables and food. (Gunderson 17)

Sacagawea gather wild licorice, currants and wild roots to eat on their expedition (Gunderson 18)

On April 9, 1805, Lewis reported, “when we halted for dinner, the squaw busied herself in searching for the wild artichoke which the mice collect and deposit in large hoards…her labour soon proved successful and she procured a good quantity of these roots”. Lewis described the roots as similar to Jerusalem artichokes in flavor, but smaller in size. The men cooked the roots in the ashes of the campfire. The roots tasted like potatoes with a nutty flavor. The Corps members ate the cooked roots with parched corn and buffalo jerky. (Gunderson 18)

Hominy is made from kernals of corn soaked in lye and then washed to remove the hulls. (Gunderson 11)

The Indians taught Lewis and Clark how to eat camas roots. They were not used to it and many of the men became ill. (Gunderson 26)

Bugs

“…and finally were reduced to(eating) buds and twigs (Holston 301)

Joe Meek held his hands in an ant hill until they were covered with the ants, then greedily licked them off (Holston 305)

Meek also collected large, black crickets for the cooking pan. When the insects stopped kicking, they were plucked from the boiling water and eaten. (Holston 305)

When forced by drastic circumstances, trappers existed on a diet of frogs, snakes, and insects. (Holston 305)

An Indian village in the Great Basin was invaded by trappers searching for food. The raid yielded sacks of sun-dried ants. In another crisis, a band of hungry trappers are small cakes that were made of crushed dried ants. (Holston 305)

Plants

Other Starvation Items

“Eating the grease in the rifle stocks, fringes, and unnecessary part of buckskin clothes, gun and ammunition bags, and every scrap of edible material boiled up in an assinaboin basket with hot stones. Holston 301)

When food became scarce, both the Indians and mountain men would scrape the putrid flesh from animal corpses. (Holston 305)

 Other famous trapper, Thomas Fitzpatrick, in order to survive, peeled the rotting flesh from the bones of a buffalo. (Holston 305)

Roasted beaver skins provided sustenance for a group of trappers when starving . (Holston 305)

A band divided one raven among seven men. (Holston 305)

Rufus Sage and his companions were reduced to eating a buffalo hide. The hide was boiled for twelve to fourteen hours in an effort to make it palatable. It was of “so glutenous a nature it almost demented the teeth employed in its mastication. (Holston 305)

Jedediah Smith, writing to Ralph Smith in December of 1829, remarked that he would “go for days without eating, and am pretty well satisfied if I can gather a few roots, a few snails, or berries satisfied if we can afford ourselves a piece of horse flesh or a fine roasted dog.” (Holston 305)

Captain Bonneville was forced to eat wolves, roots and muskrats in order to survive (Holston 305)

Pattie also hinted that his party drink their own urine in a vain attempt to refresh parched throats (Holston 306)

Joe Meek, another mountain man, was lucky enough to find a brass pin among his trappings. Fashioning a crude book, he replenished his food supply with fat trout from the Snake River. (Holston 305)

If the food situation became desperate, the mountain men might be reduced to one of mankind’s most primitive dietary traits, cannibalism. Bill Williams, a mountain man who became a guide, was accused of eating some of his companions when the food supply ran out. (Holston 306)

Perhaps the classic example of cannibalism was Charles Gardner, known as “old Phil, “. On a trip to Fort Laramie, supplies were exhausted, but Old Phil solved the problems by eliminating his Indian companion. He amputated the legs at the hip joints and took him with him. Witness at Fort Laramie swore that they saw him throwing away the gnawed remnants which Phil referred to as his provisions. (Holston 306)

On another occasion, Gardiner killed his own squaw, ate most of her, and left the remains unburied. Old Phil stated that if the human hands, head, and feet were cooked long enough , then they were as tasty as pork. The other parts of the body were “too gristly and tough”. Such recorded instances of cannibalism, however are very rare. (Holston 306)

Food at the Rendezvous.

Rendezvous had a grand feast. (Holston 306)

Following a few days of drunken living, the trapper traded his beaver skins for such luxurious commodities as tobacco, at three dollars a pound; coffee, worth two dollars a pound; and sugar at two dollars a pint. (Holston 306)

Typical of all of the mountain men, Kit Carson remarked, “once a year, I would have a meal consisting of bread, meat, sugar, and coffee. I would consider it a luxury. (Holston 306)

Alcohol

Indian trappers, and traders drank diluted raw alcohol. Metheglin, a drink made from diluted raw alcohol and honey, was a favorite. (Holston 306)

Whiskey sold for five dollars a pint at the 1832 rendezvous. It was the only item which was sold for several days. (Holston 306)

Supplies Brought from the East to the West as Provisions

Hominy, Salt Pork, flour , lard, cornmeal, were provision for food brought with the Lewis and Clark Party (Gunderson 12)