Today's fur trappers carry on traditions with modern identities.

In The Steps of The Mountain Men

Story and Photos By
Timothy M. Kelley

Most accounts of the westward exploration of our country, especially those forwarded by the myth-peddlers in Hollywood, include some romanticized version of the early fur traders and mountain men who helped open the United States to European settlement.

Typically characterized as hearty, if not downright rough souls, these adventurers braved torturous travels and brutal elements, not to mention the occasional hostile Native American tribe, to secure their wares (usually beaver pelts) for purposes of trade. Some seemingly fantastical tales of these early explorers do not stray far from the actual truth. The trappers, fur traders and mountain men who plied the wilds and waterways of our country experienced some of the harshest conditions encountered by any settlers. Because of their ability to survive such environments, these men were responsible for much of the advance exploration of the North American continent.

Nowadays, most people believe the days of the fur traders and mountain men to be long past, their exploits relegated to fanciful memory. However, in some ways, the traditions and motivations of these adventurous spirits live on in the form of modern-day trappers and fur buyers.

Graded furs, bundled into lots, await the auction table while trappers and fur buyers gather around the auctioneer.

During the 1800s, mountain men were enticed by large fur companies of the day to attend rowdy "rendezvous" in order to facilitate easier trading. By contrast, modern fur traders in our state can patronize annual fur auctions sponsored by the Illinois Trappers Association.

ITA is a statewide organization, founded in 1963, representing the concerns of trappers and other sportsmen. Since 2000, the association has sponsored at least one fur auction each year, while two auctions have been conducted annually for the past five years. The

Wild Illinois History

Youngsters who want to know more about the history of the fur trade can journey back with one of the first French trappers to reach our state. This interactive site (www.wildillinois.com) is correlated with Illinois Learning Standards for history, geography and other topics. At the end of the trip, find plans for making your own "possible bag."

purpose of these auctions is to afford the state's trappers and fur harvesters with opportunities to peddle their pelts to buyers in a centralized location.

With the fur trade downturn during the mid and late 1980s, many local fur buyers transferred into other lines of business. As times have improved for the fur market in the last half-decade, the lack of local buyers has resulted in a dearth of outlets for the average trapper to sell his product. By bringing buyers and sellers together in one place, ITA auctions provide buyers with opportunities to bid on greater quantities of pelts than they might during a typical week (or more) at their own places of business. Sellers, meanwhile, enjoy a greater chance of receiving good prices for their pelts due to increased competition between buyers.

For most observers, a typical fur auction most closely resembles a farm sale,

Stretched and dried pelts are inspected by fur buyers prior to the auction.

A coyote pelt is graded by an Illinois Trappers Association representative.

at least from the standpoint of patron manner and dress. However, in contrast to the wardrobes sported in days past, attendees generally have traded wearing pelts and buckskins for barn coats and coveralls.

While the majority share a rural background, one cannot categorize modern fur harvesters. At any ITA auction, one might meet a retired telephone serviceman, a manager for a leading pharmaceutical company, a gourmet chef or high school teacher, to name a few.

Auctions open for business at 6 a.m. when sellers begin checking in their pelts and receiving lot numbers, with the auction typically commencing at 10 a.m. Six in the morning may seem early, but since most trappers typically begin checking their traplines before daybreak, patrons are characteristically unfazed by the start time. In between the opening of the venue and the actual auction, the floor is busy with several "graders" who inspect each piece of fur and bundle them into lots according to species, size and quality, making each seller's lot into numerous, individual bundles. Pelts are measured against a marked board to determine their size. The marks on the boards correspond to pelt sizes that are accepted at international auction houses and furriers. ITA auctions generally have from eight to 20 buyers, aiding sellers in obtaining the most for their product.

Modern fur auctions do not garner the boisterous business of the mountain men "rendezvous." However, the business conducted at the ITA auctions is nevertheless brisk. Auctions typically move around 2,500 pelts, with some single auctions accounting for upwards of 5,000 furs changing hands.

Probably one of the most important traditions carried on from the past is one that lives on at the ITA fur auctions: the renewal of friendships and love of the outdoors that bring these sportsmen together.

Timothy M. Kelley is a life-time trapper and the DNR district natural heritage biologist stationed in the Havana field office.

Fur hunting and trapping remain a part of Illinois' rural lifestyle and economy. During the 2006-2007 season, furtakers sold more than 213,000 pelts valued at $1.7 million.

Pelt sales and average values for top six species in Illinois, 2006-2007.

Raccoon	136,883	$8.45
Muskrat	50,483	$6.65
Coyote	8,218	$12.55
Beaver	6,827	$14.00
Opossum	5,609	$1.20
Mink	3,088	$13.00