



## Oregon's First Resource Industry: The Fur Trade & Beaver Ecology in the Beaver State

**Grades:** Versions for 4-HS

**Subjects:** American History, Oregon History, Economics, Social Studies

**Suggested Time Allotment:** 1-2 Class Periods

### *Background:*

The first of Oregon's natural resources to be recognized and extracted by Euro-Americans was fur. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, furs were highly valuable commodities of international trade. Early explorers of the northwest, such as Robert Gray and Lewis and Clark, reported that the region's many waterways supported an abundant population of sea otter and beaver. When people back east heard about this, they knew that there was the potential of great profits to be made. So, the first permanent Euro-American settlements in Oregon were trading outposts established by large and powerful fur trading companies that were based in London and New York.

Initially the traders in Oregon obtained their furs by bartering with Native Americans. As the enormous value of the northwest's fur resources quickly became apparent to them, corporations such as Hudson's Bay Company and Pacific Fur Company decided to start employing their own workforce, and professional trappers were brought in from Canada, the American states, and islands of the South Seas. The increasing number of trappers and competition between English and American companies quickly began to deplete the populations of the fur-bearing animals. In fact, by 1824 the Hudson's Bay Company was pursuing a strategy of intentionally 'trapping out' and eliminating beaver from entire sections of the Oregon interior in order to keep rival businesses from moving into those areas. In little more than a decade, the beaver had nearly disappeared from what would later come to be known as the "Beaver State."

### **Elementary Class Activity— BEAVER BIOLOGY & THE BARTER SYSTEM**

Oregon's fur trapping history can be a sensitive subject for early learners, given their natural sense of sympathy and identification with animals. However, it is a good idea to present Oregon schoolchildren with a unit on the biology, ecology and natural history of the remarkable beaver, *Castor canadensis*, Oregon's official state animal. The school library should be a good source of information; also see this online article at [State Symbols USA](#). You can show and discuss the photographs and illustrations of

beavers from [this page of the 1904 Sunday Oregonian](#): explain that it dates from the period when Oregon's beaver population was just beginning to rebound from the overharvesting of the previous century.

In the earliest days of the Northwest fur trade, the trappers were often involved in bartering transactions with Native Americans. Note that the activity on the Native American Barter System included in the "Native American Trade" lesson plan can also be easily adapted and profitably integrated into a unit on the beaver.

### **Middle School Class Activity—FUR TRAPPERS ROLE-PLAYING GAME**

Tell the class that they are going to learn about managing a business based on a natural resource by pretending to be fur trappers in Oregon during pioneer days. The teacher will play the role of the Pacific Fur Company, and each student is to imagine that they are employed as a trapper. Explain that their desks represent sections of Oregon rivers in which they alone are allowed to trap for furs.

Ahead of time, the teacher should purchase a large bag of M&M's candy. (A healthier snack may be substituted if the teacher finds it more appropriate, just make sure it's something the kids will relish.) Place on each student's desk a portion of fifteen M&M's. Tell them they can't eat the candy right away! Each piece of candy represents a beaver living in their section of the river, and they will be game pieces in the game you are about to play.

Explain the rules of the game:

1. The game is played in rounds. Each round represents a year of work trapping on Oregon rivers.
2. At the beginning of each round, every student *owes* three beaver pelts—that is, M&M's—back to the 'Pacific Fur Company,' i.e. you the Teacher. This is the cost of their annual trapping licenses, plus payment for traps and supplies that the company provides.
3. Each student then decides how many more beavers they would like to trap that year: each "beaver" they trap is an M&M they get to eat! You must eat *at least* two M&M's each round, but you are allowed to eat *as many more* as you would like. After paying their three M&M's to the Teacher at the beginning of each round, each student is to write down the number they want to eat on a piece of paper, and wait.
4. There is one catch! Every time you eat three M&M's, you have to give another one back to the Teacher/Pacific Fur Company. This is a tax the company charges on your profits. Note that this tax compounds: i.e. eat three=pay one in tax, eat six=pay two in tax, eat nine=pay three in tax, etc.
5. At the end of each round, for every two M&M's that remain uneaten on your desk, you will receive another M&M from the Teacher. This represents a new baby beaver born to two parents who did not get trapped that year.
6. If you ever run out of M&M's, your river is "trapped out" and you're out of the game.

7. The game will be played for five rounds. At the end of Round 5, any uneaten M&M's must be returned to the Teacher.

Note that a student who plays the most conservative and profitable strategy will still only get to eat 17 M&M's through the course of five rounds—that is the best possible outcome according to the math of the game!

Remember to have the students write down the number they eat each round. Have them add up these figures after the game is completed, and each student can report how many they got to eat. You may want to record these numbers in a chart or graph.

Questions for wrap-up discussion: How many candies did each student in class end up eating? Did you think you would be able to eat more or less at the beginning of the game? How many M&M's remained uneaten at the end of the game? Why? Thinking of the M&M's as "beavers," what can this lesson tell us about the economics of the 19<sup>th</sup> century fur trapping industry in Oregon?

In order to better understand the nature of the economic demand that drove the fur trade, as follow-up, have the class do an all-newspapers search on [Chronicling America](#) using keywords such as "fashion," "fur" and "beaver hat." You can assign each student a different state's newspapers: they are in a drop-down list on the linked page.

Examine and discuss the clothing advertisements and fashion photography features from various American newspapers of the nineteenth century. What do these tell us about the demand for furs? What does this sort of demand suggest about the value of furs at this time?

### **High School Class Activity – RESEARCH, READING AND GUIDED DISCUSSION**

1. [Historic Oregon Newspapers](#) abound with historical accounts of the fur-trading days. A good example the class might examine is an installment of the recurring '[Oregon Pioneer History' feature of the Salem Willamette Farmer, published July 30, 1886](#). The source interviewed for this story was George W. Ebert, an old trapper who reflects on his experiences in early pioneer days.

Questions to lead class discussion: Does it sound like being a fur trapper was a 'good job'? Why or why not? What does Ebert have to say about the number of beaver he trapped in the early days, as opposed to the later time when the story was being written? What sort of prices was he paid for furs during the 'boom' days of the trapping industry? (Make sure the class understands the concept of currency inflation: \$8 for a pelt in the mid-1800's was a "lot more money" than it would be today!)

2. Next, have the class read the short article headlined [‘Beavers Abundant’ on page one of the February 6, 1908 issue of Klamath Falls Evening Herald](#). Note that this article dates from nearly a century after the peak period of fur trapping in the Northwest. What does the reporter have to say about the history of the beaver population in the Klamath Basin area of Oregon? What conclusions may we draw from his reports about cougars and deer in the following paragraphs? What sorts of general attitudes towards wildlife are reflected in this article? How have these attitudes changed in the present day?
  
3. Finally, read and discuss another *Evening Herald* article, published nine years later: [‘Fur Farming-A New Industry’, published February 24, 1917](#). As a lengthy preamble to its fur farming proposal, the story recounts the early history of fur trapping in Oregon, and examines game management rules and practices that were in place at the time of publication. What evidence of an emerging ‘conservation’ ethos is evident in the 1917 article?