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The Way We Were Improvising History at Rocky Mountain Rendezvous

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THE WAY WE WERE

IMPROVISING HISTORY AT ROCKY MOUNTAIN RENDEZVOUS

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ABSTRACT

Participants at today’s Rocky Mountain rendezvous dress in pre-1840 clothing and gather to camp in period shelters and engage in an assortment of history-based activities. These encampments, which last several days, evoke the Rocky Mountain rendezvous of fur traders and beaver trappers that occurred between the years 1825 and 1840. Rendezvousoers usually describe what they are doing as re-enactment of history. In this dissertation I argue that rendezvous are better described as theatre, as a special time and space in which actors impersonate characters while an audience watches. Through ethnographic study of four rendezvous and research of the popular journals surrounding the buckskinning culture, I examine how the playful improvisational theatre at rendezvous facilitates exploration of personal identity as part of a shared national American identity. This exploration may involve impersonating characters from pre-1840 American history, practicing traditional crafts such as blacksmithing or leather work, shooting period flintlock rifles, cooking meals over open fires, playing traditional music, and other activities. According to the rules of rendezvous, the theatrical “sets,” “costumes,” and “props” must be historically authentic, so the environment lends an aura of authenticity to its “plots,” even though these plots do not make any effort to reproduce specific historical events. The lived experience at rendezvous thus looks and feels like living in history, but is in fact improvisational theatrical play with historical symbols. This play can and does displace “factual” history and manufacture its own versions of the past. Because personal and national identities are closely linked to memory, and since a nation’s “memory” is its history, the improvisations at rendezvous quite literally change history. The degree to which such manufactured historical myths resemble verifiable academic history varies considerably among rendezvousoers, depending on the quality of the historical research done and the ability or willingness of the researcher to critically evaluate the data. Since historical myths work actively within a culture, defining possible identities and informing political action in the present day, this examination of how the American myths evoked at rendezvous are created, challenged, and affirmed at rendezvous has broad implications for other cultures and their mythologies.
INTRODUCTION

Mem'ries light the corners of my mind
Misty water-colored mem'ries of the way we were . . .

Mem'ries may be beautiful and yet
What's too painful to remember we simply choose to forget

- - - Marilyn K. Bergman

“Hear ye! hear ye!” the sign says. “You are entering the early 1800s.” The sign is hand written in chalk on a metal-framed blackboard. The “real” date is August 30, 2002. The scene is the Fort Bridger National Park in Fort Bridger, Wyoming. The town and the park are set in a river valley with mountains rising in the distance on all sides. A tiny brook runs through the park, with a few scraggly trees clinging to its edges. Along the brook, and along the winding walkways laid out throughout the park, are Plains Indian-style tipis, canvas box tents and marquee tents, simple lean-to shelters, and portable toilets. The people walking by are dressed in everything from buckskin shirts and legging to fringed leather dresses, loin cloths, calico dresses, Colonial-era weskits and breeches, and T shirts, shorts, and sports sandals. Posing beside a large bell festooned with American flags are people dressed like Ulysses S. Grant in Union uniform, Abraham Lincoln in beard and top hat, and George Armstrong Custer in red vest, string tie, and jacket. Beside them are a woman in a beaded Indian dress and a long-haired, bearded man dressed head to toe in leather and fur—the kind of fur with the animal’s head and legs still on. Several people ask and are granted permission to have their photographs taken with this odd assortment of personages. Some of the photographs, when they are printed, will show in the background some of the original buildings of the fort and also, in the far background, signage for gyro sandwiches, pita wraps, burgers, and Coca Cola.

What year are we in, here? What kind of a world is this, with Coke and Custer, tipis and toilets, and Spandex and skunk fur? Welcome to twenty-first-century rendezvous—a improvised whirl of anachronisms and history. Despite what the sign says, what “you” are entering here is not the “early 1800s” but an environmental theatre where characters from a wide range of historical eras can meet and interact. Theoretically the rendezvous is set in the times before 1840, but the majority of the people at this Fort Bridger rendezvous are visitors from the twenty-first century. Still others, like the persons posing near the bell, were alive in 1840 but came to fame (and came to look like their impersonators) much later in the century. Lincoln, Custer, and Grant were all born in the early 1800s (1809, 1839, and 1822, respectively). Lincoln served as President of the United States and was assassinated in 1865, Custer died famously in
his “last stand” in 1876, and Grant served as the Union General in the Civil War and also as President before he died in 1885. The Indian woman is dressed much like an Indian in 1840, but her people today would be more likely to dress in contemporary clothing. The bearded “mountain man,” a fur trapper who lived and worked in the Rocky mountains, is the only one of the group who really “belongs” only in the early 1800s.

The mountain man is also the character most closely associated with the historical rendezvous on which the gathering at Fort Bridger is based. The word “rendezvous” comes from the French rendez vous, meaning “present yourselves.” In English, according to Webster’s Ninth, the word means both “a place appointed for assembly or meeting” and the meeting itself (997). The Rocky Mountain fur trappers in the early 1800s worked in brigades of up to 20 or so men, who were sometimes part of larger groups associated with different fur companies. The brigades often broke up into pairs or trios who traveled and camped together as they laid their beaver traps and harvested the pelts. These groups would arrange to meet up with each other, to rendezvous, on a regular basis so they could compare notes on good places to trap, the location of the deer, buffalo, and other animals that served as their food, and the movements of the many Indian peoples who were also living in and traveling through the Rockies. A mountain man’s life was harsh and dangerous, and information about beaver, game, and friendly and hostile Indians was essential to his survival. So these rendezvous were important events.

Fort Bridger is located in the heart of historical beaver trapping country, and the grand scale of the countryside makes one marvel that people moving through such territory could ever find each other to rendezvous in the first place. The huge mountains, wide or sometimes torrential rivers, and rugged terrain made travel on foot or horseback difficult even in the warm-weather months when there was no snow. The beaver trappers worked mostly in the cold months, when the fur was the thickest on their prey, and so they camped in the snow and waded into icy rivers to set their traps. Their journals and other accounts indicate that trappers would meet up with each other by chance fairly frequently. Often such chance meetings saved the lives of injured trappers or those who had been robbed of their guns and other tools for survival (knives, tomahawks, blankets). But the prearranged rendezvous served as a way for the trapper brigades to keep in touch with each other, compare notes, and make plans.

The larger “general rendezvous” that serve as the models for the 2002 gathering at Fort Bridger occurred in the summertime, the off season for trapping and the easiest time for travel. The general rendezvous were set up as a place of trade between the trappers and representatives of fur companies based back east in the United States. The mountain men would load up horses with their pelts, gather their families (Indian wives and children and extended Indian families) if they had them, and head for a prearranged site chosen for its plentiful fodder for horses, game for people, and water for all. The traders, based in St. Louis, would pack in supplies such as new steel traps, guns, knives, ammunition, clothing, blankets, food (flour, corn, sugar, tea), and liquor. Local Indians soon learned of these events and came to trade furs and other goods. Still other local Indians came for more violent reasons. The participants at these historical rendezvous camped in a variety of shelters, from simple leather or canvas “tarps” to Plains Indian tipis and other Indian-style shelters to canvas box tents brought in by the traders. They ate meat from local game (deer, elk, buffalo, smaller animals) and vegetable foods gathered from the plants in the area, supplemented with the food from the traders. They spent their time trading, procuring and preparing food, caring for animals, getting dead drunk, fighting, competing in shooting and horseback riding competitions, singing and dancing, gambling, getting married or even trading wives, playing cards, gossiping, and telling tall tales. People
would leave the rendezvous for their own reasons; perhaps supplies were gone, game became scarce, family or tribal gatherings were planned, or it was just plain time to get back to the mountains.

Such, then, were the historical rendezvous: certainly the social events of the year and theatrical events in themselves. Today’s “re-enactments” of the rendezvous, like the one at Fort Bridger, are similarly social and theatrical. These latter-day rendezvous are not attempts to recreate the originals in a strict sense; that is, they are not like Revolutionary or Civil War battle re-enactments with their choreographed adherence to the specific events of history. Most people at today’s rendezvous do not play the roles of specific characters in history, nor do they try to arrange their camps like the originals or reenact remarkable events. Today’s rendezvous are also unlike controlled historical environments like Plimoth Plantation in Massachusetts and Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia, with their carefully researched settings, props, and characters. In my opinion, these so-called rendezvous re-enactments are more accurately called historical improvisations. They are based on a historical situation (rendezvous), set in sites that attempt to mimic the historical setting (rural encampments), use “props” that are historically authentic (shelters, cooking implements, guns), engage in “plots” that revisit general historical activities (trading, shooting competitions), and involve “characters” based on historical persons dressed in period-appropriate “costumes.” There are complex sets of rules that govern the settings, props, costumes, and plots at rendezvous, but these rules allow for extensive improvisation within a kind of 24-hour environmental theatre.

The subject of this study is the theatrical elements of rendezvous and how they frame the many meanings that participants and visitors take away from them. I have attended several rendezvous as a tourist and a re-enactor, and I have corresponded with and interviewed a variety of participants in various roles. I am interested in why people choose to attend these events, what they get out of it, what it feels like to “do” history in this way, and how rendezvous has affected the way they think about themselves in connection with American history. My experiences have led me to believe that rendezvous functions as a playful milieu for exploring the individual and collective (specifically national) identities of the participants. I will argue that they constitute a unique, reflexive, and self-conscious performance form in which the boundaries between “actors” and “audience” members are constantly shifting. During these improvised performances, the boundaries between history and myth are likewise blurred, leading to affirmation of some stories about the past and challenges to others.

What truths there are at rendezvous come from this theatricality, what Constantin Stanislavski has referred to as “truth transformed into a poetical equivalent by creative imagination” (160). In my view, participants at rendezvous are quite literally playing with poetical equivalents of historical “truth” and thereby playing with the possible meanings of American history and its implications for the United States and its citizens. That is, buckskinner are exploring the sources of what is now referred to as the dominant (national) ideology and what it means to be an individual American. I believe that approaching rendezvous as a theatrical event provides a theoretical framework and vocabulary that can enhance our understanding of this exploratory process.

The poetical equivalents that are active at rendezvous center around the character of the frontiersman and the geographical, cultural, and metaphorical frontiers in which he (and sometimes his family) lived. The historical rendezvous took place between 1825 and 1840. During this period in history the young United States was in the process of defining itself through internal political maneuverings and expansion into the “unexplored” territories to the
west. Thus, the geographical frontier, defined as territory just beyond the furthest edge of the lands settled and farmed by persons of European descent, pushed westward as the new nation grew. This westward push happened in fits and starts, through individual persons and families who set up housekeeping where land was “available,” but the overall effect of such settlements, and the sometimes bloody conflicts that accompanied them, was an increase in the settled lands and a steady decrease in the lands acknowledged by Euro-Americans as “Indian territory.” The geographical frontier was the place between the settled land and Indian country.

As a physical place, a borderline between territories dominated by different cultures, the geographical frontier was also a cultural frontier – characterized by both violent and peaceful encounters. Violent raids and out-and-out battles grew from territorial disputes, revenge on personal, familial, and tribal levels, and political alliances between different Indian tribes and between Indians and Europeans. In more peaceful situations, Americans, Englishmen, Frenchmen, Spaniards, and other Europeans mingled with Indians from dozens of different tribal traditions. The various cultures traded material goods, intermarried, performed dances and music for each other, engaged in athletic and other skills competitions, and feasted. On the cultural frontier, neither side was yet dominant, and some European frontiersmen adopted lifeways that were fully Indian or a blend of Indian and European traditions. Indians, also, embraced aspects of European lifeways. The frontiersman’s position between cultures, his hybrid persona, has been a matter of fascination for Americans and Europeans ever since Europeans first arrived on this continent.

National identity, expressed in the histories, narratives, art, and drama of the time, was very much in flux. American citizens of European descent were searching for a way to define themselves as “not-Europeans,” as some kind of unique people who “belonged” in their new home. One way to do this, as Henry Nash Smith and others have pointed out, was to push westward, away from the European influence that pervaded the eastern seaboard and toward a national identity that would somehow grow organically out of connection with the wild landscape. The dynamics of identity formation were complex and included justifications of slavery of imported Africans and extermination, “removal,” and attempted forced assimilation of the Native inhabitants. The aspect of identity formation that I examine in this dissertation is the chimeric frontiersman, a creature part European, part Indian, and part wild animal. In the early nineteenth century, the frontiersman was historically present in the likes of Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett and was also mythically present in tall tales told about these men and other, fictional characters. As a blend of the European and human and other creatures indigenous to the continent, the frontiersman was a natural national icon, a base upon which to build a unique national identity. As a chimera, and as a kind of transitional hero who pointed the way west but who eventually was either absorbed or eliminated by the European settlers who followed him, he also inspired ambiguous feelings. The myths surrounding the frontiersman are part of the context of rendezvous, as buckskinners embody various aspects of the myths in their day-to-day lives in camp.

As a site of improvisations on historical fact, the latter-day rendezvous involve characters based on frontiersmen and their families in a setting loosely based on the general rendezvous and eastern trade fairs that similarly brought merchants and far-flung customers together for trade. I will show that both characters and setting are interpreted in ways that vary significantly with regard to historical accuracy. Participants can pick and choose from historical data that range from primary documents and artifacts to secondary and tertiary representations in books and journals and at the rendezvous themselves. What emerges is a kind of popular history that may
or may not have any resemblance to the persons and events that are the ostensible models. The history carries a lot of power for rendezvousers because they develop the perception that they have lived through it in the “re-enactments” of rendezvous.

If reader response theory proclaims the death of the author, as Roland Barthes would have it, then perhaps there is a corresponding death of “factual” history in the face of popular historical myth (in its many artistic forms as well as less overtly artistic newscasts and written accounts) interpreted by individual persons. I contend that in many ways what I will call perceived history or historical myth, that is, beliefs about the past, has more ideological “power” than scholarly historical works have. This idea is, of course, nothing new in itself; it is easy for most Americans see the power of revisionist history in such countries as the former USSR and China. Revisionist history can have positive effects like bringing the stories of women, African Americans, Native Americans, and other under-represented groups into the collective awareness of the American people. But what is much harder to look at is how popular myths mask the sometimes brutal realities of the past and thereby color our perceptions of, for example, current issues like American domestic and foreign policy. Going back to the beginnings of the formulation of who is the American “Us” and who is “Them” can shed light on how we as a nation came to be what we are and may be able to sustain us through our current national concerns. As I write in early 2004, the United States is engaged in an escalating international war against “Terrorism” and in “homeland security” operations that have the potential to force (and enforce) rules about who gets to come into the country, how people move around the country, and who gets to become a citizen. The perceived national identity, challenged and strengthened by the attacks of September 11, 2001, is likely to be sorely tested in the next months and years as it becomes less clear who is “Us” (victims of the attacks) and who is “Them” (the perpetrators of terrorism).

On a more mundane level, this inquiry has been directed by my curiosity about why some people living in the twenty-first century seek to spend time experiencing (and improvising) this particular national myth. Why the mountain man? Why this particular era – near the beginning – of our national history? The answers to these questions are complex and interwoven with concerns about present-day collective and individual identity. The perception of the diverse tribes of indigenous peoples as a conflated Enemy was, in my opinion, a significant factor in American national development. The simultaneous perception of these same peoples as admirable, knowledgeable about survival, and having a legitimate claim to the land complicated the picture. The mountain men, who historically adopted many of the Native lifeways, married Indian women, and sometimes “went native” and abandoned their European heritage altogether, were both admired and distrusted because of their intimacy with these other cultures. A significant part of contemporary rendezvous involves the Indian aspects of mountain man life, and I wanted to find out what this engagement with Other-as-part-of-self means to individual re-enactors and to the rendezvous community.

As an improvised enactment of history, the mountain man rendezvous is a unique “stage” for reinvention of perceived history. Part of the culture of the rendezvous re-enactments is the requirement that serious participants “do the research,” that is, back up their rendezvous personae, their clothing and equipment, and even their interactions with serious inquiry into the material and cultural practices of the early 1800s. One must achieve the look of the era and act the part of the era. At the same time, no one is fooled into believing that the rendezvous sites and events are “real”; everywhere there are signs of the artifice of theatre, the coexistence of the early 2000s with the “stage time” of the rendezvous.
Literature Review

Most writing about rendezvous comes from the community itself. There are books, journals, and websites established and maintained by various buckskinning groups, and for the most part their purpose is to introduce beginners to rendezvous, disseminate historical information, delineate membership rules of the sponsoring organization, advertise encampments, display photographs, and describe buckskinner’s experiences. Most of the writing is neither academic nor analytical. Some writers do address the subject of the purpose of rendezvous and buckskinning, but I have found no comprehensive analysis. Since there is no general overview in the popular literature, I will simply cite many of these references throughout this dissertation as they shed light on my topic.

Academic analyses of rendezvous and other living history sites come from the fields of American history, American Studies, museum studies, education, and consumer theory. In this section I outline their main arguments and set forth the general line of my challenges to some of their points.

Stringfellow

Wayne Stringfellow’s 1995 dissertation, The Development of the Buckskinning Movement as a Recreational Activity, is from the Department of Education at East Texas State University. Stringfellow outlines the development of buckskinning from its roots in competitive shooting events to its more social forms of today. He frames rendezvous as recreational events, but the focus of his work is on tracing rendezvous history rather than analyzing what makes the events recreational. He does not address the connection of rendezvous with history at all. I agree that rendezvous are a form of recreation for many participants, but my inquiry also looks at the variety of other or additional reasons why people do rendezvous. That is, this dissertation does not particularly argue with Stringfellow but does follow some of the threads of his work in new directions. I have relied extensively on Stringfellow’s historical fact finding for my brief overview of rendezvous history in chapter 2.

Belk and Costa

Russell Belk and Janeen Arnold Costa make much of rendezvous as a site of consumption. Their article, “The Mountain Man Myth: A Contemporary Consuming Fantasy,” was published in the Journal of Consumer Research in 1998. They have interpreted contemporary rendezvous as “fantasy consumption enclaves” (219) in which a “constructed (alternative) reality” is created by participants via “interpretations of, and emphasis on, a mythic past” (220). They define the “dominant mythology” surrounding mountain men as “that of rugged, raucous, masculine individualism among a community of kindred spirits” (221). This “mythologization” of mountain men dates back from visual images (drawings and paintings) and verbal accounts that appeared while the mountain men were still alive and continues through representations of mountain men in movies and television series (220-1). Mythologization of mountain men is closely tied to mythologization of the Indians among whom they lived, and Belk and Costa are correct in noting that the “accentuation of things Indian” at latter-day rendezvous is significant (223). They describe rendezvous as a process of establishing community through shared symbolic objects, establishment of the fantasy enclaves (the encampments themselves), and participation in “rituals” and activities, all designed to facilitate a “quest for self-transformation” (236).
The rules of authenticity at rendezvous prescribe the objects (equipment, tools, clothing, etc.) that are acceptable in camp. These become shared symbols, which Belk and Costa describe as “recreated icons that put believers in touch with the numinous” (230). They then criticize latter-day mountain men for being unable to “escape the consumption ideology of a consumer culture” and go on to state that “[i]dentity, in a rendezvous context, still depends on what one has and owns” (230). Belk and Costa interpret the accumulation of “additional acquisitions” as a “sacrament celebrating their serious leisure activity” (231). Material objects come to acquire a shared meaning within a community that is actually quite diverse with regard to belief systems (231).

The most significant of these shared symbols is the rendezvous setting itself, which, according to Belk and Costa, becomes a “hallowed” time and space that is set apart from everyday reality. They describe a Western National Rendezvous opening ceremony that has Lakota spiritual elements such as burning sage and acknowledging the Four Directions (218). The purpose of these ceremonies, and even more “secular” opening events, is to set rendezvous apart as a place where things are different, where the everyday rules of life in our times do not apply. Continuing with their spiritual interpretation, Belk and Costa note that “the highest status belongs to re-enactors with specific historic knowledge and skills,” among them shooting, craftsmanship, campcraft, storytelling, drinking, and survival skills (231). They refer to this historical knowledge as “ritual knowledge needed to sustain rendezvous re-enactments” (232).

Their descriptions of events at rendezvous are peppered with spiritual/religious terms like “ritual” and “sacred” and “sacrament,” and they compare rendezvous to rituals of transformation (234-5). They also mention, all too briefly in my opinion, the aspects of play that pervade rendezvous (234). Belk and Costa emphasize the material consumption at rendezvous and see it as a failure of some effort to become a classless society with a cashless economy. They conclude that rendezvous and the “mountain man movement” are “best understood as a quest for self-transformation in a socially constructed alternative reality” (236).

There is much about Belk and Costa’s article that I have found useful in my own analysis of rendezvous. I agree with their assessment of rendezvous as an alternative reality that is socially constructed. I also like what they say about playfulness, and I explore this play element more fully in chapter 2. Here, I want to challenge the comparisons to ritual and the claims that buckskinner are seeking transformational experience. I also want to argue with the idea that anyone at rendezvous thinks of the community as truly classless or without economic motivations.

When Belk and Costa categorize the modern mountain man movement as a quest for self-transformation, they do not define “self-transformation,” an expression that I find troublesome over-use has rendered it almost meaningless. Participation in rendezvous can significantly change a person’s outlook, but I do not think that such a change is a transformation. Belk and Costa cite anthropologist Victor Turner in their analysis. Turner’s work has been integrated into theatre studies through his collaborations with director and performance theorist Richard Schechner. Of particular interest for Turner and Schechner is the idea of rites of passage within a culture. During major transitional times in life, for example, the passage from childhood to adulthood, many cultures have rituals that honor and facilitate the passage. Rites of passage have three phases: separation from society, a transitional experience, and reincorporation into the society in the new role (Turner, From Ritual 24). During the transitional experience, young persons are transformed from children to adults. Schechner has applied the rite-of-passage
model to theatrical performance, which entails audience and actors coming together for an
together and then returning to the community.

Rendezvous are certainly situations, like theatrical performances, in which a group comes
together to share an experience and then individuals return to their daily lives. What I am
questioning here is the nature of the transitional experience at rendezvous. Schechner makes a
useful distinction between transformations, in which performers are permanently changed in
some way, and transportations, in which performers ultimately return to their starting point
(Between Theater 125). Several transportations can, according to Schechner, result in a
transformation (127). A true rite of passage, as defined by Turner, would involve a
transformation of some kind, a “passage” from one identity to another. A transportation would
be more like a visit to another identity followed by a return. I would say that what happens at
rendezvous is more like transportation than transformation.

The distinction between transporation and transformation is related to Turner’s concepts
of liminoid and liminal. Liminality refers to the transition stage in a rite of passage; the person is
neither what he or she was before nor what he or she will become after the transition. In this
liminal state, the person’s identity is completely fluid. A concrete metaphor for this would be the
state of a cocoon in which the erstwhile caterpillar is essentially formless on the way to
reconstructing as a butterfly or moth. The metamorphosis of a butterfly is completely different
from the gradual physical development of a horse or a human being from birth to adulthood,
which does not involve disintegration of form in between distinctly different phases. Belk and
Costa acknowledge that rendezvous encampments are liminoid, rather than liminal, but then they
use the language of the liminal (“sacred,” “sacrament,” “ritual,” and so forth) to describe it and
claim from it a result (“self-transformation”) that requires liminality. Such blurring of liminal
and liminoid, which conflates two very different things, the spiritual and the secular, is grossly
misleading. I agree with Belk and Costa that rendezvous are liminoid phenomena, and therefore
I argue that the use of liminal language to describe it is inappropriate. I argue in throughout this
dissertation that the work on the self at rendezvous constitutes affirmation and/or exploration of
identity, rather than any kind of transformation of self.

I agree with Belk and Costa and with Hubbell in their observations that rendezvous is a
consumer culture with many fantasy elements. However, I would like to challenge some of the
judgements behind their interpretations. First of all, a rendezvous, by definition and historical
precedent, is a venue for trade of material goods, so it is not surprising that the people there focus
on material goods. Also, to fault Americans for being materialistic is to throw stones in a glass
house; there are few of us, of any race or ethnic group, who truly escape the consumerism that
pervades our country. I am not convinced by Belk and Costa’s assertion that participating in
rendezvous is an effort to escape consumerism itself. Latter-day buckskinners certainly
consume, and the fact that their choices about what to consume are at variance with the dominant
culture does not change their basic orientation as consumers. I find it more useful to look not at
the consumption itself but at its purpose and effect.

Finally, in challenge to Belk and Costa, I agree with them that rendezvous can be framed
as a fantasy community but I disagree with their tacit assumption that because it is a fantasy
environment the experiences within it are false. Belk and Costa are not the only writers to make
this assumption, and I will argue with it in detail throughout this dissertation. I will simply say
here that I see rendezvous as a theatrical event in which the proverbial magical “as if” creates
imaginary circumstances in which truthful experiences can and do occur.
David Hubbell’s 1995 Master’s Thesis in American Studies, *Sites of Simulation: Re-Creating Rendezvous in Mountain Man Living History*, examines how politics and power relations operate at rendezvous (11). He correctly notes that the versions of history present at rendezvous are popular history, untainted by academic concerns about history. Such free play can potentially destabilize hegemonic historical metanarratives, according to Hubbell (7), but living history tends to “hermetically seal off the past from the present” and thereby de-politicize history (10). Other writers, cited below, have similarly noted that living history tends to mask the complex political struggles of the time portrayed. Specifically, Hubbell states that the enactments of mountain men at rendezvous are tied to and reassert “the myth of the individual,” which he claims is tied to cultural myths that mask discrimination and oppression (13-4).

Hubbell’s main point is his characterization of rendezvous as a site of “consumption of experience” (14). This experience is consumed via production and consumption of symbolic commodities sold by the traders (86). He claims that participants are searching for authenticity of experience (9) but end up consuming a commodified “idea” of rendezvous (16). He notes that re-enactment is three-dimensional but “takes on a two-dimensionality through its rhetoric of surfaces” (79). As an example of the rhetoric of surfaces, Hubbell goes into detail about the display of items for sale alongside items that are placed in the traders’ tents for decorative purposes (86). That is, it is hard to tell what is for sale and what is not. Another aspect of the rhetoric of surfaces, for Hubbell, is the hazard of a breakdown of the illusion of living in history. He points out the many anachronisms for the sake of comfort, even referring to some areas as “back stage” (55), and concludes that such breaks in the illusion spoil it and render it superficial (two-dimensional). Similarly, he views a shift from acting in the first person (being a persona, doing history) to acting in the third person (talking about one’s persona as separate from the self, telling about history) as a break in the illusion (115). He notes that, “For trader’s row and the rendezvous in general there is a constant threat of the festival de-evolving into a kitsch carnival” and that the rules about maintaining historical authenticity are “one way to manage this tendency” (111).

According to Hubbell, today’s would-be mountain men are searching for authenticity (9) but end up “buying” an “idea” of rendezvous that is nothing but a simulated commodity (16). In other words, for Hubbell, rendezvous are experience for sale (120). Persons who “consume” rendezvous, then, are deluding themselves into perceiving as real an experience that is by nature false. By embodying the mountain man “historical Other,” buckskinner, are, according to Hubbell, commodifying and consuming him (120). Hubbell refers to participation in mountain man skills events such as shooting contests as “active consumption” of this historical Other (137). To me, this concept of active consumption seems oxymoronic. Consumption is often defined as the opposite of production; considering that definition, “active consumption” sounds a lot like production to me. Hubbell’s focus on simulation is accurate in that he notes the many anachronisms at rendezvous, but I do challenge his assumption that because the environment is fake the experiences within it are also false or inauthentic. It is here that theoretical frameworks from theatre can be useful. Theatre practitioners understand that willing suspension of disbelief is not the same as belief and that it is possible to live truthfully under imaginary circumstances. Everybody agrees to act “as if,” and everyone is aware of the truths that can be found in illusions. The double consciousness is one thing that theatre does better than anything else does;
as Greg Dening puts it, theatre is the "living through’ something, plus the reflectiveness that makes sense of it” (83). Theatre, then, is a unique way of thinking about something, of reflecting on it. The very double consciousness that some critics of tourism (and of rendezvous) consider a flaw can, in fact, provide authentic experiences within an inauthentic or (in the case of rendezvous) an imperfectly authentic environment.

Hubbell is also critical of adoption of historical persona. He notes that when he dressed in period clothing for the first time he felt suddenly transformed from an outsider to an insider (23), only to find out later that his underwear, which was more visible than he had thought, marked him as a beginner (24). He describes a class on how to decide on a rendezvous persona. The instructor suggested that his students start out with a general historical type and then flesh that type out into an individual person (63). Hubbell seems to have ignored the fleshing out part and is critical of playing types because it simplifies the actual historical models into two-dimensional beings that seem easy to imitate (64). The historical mountain man then becomes “commodified into an historical Other that can be assumed with relative ease” (120), a “generalized historical persona which is defined by its very reproducibility” (126). Thus, he concludes, the historical Other at rendezvous is “highly managed and commodified” (127).

Thus, in Hubbell’s terms, rendezvouers use their bodies as “tool[s] in the consumption of the mountain man other” (121). They do so in a simulated space that provides an experience for sale, an experience of “leaving your temporal reality to transgress borders into a make-believe world” (120). Re-enactors “sink into the simulated environment” via use of material culture reproductions (123). Living in camp, wearing clothes that feel different from everyday wear, and using the different muscles and motor skills necessary for making material neo-artifacts “provide a sense of being the historical mountain man through re-enacting various skills” (122). He categorizes such re-enactment as active consumption of the historical Other (137). Here again, he is labeling what a productive activity, enactment and even creation of material neo-artifacts, as consumption.

For Hubbell, the “re-created past…has been generalized to the extent where there no longer is an ‘original,’ only copies referring to other copies” (126). Rendezvous are thus simulacra that have long since lost connection with any kind of real historical past. This sense of simulated space is enhanced by what Hubbell calls a “continuous cycle of self-documentation” (taking photos of selves and friends, writing about experiences in the journals) (130). Latter-day rendezvous thus become as much about previous latter-day rendezvous as about the historical events in the 1800s. For Hubbell, this loss of (or tenuous) connection to the original referent, the historical rendezvous, creates a false experience for buckskinner who think that they are really re-creating history.

There is much to Hubbell’s observations that I appreciate, and much about his analysis that I disagree with. I agree with his comments about the de-politicization of history, of rendezvous as an exercise in political nostalgia. Hubbell does not follow through on his statement that rendezvous have potential to destabilize the historical myths; indeed, his argument seems to be that rendezvous affirm such myths rather than question them. I will show in chapter 5 how mythic destabilization can and does happen at rendezvous. As I noted above, Hubbell specifically refers to the myth of the individual that is so precious to American political consciousness. His logic is in line with some structural and poststructural materialist theories that view people as constructed entirely by their cultural milieu. According to this theoretical framework, any subjective sense of a self that can make independent choices is false because all possible choices are framed by the person’s social system. I will question some aspects of these
theories in chapter 3, but I will also show how historical myths work as framing systems that can, indeed, limit choices.

I will challenge throughout this dissertation the categorization of rendezvous as simple consumption of commodified experience. First of all, commodification implies some kind of packaging of the experience into sellable units that are predictable and reproducible. To be sure, there are rules for rendezvous, rules for everything from sites to equipment to competitions, but no two rendezvous are the same. Nor is the rendezvous at a permanent site the same from year to year. And within any given rendezvous encampment participants have lots of choices about what to do all day, what level of historical authenticity to achieve, and whether or not to enact a persona, among other things. To me, commodification of experience for consumption renders the consumer passive; she or he must “buy” the whole package, like a ride through the Old West at a theme park. I do think that many casual day visitors to a rendezvous are consuming the experience, buying a ticket so that they can walk into the site (dressed in costume or not). And some campers go just for the fun of it, enjoying the look and feel of the encampment and the goods for sale in the traders’ tents. But, as I will show, people do rendezvous for many different reasons. Rendezvous, as theatrical environments for improvisation, are set up to accommodate just this wide array of reasons for being there. Some of these reasons involve much more production than consumption.

In my opinion, the breaks in illusion of living in historical time are simply a part of the whole event. Portable toilets are necessary because historical authenticity in that area would drive campers off the site within days and invite unpleasant encounters with public health agencies. Rendezvousers can tolerate such anachronisms without feeling a rupture in the whole experience. In theatre history terms, Hubbell is like a Richard Wagner attending a Bertolt Brecht production. For a Wagner, dedicated to total illusionism in a dramatic production, Brecht ruined theatre by shattering its illusions. For a Brecht, Wagner’s work invited abandonment of reality. A rendezvous encampment is much like a Brechtian set, and its actors are often commenting on themselves as they perform in a Brechtian manner.

Hubbell is critical of buckskinner who adopt personae that are two-dimensional types, rather than real persons, because the enacting the types is easy and leads to simplified assumptions about the historical models. There are many buckskinner who do this, and I agree with Hubbell that such practices can foster romantic notions about the mountain men and their lives. But there are also buckskinner who go into great detail about establishing their characters as complex human beings. There are also plenty who dress like a type without enacting a persona at all. For those who do not act in character, buckskinning activities are all about revisiting historical experience by physically imitating, say, the actual path of a historical trek or simply living off the land while traveling on foot or horseback. Hubbell mentions one such trekker, “Ed,” who comments that people are who are attracted to living like the old fur trappers do not realize just how harsh their life was (27). Hubbell seems to consider “Ed” an anomaly among consumers, but making generalizations about rendezvous without considering its many “Eds” leads to mistaken conclusions. My own analysis of rendezvous does take into account the fact that not everyone does rendezvous for the same reasons or in the same way.

Hubbell is not alone in being critical of the apparent deceptions at rendezvous, like a camera concealed in a leather bag or Styrofoam coolers encased in rustic wooden crates (67-8). He seems scornful of the fact that re-enactors drink mass-produced liquor or beer but put it in period containers: “it was not about what you drank, but the drinking vessels you used” (72). The more hard core among rendezvousers similarly see such anachronisms as signs of
degeneration of rendezvous. For the most part, however, buckskinners adapt to the exigencies of sanitation that require at least portable toilets and coolers. Beyond that, there is considerable controversy about what is allowed in the “primitive” camps that limit equipment and technologies to those used before 1840. At one extreme, committed amateur historians like members of primitive survivalist groups/ meticulously keep to the rules of historical authenticity and imitate as exactly as possible the daily lives, including food preparation and storage, of the historical mountain men. One could go through their campsites and inside their tents and find few anachronisms. At the other extreme, there are campers who keep to the rules just enough to be allowed to stay in the primitive camp. They may keep their tent flaps closed to hide an array of non-period items from sleeping bags to canned foods. I will discuss these extremes, and the many attitudes in between, throughout this dissertation.

I also argue with Hubbell’s assessment of buckskinners as self-conscious, as cultures studying themselves. Some certainly do pay great attention to what they and others are doing with regard to enacting history or practicing traditional culture, but many others do not. Hubbell is correct in noting that for many rendezvous are simulacra that represent themselves (the present) at least as much, if not more, than they represent the past. He and others see this as a fault, in that buckskinners are fooling themselves into thinking they are living in the past. My contention is that nobody is fooled, that re-enactors are really actors who are in a double consciousness that includes stage reality and real-life reality. Rendezvous, in my opinion, are more about today than they are about the 1800s.

Handler and Saxton

Richard Handler and William Saxton’s 1988 article in Cultural Anthropology, “Dyssimulation: Reflexivity, Narrative, and the Quest for Authenticity in ‘Living History,’” makes a similar assertion that “living history,” which includes rendezvous but also other forms of re-enactment, is a “genuine aspect of present-day culture” (243). They claim that living historians experience their everyday lives as “inauthentic, hence alienating,” and are seeking authenticity via re-enactment. They note that the concern for authenticity at re-enactment events has as much to do with faithfulness to today’s culture as to the past (243).

Handler and Saxton are writing mostly about living historians who work at living history museums or who reenact battles and military posts or encampments, but many of their comments also apply to buckskinning. They see the concern for historical authenticity as an effort to re-create the past, not symbolize it (243). The problem with such efforts, according to Handler and Saxton, is that re-creating the past is impossible (244). It may be possible to recreate material culture, but it is difficult to truly re-create the subjective experience of persons in the past. We cannot avoid projecting our own values into the experience (245).

Handler and Saxton see an inherent contradiction between wanting to experience the past (understand the historical other) and having magic moments that seem real (authentic experiences of the person in the present day) (247). They define authentic experience as self-realization, which includes self-integration (a sense of being a unified self, rather than fragmented) and self-transparency (the inclination and ability to look honestly at the self) (248). Inauthenticity, by contrast, is perception of the self as a collection of roles and conventions (249). In formulating these definitions, they rely on the German philosopher Martin Heidegger’s definitions of inauthenticity as “forfeiture of individuation to the instrumental canons and social conventions of the public domain” (249) and authenticity as integration of one’s life into an “integrated, singular configuration of meaning” “imprints the signature of authorship on a life
understood as a work-in-progress” (250). Handler and Saxton go on to suggest that “Living historians share with other moderns the notion that an authentic life is a storied or emplotted life” (250) and that living historians do living history in order to “gain access to lives and experiences characterized by the wholeness that historical narratives can provide” (251).

Handler and Saxton see this effort to live a storied life as “doomed to failure” because real historical people did not see their own lives as coherent stories. Therefore, attempts to recreate their experience fail because re-enactors are being reflexive while doing something that was originally not reflexive (251). The process of re-enactment itself is a reflexive one (involves double consciousness of self acting) and thus “dissolves the ideal of authenticity as unself-conscious autobiography into studied protocol” (253). Handler and Saxton therefore categorize living history as an exercise in what they call “dyssimulation” (253). As an example of this they cite interviews with Civil War re-enactors who told them that while the “battle” is going on their commanders are telling them what to do and when to “die” (255). Invention of what is not written into an enactment can become disruptive of the process. (If a Confederate soldier refuses to “die” and continues to fight he is going against the script and changing “history.”)

Handler and Saxton also discuss what they call “magic moments” in which living historians feel total identification with the historical Other (256). They note, and I agree with them, that these experiences are actually the opposite of total identification with the past; they are instead instances of living in the moment, completely in the present. I discuss such magic moments in chapter 2.

The biggest difference between rendezvous and events like battle re-enactments, with regard to Handler and Saxton’s work, is that at rendezvous improvisation and modification of historical story are part of the game. I will argue against the idea that all buckskinner are searching for identity. What goes on at rendezvous is all about identity, but some people are “searching” more than others are. Most of what happens at rendezvous confirms and celebrates previously held ideas about identity; there are also some persons for whom rendezvous does become a way to explore and expand identity. I do agree with Handler and Saxton’s idea that many living historians are searching for a story to be a part of. I see this as not only a personal identity issue but also a collective (national) identity concern. I will categorize these stories as historical myths, for which I have adopted Richard Slotkin’s definition as “stories, drawn from history, that have acquired through usage over many generations a symbolizing function that is central to the cultural functioning of the society that produces them” (Fatal Environment 16).

This symbolizing function, according to Slotkin, assigns meaning to past events and creates (and limits) possible roles to be “played” in similar events in the present. For the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century, our historical myths inform our actions as a world power. I will discuss historical myth in detail in chapter 4, because believe that latter-day rendezvous encampments are sites of entry into and potential modification of historical myth. Slotkin asserts that the way to temporize the power of myth over our thinking is to demystify the myth itself, and the way to demystify it is to expose the way the myth has been created (or, in the case of the rendezvous re-enactments, how it continues to be created). This dissertation is an exercise in just such demystification. Historical myths are closely related to ideologies, and therefore popular historical myths both shape and are shaped by the so-called dominant ideology.

**Leon and Piatt**

Warren Leon and Margaret Piatt’s chapter on living history museums in History Museums in the United States: A Critical Assessment makes two points that I consider important
for my discussion. First, they note that living history museums downplay social dysfunction and ignore power relationships that were a part of “real” history (69). Such glossing over of conflicts is motivated not just by a desire to romanticize history; much of what is presented at living history museums is defined by what tourists want to see. Leon and Piatt note one attempt by Colonial Williamsburg to duplicate a slave auction; the idea was criticized because it had the potential to re-open old wounds by appearing to glamorize such events. Too much realism, in this case, is not safe for re-enactors (a convincing whipping is not easy to stage) and also limits the roles that African-American re-enactors can play (75). The content of much of the living history presentations that are open to the public is thus shaped by the public. This pandering to public taste can lead to distortions of historical accuracy. The interaction between accurate historical representation and what the public wants is also active at rendezvous. Since the events are non-scripted, and there is no controlling agency that assigns roles and trains the actors, distortions of history are rampant.

Jay Anderson

Jay Anderson, like Leon and Piatt, writes mostly about re-enactment of formal events like battles or the interpretation of history within restored villages like Colonial Williamsburg, in Virginia. In particular, he makes the point that “each unit [living history group] makes its own covenant with historical truth and determines the way it will carry on its dialogue with the past” (191). I like both the idea of a covenant with truth and the framing of living history as a dialogue. Anderson says that the living history community may be independent of academic history but it is self-critical (191). The degree of self-criticism varies considerably at rendezvous, as I will show, and the covenants with historical truth are likewise variable. Anderson also makes the very important point that living history tends to reject a linear view of the past in its focus on everyday life (192). Even as rendezvous engages with historical story, it disrupts the story by framing its world in terms of the everyday activities of the past.

Approaches to Rendezvous

My own first experience with latter-day rendezvous was the 1998 Southeastern Rendezvous in Monticello, Florida. I happened to go only because I live less than 10 miles away from the site. My husband, Greg, had taken his father to a rendezvous at the same site two years earlier, and their descriptions of events had piqued my curiosity. I could not believe that grown-ups did this kind of thing, and I wanted to see it for myself. Greg was happy to go along with me.

The setting was a plantation in rural north Florida. This part of the state, one of its best kept secrets, consists of gently rolling terrain covered with thick woodlands alternating with open grassy fields. North Florida is cattle and cotton country, and it is gorgeous. The camp was situated so that the trading tents were on the edge of a field, in the sun, and the campsite was in the high shade of a mature woodland. We had to park about a half mile from the actual rendezvous, and we walked in. We were greeted at the “gate,” a small tent, by two women in caped cloth jackets with fringe all along the edges of both cape and jacket. They had on sunbonnets and long skirts.

We paid our fee and walked on to the “trader’s row” of about 40 or so box tents (canvas structures shaped like houses), marquee tents (more elaborate canvas “houses,” sometimes with rounded ends), Plains Indian tipis, and variations on lean-tos with canvas triangles or rectangles supported by poles and tied with ropes to pegs in the ground. Some trading sites consisted
simply of a blanket on the ground with goods (beads, knives, tomahawks, etc.) placed on the blanket. The contents of the tents were a marvel. On display were “trade beads” (like those used by early explorers to trade with Indians and other peoples all over the world), tanned animal skins with and without fur (and with and without legs, head, and tail), a huge variety of necessaries for black powder shooting, bows and arrows, handmade clothing of cloth and leather in period and contemporary styles, moccasins, Indian-style drums, feathers, handmade tomahawks and knives, tin and cast iron cookware, wrought iron goods, candles and candle lamps, simple wooden furniture, tents, food, sewing supplies, and many other items. All goods were displayed without plastic or commercial cardboard or paper containers. The displays themselves were sometimes very clever constructions of wood, iron, fabric, and hemp rope.

The rendezvous seemed to me to be a combination between a craft fair and a museum. And then there was the theatrical element. Also on “display” were a variety of people moving about dressed in the manner of Euro-Americans and Indians of the nineteenth century. One tall, long-haired young man was pulling a clumsy-looking wooden-wheeled wagon full of firewood. He dropped the handles of the cart and wiped his brow, declaring, “I am plumb tuckered out!” in an accent not quite southern, not quite Apalachian. His companions teased him about his weakness, and the three of them carried on a conversation that seemed to me to be a kind of theatrical improvisation. All used odd variations of what seemed like a made-up accent, and their “performance” was clearly an effort at role playing in the historical characters indicated by their rural period clothing (simple shirts, button-front trousers and suspenders, moccasins or bare feet). Some of the traders, similarly, seemed to act a role as they described and traded their goods. Others were simply dressed in historical costume but “acted” in their contemporary manner, inviting customers to visit their websites to order additional goods not on display. Many of the historically costumed people walking through the trading tents were campers living on the site for the week-long rendezvous. Some of them seemed to be playing a character, and others were clearly not. Some were dressed as historical Euro-Americans, and some wore Indian-style clothing that exposed sunburned white skin.

Greg and I walked on past the trader’s tents toward the camping area and started to chat with a knife maker whose wares were spread out on a blanket on the edge of the camp. We were interrupted by a polite but firm “mountain man,” dressed in fringed buckskin shirt and leggings, who told us that tourists were not allowed to go into the primitive camping area. I later learned that he was a “dog soldier,” a volunteer from the sponsoring organization whose job was to keep order at the rendezvous. One of the rules of this Southeastern Rendezvous was that the period camp was off limits for persons dressed as Greg and I were, in twentieth-century style.

I was enthralled. As we walked back through the trader’s row, talking with vendors and others as we moved along, I was amazed to confirm that grown-ups did, indeed, do this sort of thing, and they brought their children along. They all seemed to enjoy it tremendously. And, marvel of marvels, my husband, who is grudgingly tolerant of my interests in theatre and acting, seemed interested in getting involved, as well. This first visit to a rendezvous planted the seed for what would become my dissertation project four years later. I have always been interested in untrained actors who do community theatre, the therapeutic possibilities of acting and theatre games (I have a Master’s degree in Expressive Therapies), and the power of the dramatic “as if” in our daily lives. I saw rendezvous as a rather unique performance form with potential for influencing the lives of its practitioners outside of the encampments themselves.

As I approached writing about rendezvous, I found myself faced with a number of choices about how to study these phenomena. Several theoretical frameworks, and their
attendant methodologies, could be used for such a study. With my academic background in performance studies and expressive therapies, I wanted to apply theories from these disciplines, but I was also aware that I was entering other possible academic fields in this study. Theoretical approaches from ethnography, anthropology, psychology, and history could be a part of the research. The challenge, for me, was to find a research method or methods that would increase my understanding of what rendezvous are and what happens there. Umberto Eco tells us that the purpose of theory is to “give us back an old object illuminated by a new light in order to realize that only from that point of view the object can be really understood” (109). I am not sure how attainable “really understanding” is, but I do think that different illuminations, different theoretical frames, can define the kind of understanding that can be achieved. That is, how you define the subject and frame the questions about it will determine what you can know about the subject. As I was pondering approaches, I stumbled upon a children’s book, of all things, that seemed to reflect and illustrate my process.

In this book, *What Is Mr. Winkle?*, author and photographer Lara Jo Regan approaches and answers her question visually. Her subject, the titular Mr. Winkle, is a small mammal of indeterminate species. He is posed adorably if not always convincingly as a stuffed animal, a “hamster with a perm,” a “laboratory creation,” a “cat in a dog suit,” and a bedroom slipper, among other things. I, for one, would not seriously challenge Regan’s ultimate assertion that Mr. Winkle is, in fact, “the cutest dog in the universe.” This delightful book can be found in the children’s section in bookstores. However, much of its rather sophisticated visual humor would be lost on most children of picture-book age. Similarly, most young “readers” would miss what I see as both an example and a critique of heuristic process. The book begins with the question of the title, and it poses a series of possible answers in question form (each with an accompanying photograph): “A ghost?,” “A hungry lion?,” “A devil?,” and so on. What I consider to be the critique comes from the obvious “framing” of the photos. Mr. Winkle is dressed, accessorized, and placed and lit in “sets” in such a way as to bias an observer’s perceptions in the direction of the question that serves as caption for a given photograph. For the “A devil?” photo, Mr. Winkle sports little horns, is lit from below in red, and is posed in a cylinder decorated with a translucent flame motif. For the “A stuffed animal?” photo, Mr. Winkle is placed in a basket along with several small stuffed animals in colors similar to that of his fur. One of Mr. Winkle’s distinguishing features is that his tongue is always hanging out, and for this photo Regan has attached felt tongues to all of the stuffed animals so that they look more like him. In context of a children’s book, such contrived framing of the “data” comes across as playful silliness, but in other contexts such manipulation of information can have more serious consequences.

With these images in mind, I began my phenomenological search. The question for me was, “What is rendezvous?” Is it a culture, suitable for ethnographic or anthropological study? Is it a tourist destination, to be approached with sociological theory? Is it psychotherapy? Is it history, subject to historiographic critique? Is it theatre, or some similar performance form? Or is it all of these, requiring application or even creation of interdisciplinary approaches? I went down a lot of dead ends in the heuristic process of answering these questions, and I will not recount them here, but I would like to review the overall outline of this process here. I found some useful research tools in each of these subject areas.

**Ethnographic Theory**

When I began my research, I thought of myself as an ethnographer studying the culture of rendezvous. Other writers discussed above framed their research as ethnographic in nature, and
such an approach seemed obviously appropriate to me. On the surface, the rendezvous community looks like a culture: people dress a certain way, live a certain way, do things that are different from what most Americans do in their daily lives, and even have a certain language of their own. The project of ethnography or anthropology is to determine what a culture means to itself, and that is certainly what I was planning to do with this dissertation. The work of anthropologist Edward Bruner on how a culture imposes meaning on experience was particularly useful for my analysis of rendezvous as cultural expression in chapters 2 and 3.

I found that ethnographic methodology was helpful in terms of examining the relationship between “field worker” and “informants.” Like others who have studied rendezvous, I found that it was easy to disappear into the community simply by wearing appropriate clothing. It was obvious to some that I was a beginner, but newcomers are welcomed into the community. My research questions were not out of place in this setting; any beginner would want to know about the same things that I was interested in. The relationship between ethnographer and subject, then, is unusually close at a rendezvous. For the most part, ethnographers are usually studying cultures quite different from their own, and even after extended sojourns in their subject communities they remain essentially outsiders. It is usually difficult for an ethnographer, as an outsider, to enter into the “imaginative universe” in which the culture under study operates (Geertz, Interpretation 13). As an “instant insider” at rendezvous, with as much interest in American history as the buckskinners had, it seemed to me that by the very act of dressing in period clothing I was entering into the imaginative universe. Such entry into the rendezvous world brings with it some degree of bias, in my case a bias that tends to look favorably on the events at rendezvous because I am among the cultural “heirs” of the historical groups represented there. I have done my best to remain as objective as I can be, but I know I cannot step completely outside of my culture.

One problem with using an ethnographic approach to studying the rendezvous community as a culture is that it is not a monoculture with a common lifeway, religion, and world view. Although buckskinners live the rendezvous life while an event is going on, they leave that life and return to very different “home” lives. Even at rendezvous, as I will show, different campers enter into the “primitive life” to different degrees. There is certainly no agreement among rendezvousers on religion or even on what rendezvous is and should be. Any generalization about buckskinners is going to necessarily disregard individuals who are exceptions to the generalization. As I have put together this dissertation, I have done my best to take into account the diversity within this “culture” of buckskinners and to define some of the parameters that create this diversity. Some useful theoretical frameworks and terminology come from the fields of sociology and psychology.

**Sociological Theory**

Sociological theories related to tourism are pertinent to the examination of rendezvous because they offer data and insights into why people travel, for pleasure, to destinations sometimes very far away from home. Tourism is most usefully defined by John Urry as a leisure activity that involves a move to, and temporary stay in, one or more destinations for the purpose of pleasure (132). Tourism is always a temporary state; if people travel somewhere and stay, they are no longer simply touring. Tourists travel for pleasure. The main purpose of the journey is not social (visiting family or attending a wedding), related to business or career (travel to a performance venue or conference), or religious (a pilgrimage to a place sacred to one’s religion). Nor is the travel imposed from without, as in situations where refugees are fleeing from political
events (like wars or ethnic violence) or natural disasters (like earthquakes) or seeking economic opportunities (like many immigrants to the United States). Tourists are looking for something that is different from daily life.

Today’s rendezvous certainly share many features of Urry’s tourist experience: buckskinner travel to the rendezvous site in anticipation of pleasure in experiences outside the realm of everyday life. The tourism framework gets a little confusing because, in my descriptions of rendezvous, I have distinguished tourists, defined as those persons present at rendezvous who are not in period clothing, from buckskinner participants who are in costume. However, it is possible to frame both groups as tourists, in the sense that they all go to the destination, the rendezvous site, in search of a specific experience. What, exactly, that experience is is a matter of debate among theorists of tourism.

At one extreme of the debate is Daniel Boorstin, who bemoans the loss of the “art of travel” around the beginning of the twentieth century (77-117). Travel, once uncomfortable, expensive, and even dangerous, was part of a European aristocrat’s education both academically and socially. It required considerable planning, investment of time and money, personal risk, and active participation on the part of the traveler (84). The transition from traveler to tourist, according to Boorstin, involved a shift from active participation to passive consumption; foreign travel changed from an “undertaking” to a commodity (85). Tourist demands for a “lifetime of adventure in two weeks” and “all the thrills of risking [one’s] life without any real risk at all” has led to packaging of adventures and thrills that meet these demands (80). Tourists, then, according to Boorstin, have literally created tourist destinations and the “pseudo-events” that occur there. American tourists hold high expectations of life in general and travel in particular, and they will pay well for experiences that meet these expectations (4-6). Boorstin’s overall thesis is that American tourists live inauthentic daily lives and so they prefer these pseudo-events over authentic experience.

At the other extreme of the authenticity debate is Dean MacCannell, who sees “the tourist,” conceived as a middle-class (male) sightseer, as a model for “modern-man-in-general” (1). The tourist goes to a sight/site, according to MacConnell, in a search for what he calls an authentic experience (94). This is in contradiction to Daniel Boorstin’s claim that tourists not only accept pseudo-events (and thereby have pseudo-experiences) but prefer them to authentic experiences. MacConnell defines authenticity as the opposite of the “discontinuity of modernity”; that is, authentic experience occurs when the “fragments” of modernity are incorporated into a “unified experience” (13). By this definition, tourists perceive their own lives as inauthentic (fragmented) and are seeking authentic experiences that give them a sense of wholeness.

Richard Handler and William Saxton are much more helpful in defining authenticity. They also make a useful differentiation between historical authenticity and authenticity of experience. They define historical authenticity as “isomorphism between a living-history activity or event, and that piece of the past it is meant to re-create” (242). Historical authenticity, then, involves a surface resemblance between an artifact and its reproduction, between a battle and its re-enactment, and between a historical village and its present-day model. Authenticity of experience, while it may be facilitated by historical authenticity, is quite another beast. Handler and Saxton apply Martin Heidegger’s definitions for inauthenticity as a kind of dissolution of the individual into its social constructions and authenticity as the integration of one’s life events and social roles into an “integrated, singular configuration of meaning” (250). An authentic life, according to Handler and Saxton, “imprints the signature of authorship on a life understood as a
work-in-progress” (250). An authentic life, then, is a “storied” or “emplotted” life, a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end. This definition seems to fit in with MacConnell’s understanding of the quest for authenticity as a way of unifying fragmented experience.

Edward Bruner challenges the assumption that tourists are looking for authenticity. He cites data showing that most tourists are not alienated and are in fact satisfied with their own culture (240). According to Bruner, tourists do not want outright fakes but are “quite content with a theatrical suspension of disbelief” (240). John Urry, likewise, argues against the search-for-authenticity theories and notes that what he calls “post-tourists” actually enjoy the inauthenticity and sometimes make a game of it (11).

With perhaps the most cogent voice in this debate, Erik Cohen suggests that thinking in terms of “the tourist,” that is, formulating theories around the idea that all tourists are touring for the same reason, is unproductive. He proposes a set of five “modes” of touristic experience, ranging from those who travel for recreation to those who are seeking a new cultural “home” for themselves because they do not identify with their culture of origin (180-190). I like the idea of tourists traveling for different reasons, and in chapter 5 I discuss my own categories of rendezvousers based on different motivations for travel to rendezvous.

**Psychological Theory**

Such concerns about what tourists are looking for moves the academic discipline from sociology into psychology. I will argue in chapter 3 that rendezvous is a milieu for affirmation or exploration of personal identity. My own orientation in psychology comes from my training (Master’s degree) and work in expressive therapies. This field, in its turn, developed out of a fusion between arts education and humanistic psychology.4 The humanistic school of psychology, which developed alongside and as a reaction to Freudian theories,5 is generally associated with the work of Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers. The main point of differentiation between Freudian and humanistic thought is what motivates people. The humanists think that human development is not just motivated by fulfilling deficiency needs like sexual gratification or the desire for social acceptance and love. Certainly these needs are motivating factors, but they are not the only ones, according to the humanists. They posit some kind of force-from-within, a “drive” that is not instinctual or animalistic but uniquely human, that pushes people toward growth. According to this line of thought, we are not, as Freud would have it, dragged kicking and screaming through the developmental stages of childhood. On the contrary, a healthy child is eager to grow and achieve new things and take on the “tasks” of adolescence and adulthood. In fact, growth does not stop, as it does with Freud, at sexual maturity; the urge-to-grow motivates people throughout life, although the arenas of growth tend to change with the different phases of life.

The source of this urge-to-grow has been a subject of debate among psychologists,6 but I will not enter into this debate here. I mention the urge-to-grow because much of what has been written about rendezvous analyzes the situation in terms of fulfillment of deficiency needs – for example, a touristic search for authenticity in an inauthentic life, a variation on the American urge to accumulation of material goods, or a return to the good old days of unabashed white male dominance. These factors are operational in some cases, but in others rendezvous provide an arena for personal growth on all levels. The main point that I want to make here is that human beings can act from both deficit needs (that is, something missing that can come only from outside of the person) and growth needs (something within needs to find expression on the
outside). The needs that people bring to rendezvous inform what they do while they are there and what they take away from it.

**Historical Theory**

Since rendezvous are a form of what has been called “living history,” analysis of rendezvous begs inclusion of history-based theory. I discuss historiography in detail in chapter 4, and apply it to rendezvous in chapters 4 and 5, and so I will not discuss it at length here. I will argue throughout this dissertation that rendezvous are about history, and that they use symbols of history and even sometimes feel like re-living history, but that they in effect invent history through theatrical improvisation. I should note here that the history I am discussing here is post-contact history in what is now the United States. When I discuss American national identity, I am referring to an identity that is distinctly American; that is, it is distinguishable from its English and other European antecedents and involves some absorption of Native traditions. American identity and history are linked closely to each other, and I will elaborate on that idea in chapters 3 and 4. American identity has always been complex and is by its very nature always incomplete. The past and continuing influx of diverse peoples (and the current hysteria surrounding Islamic terrorism) makes for a constantly changing concept of what it means to be an American. When I use “American” throughout, I am usually referring to those who supposedly represent the dominant ideology: men and women of European or Euro-American descent who may have some Indian or other ancestry but who perceive themselves as culturally American. I have already noted that I count myself as part of this group.

**Performance Theory**

My main theoretical perspective, course, is that of performance studies. I will argue throughout that the enactment – performance – of “history” at rendezvous connects the disciplines of psychology, sociology, anthropology, and history. In chapter 2 I argue that rendezvous is a unique form of improvisational theatre. Analyzing rendezvous in theatrical terms has three advantages. First, it re-frames “fantasy enclaves” as theatrical “as if” environments and therefore allows me to distinguish between literal belief and willing suspension of disbelief. Second, it re-frames anachronisms as purposefully theatrical elements that remind one and all that rendezvous are performances, not real life. Third, analysis in theatrical terms re-frames “re-enacting” as acting, with its attendant reflexive double consciousness. Thus, theatrical theory gives me a language in which to describe rendezvous as conscious performances that comprise what I argue is a playful and creative way to think about personal identity and community and national history via manipulation of shared history-based symbols.

**Research Methods**

I began my research by reading histories and as many journals from the time period as I could find. Then I attended several rendezvous. I felt that it was important to experience rendezvous from the perspective of a tourist outsider and as a re-enactor. My perceptions of the different rendezvous I attended was certainly colored by the role I was playing. I felt a kind of triple consciousness: I was at the same time an actor, an observer and recorder of my own activities and responses, and an observer and recorder of what others were doing. I made no secret of the fact that I was gathering information for a dissertation, but neither did I move about with pad, pencil, and tape recorder or ask formal survey questions. I simply went around the rendezvous asking questions and experimenting with living in camp myself. I neither
emphasized nor hid the fact that I was writing a dissertation about rendezvous and that my
correspondence with the people I met was part of the research. I was quite surprised to find that
nobody was particularly curious about what I was going to say about rendezvous. I also put an
author query in two buckskinning publications, *The Tomahawk and Long Rifle* and *Muzzle
Blasts*, in which case I represented myself as an author intending to write about rendezvous and
asked permission to quote them by name (either real name or persona name). I received several
lengthy and thoughtful responses, some via email and some written longhand in letters.

2002 Fort Bridger Rendezvous

For my first rendezvous as a researcher, I chose the Fort Bridger Rendezvous in Ft.
Bridger, Wyoming. I had read some history and the published journals of several trappers, and I
wanted to attend a rendezvous held close to the sites of the historical events and near the rivers
where the mountain men trapped their beavers. I had read that the Fort Bridger Rendezvous was
huge, attracting some 10,000 visitors each year, and that one feature of this particular rendezvous
was “classes” in various aspects of buckskinning such as choosing a persona, making clothing
and accoutrements, and cooking. There were, in fact, no formal classes, but the rendezvous
proved to be an important learning experience and a good place to start. My husband and I
attended as tourists, in order to experience the “audience” perspective on the theatrical elements
of a rendezvous. This time, we attended three days of the four-day event, and I took a lot of
notes as we went. We also toured the area, visiting the rivers and one historic rendezvous site
and taking in the Museum of the Mountain Man in Pinedale, Wyoming.

The Fort Bridger Rendezvous was, as advertised, huge. In contrast to the simple one-
street trader’s row at the 1998 Southeastern Rendezvous, there was a network of trails in and
around the buildings of the original fort with over a hundred trading tents of all sizes and shapes.
I was dressed in jeans and T shirt and so had to pay an entry fee, but other visitors who made an
effort to dress in period costume could waive the fee. The rules for what passed as “period”
seemed to be fairly casual: women could wear a long skirt, a long-sleeved or even sleeveless
camisole top (anything besides a T shirt seemed to suffice), and moccasins or simple moccasin-
like shoes, and men could wear a fabric or buckskin shirt over brown- or tan-colored trousers,
again with moccasin-like shoes. These outfits were hardly historically accurate, but the arbiters
of costume deemed them sufficiently non-twenty-first-century to at least qualify their wearers for
a free day at rendezvous. Their clothing also enabled them to stay at the rendezvous site past
7:30 p.m., the official closing time for tourists.

The rendezvous was set up inside Fort Bridger State Park, the site of a trading post built
by mountain man James “Jim” Bridger in 1843. Bridger operated the post, which was a stop
along the Oregon Trail, for several years. It was bought by Mormons in the 1850s and later
became a military outpost (Fort Bridger Rendezvous Association). The extant buildings include
quarters for military officers, a general store, a barn and stable area, an ice house, and other
buildings. More recent constructions include a large gazebo (which served as the center for
community gatherings and performances), a small museum containing some fur trade artifacts
and a gift shop, and a building containing showers and rest rooms. The trading tents were
situated closest to the entry gate. The primitive camping area was right next to the trading tents,
and visitors (even those not in period costume) were invited to walk freely among both the trade
tents and the camps (and reminded that these camps were private homes and should be respected
as such). Thus, the Fort Bridger Rendezvous was a more open site than the Southeastern, with
its restrictions on where tourists could go.
Within the primitive camp was a special area designated for demonstrations by two national buckskinning groups, the American Mountain Men and the American Longrifle Association (ALRA). Visitors could watch both men and woman working on their crafts. A buckskin-clad woman named Jill was braiding and sewing with porcupine quills and had a meal of stew brewing in a cow stomach suspended on a stick tripod. She heated stones in a fire and added them to the stew to cook it as the Indians did in the days before metal cooking pots were brought in by white traders. A trapper named Bruce demonstrated beaver trapping techniques. (He even offered a whiff of castoreum, the scent from glands near the base of a beaver’s tail. This scent, used to bait the traps, smells strong but not unpleasant.) Another mountain man named Bill “Yaro” Keith gave my husband and me a tour of the site and pointed out the period riding and pack saddles used on the primitive horseback outings of the AMM. Yet another buckskinner had a table full of books of the paintings and drawings used by the AMM as primary sources for details on clothing and accessories. Still others had handmade guns, scrimshaw powder horns, and other items spread out on blankets for trade or sale. (The price often depends on what the buyer is wearing; period dress will lower the price, and it is always worth haggling on a cash price.) All of these people were very knowledgeable about their wares or the tools they were using, and yet every one noted that she or he knew little and was always learning about history. I was struck by both the intensity of the fascination with history and the acknowledgement that there is always more to learn.

NLRA member “Doc Mark” Rutledge had buckskinner and tourists (including at least one very interested present-day doctor) crowding his large marquee tent as he expounded on the medical theories of the eighteenth century and described the use of the period medical tools in his extensive collection. Rutledge has no medical training in his current lifetime, but his knowledge of the period techniques is encyclopedic. His clinical, graphic descriptions of amputations, cranial surgery, and such practices as blistering and bleeding were both fascinating and revolting. And I, for one, was made aware for the first time that George Washington was bled to death by well-meaning doctors who thought that the human body contained more blood than it actually holds.

The shooting ranges for guns and bows, and the targets for knife and tomahawk throwing, were located at a distance from the camping and trading activities. Also at some distance was a “tin tipi” camp where people could set up high-tech tents, RVs, and an assortment of other modern camps. Tin tipi campers could put on period clothing and then walk into the primitive area.

The trading tents contained a wide variety of goods much like those at the 1998 Southeastern Rendezvous. I was particularly struck by the piles of leather hides and furs. (I was amused to overhear one buckskinner complaining that this rendezvous was “a big fur fair.” It seems to me that one could also describe the historical rendezvous as just that.) One could buy fur, claws, and bones from coyotes, bobcats, rabbits, skunks, raccoons, deer, elk, black bears, and grizzly bears. I even saw one alligator skull, which seemed rather far from home. Also on sale were hand-crafted flintlock rifles and pistols, accessories such as powder horns and “possibles bags” (leather satchels, worn attached to a belt or over the shoulder, for carrying small items and extra ammunition), and the tools to go with them. There was lots of clothing for sale, for would-be “mountain men,” “Indians,” and “eastern men and women.” Many of the trade tents sold items for use at rendezvous: wrought iron cooking implements, folding chairs and tables, wooden crates designed to hide coolers from view, candle lanterns, water containers, blankets, and so forth. All of the vendors were friendly and happy to talk about their crafts, life at
rendezvous, and black powder shooting. Many of them travel from rendezvous to rendezvous and make a reasonable living as traders. Some also have retail stores and/or mail order businesses with websites.

Organized activities at the Fort Bridger Rendezvous included performances by Native American dancers and singers, a Scottish drum-and-bagpipe band, and a group of Celtic musicians. There were also informal impromptu performances and jams throughout the rendezvous site. There were competitions in shooting (guns and bows), throwing (knives, tomahawks, frying pans), cooking in a Dutch oven (a covered cast iron pan that can be used to bake bread, pies, etc.), and costumes. The main formal social events were historical lectures by Brigham Young University professor Fred Gowans, a real wedding, a “buckskinner’s ball” with live music, and a church service on Sunday morning. (I will be discussing these activities in detail in throughout this dissertation.) All visitors were welcome to attend any of these activities (except the ones after 7:30 p.m., which were limited to persons in period dress).

The visitors were of all ages and of several racial and ethnic groups, including American and Mexican Indians, Asians, African-Americans, and Euro-Americans. The participants in the encampment and trading activities were mostly Euro-Americans, with some buckskinners who looked to be of Indian or Euro-Indian mixed-race descent. The only African-American “re-enactor” I saw was a drummer, dressed in full Scottish regalia with kilt, tam, and argyles, in the bagpipe band. The atmosphere at the Fort Bridger Rendezvous was friendly and welcoming. I have since learned that buckskinners as a group seem to be eager to talk about what they do and to help beginners join in the fun. It is easy to start a conversation with just about anyone you encounter at a rendezvous.

2003 Alafia River Rendezvous

The next step in my research was to go underground and attend as a re-enactor. In this instance, all that is required is to look the part, so I began researching period clothing. I sewed a skirt, shift (an undergarment that serves as a blouse and continues on under the skirt), and bodice for myself and a shirt and “hunting frock” (fringed jacket) for Greg. I decided to sew all clothing by hand, out of materials as authentic as I could find (this meant linen for almost everything). The process of making the clothing is a part of the whole rendezvous lifeway. I felt a tremendous sense of connection with women over many generations as I put together our clothing. (I also admit to wimping out and purchasing Greg’s drop-front button-fly trousers, rather than making them. We also bought moccasins.) The rendezvous we planned to attend was in Homeland, Florida, south of Tampa, and so even though the event was in January we figured the weather would be fairly warm. As the time approached, however, we realized that it might well get very cold, so at the last minute I made Greg a capote (a hooded coat made from a woolen trade blanket) and myself a full-length woolen cape with a hood. We were glad to have these, as the weather went well below freezing every night.

We camped near the site, this time, in the “tin tipi” area, so we could use camping gear that we already had. We found ourselves nestled among mostly RVs and sometimes elaborate trailer campers. The rendezvous site was a short walk away, through some pretty pine woods and over a simple wooden bridge across a small brook. The Florida Frontiersmen, a local subsidiary of the NMLRA and sponsors for the Alafia River Rendezvous, had recently bought the property on which the rendezvous took place. It was, of course, flat terrain like all of south Florida, and especially at night the lights from nearby towns and passing cars were clearly visible. A busy highway right next to the site provided an ongoing background hum that was
distinctly anachronistic. An odd site, perhaps, for a convention of mountain men. The primitive encampment was laid out in regular wide “streets” marked out (at the beginning of the rendezvous) with stakes and string. It was treeless except for one large live oak at the end of the main avenue. The trading tents tended to be near the center of the site, and the non-trade camps were scattered along the edges. There were several tipis located near the newly planted “arbor” of cedar trees, a permanent “horse camp” with corrals and simple pole barns for horses and equipment (the dog soldiers at this rendezvous patrolled on horseback and were most impressive), and, off to one side along the path to the tin tipi area, a small group of shelters in the Creek Indian style. Among the traders’ tents were several tents offering food and (non-alcoholic) drink. Near the entrance was a “general store” offering simple food items, some dishes, and $3.00 showers.

The lack of mountains, and the distance from the Rocky Mountains in particular, seemed to influence the “characters” who were present. This was my first hint that rendezvous held in the eastern United States tend to be different from those in the west. There were “mountain men” and “plains Indians” at Alafia, but there were also many people dressed in “eastern” clothing either from the frontier (hunting frocks and homespun) or from the city (weskits and knee britches on the men, European-style soled shoes or boots, brocade and silk on the women). In addition, some people wore kilts and tartan in the Scots tradition, and the men camped in the “Creek” shelters wore clothing appropriate to that tribe. The encampment lasted for ten days, including two weekends, and the public (i.e., those in twenty-first-century clothing) was only allowed in to the site on the second weekend. This made for a different feel to the event during the first week.

Scheduled events at Alafia included Scottish highland games, musical performances mostly in the Celtic and bluegrass styles, shooting and throwing competitions, school for the children, a highly theatrical kangaroo court (which I describe in chapter 3), and an assortment of formal and informal workshops. The array of trading tents reflected the more eastern “origins” of the participants: there were fewer furs and more bolts of fabric, one tent sold Colonial-era leather shoes, and other traders dealt in woolen yarn, more cloth than leather clothing, and camp equipment like lanterns, furniture, and blankets. There were also plenty of supplies for black powder shooting, including the guns themselves, and other mountain man paraphernalia such as longbows, knives, and tomahawks.

Here, again, the vast majority of campers were of Euro-American descent, mixed in with a few Euro-Indians. Most of those dressed as Indians were male, with a few exceptions. I did not stay for the “tourist” weekend of this rendezvous, so I did not see the racial/ethnic mix of the visitors. The cultural tone of this rendezvous was much more European than that of the Fort Bridger Rendezvous, with most of the formal events centered around Celtic and Euro-American musical and cultural traditions. The one big exception was the opening ceremony for the rendezvous, which was clearly influenced by Plains Indian culture: the leader of the ceremony was dressed in beaded buckskins, burned white sage in the Plains tradition, offered the smoke to the Four Directions, and even spoke some Lakota as part of the ceremony. The circular cedar arbor in which the ceremony was held was modeled after the Lakota Sun Dance sites. Mixed in with the Lakota elements were very European acknowledgements of those who had helped with the planning of events and preparation of the site and a final whoop of “Let’s Rendezvous!” as the ceremony ended.

My own experience of this Alafia rendezvous seemed fragmented as Greg and I would walk back and forth between the primitive site and our nylon tent among the RVs. Early one
morning, as I lay in my sleeping bag listening to the RV generators cranking up, I decided that for our next rendezvous we would have to live among the primitive campers. I began to plot grant applications to help with the purchase of the necessary equipment.

2003 Tallahassee Colonial Trade Faire

One local event took place shortly before the next rendezvous, and I mention it here because it shows how rendezvous get blended in with similar historical “re-enactments.” The 2003 Colonial Trade Faire in Tallahassee, Florida, was a relatively small event, with some 15 trade tents and maybe 20 camps. Many of the campers and traders had also been present at the Alafia River rendezvous, and we would see them again at the Southeastern Rendezvous in Alabama. The setting was a beautiful pond in a field surrounded by a thinly wooded quail plantation. This Trade Faire was mainly geared toward education of the public. One woman demonstrated the retting and spinning of flax into linen thread; a very relaxed “Indian” (he would not tell me whether or not he was actually enrolled in a tribe) had on display an assortment of Indian “artifacts” and explained their use, a blacksmith was hammering on iron, a soap maker was boiling up her wares, and one bewigged Colonial “judge” threatened humorously to lock wayward children up in the stock and pillory in front of his tent. (The teachers accompanying one group of schoolchildren had some suggestions as to who might be appropriate for such disciplinary action.) Many of those camped on site were members of the local buckskinning group, the Jefferson Longrifles; they are all Euro-American or Euro-Indian, and their personae, for the most part, reflect their ethnic/racial backgrounds. The visitors, who were nearby residents and schoolchildren, reflected the ethnic/racial mix (white, Hispanic, African-American, Indian, Asian and mixed races) of the Florida Big Bend area.

2003 Southeastern Rendezvous

My preparation for primitive camping at the 2003 Southeastern Rendezvous in Troy, Alabama, involved still more research and the acquisition of a tent and simple equipment for cooking. I discuss the rules for period camping in detail in Chapter 2, but the general idea is that your shelter, and everything that shows outside of it, needs to be “period appropriate.” As long as the tent flaps are closed, what is inside (“backstage”) is nobody’s concern. Thus, we could sleep under a down comforter on an inflatable mattress and keep perishables in a cooler inside the tent, but our cooking utensils, lantern, and outdoor seating needed to look right. We had bought some simple wooden seats, a wrought iron cooking set, and a tin lantern at Alafia, and we already had some cast iron pans and appropriate utensils. With a little help from a research grant from the Council of Graduate Students at Florida State University, we purchased a simple box tent. So, with the addition of a change of shirt for Greg and a change of shift and a woolen shawl for me, we figured we were set to “go primitive.” We were ready for everything except rain. At the last minute we bought four yards of oiled canvas; I cut it in half, so we could each have a piece if things got wet.

The 2003 Southeastern Rendezvous was sponsored by the same regional branch of the NMLRA that sponsored the 1998 rendezvous in Monticello, Florida, that had been my original encounter with buckskinning. The setting was a hilly field with trees surrounding it and a pond on one edge. The intrusions of local light and traffic were much less obvious than they had been at Alafia. You could see the ranch home of the landowner from the rendezvous site, and the lume from Troy in the night sky, but for the most part the sights and sounds of the twenty-first century were absent. Campers were allowed one hour to drive a vehicle in to the site and unload.
We then had to park the truck, set up, and get into period clothing as soon as possible. We drove in the one-lane farm road from the parking area to the rendezvous, picking up a pair of buckskinnners who had just parked their own vehicle after unloading. They told us that we could just pick any place to camp, so we drove around the site along the “roads” laid out with stakes and string until we found a fairly flat spot with not too many fire ant nests.

It was windy and spitting rain as we began to unload, so we rather hilariously erected the tent, put our gear in it, waited out the rain, put the gear back outside, put down the ground cloth, and moved everything back in. As best I could, I muffled the sound of the electric pump for the air mattress, fearing that at any minute a dog soldier would burst into the tent and bust me for the non-period noise. I needn’t have worried; the tolerance for anachronism at this rendezvous was relatively high, and we even managed to drive our truck back in to haul a load of firewood up the hill to our campsite. Greg and I had set up the tent once at home, for practice, and we managed to get the thing up and fairly square. As we struggled with the fly that would serve as a kind of “porch” in front of the tent itself, a kindly neighbor, “Mississippi Jim” May, offered his assistance. We were to find that our fellow campers were most willing to offer help and advice about camps and equipment. All seemed to understand that beginners have to start somewhere, and they shared some tales about their own first efforts as they proudly showed us their “period” solutions to the challenges of living at rendezvous. Most had learned how to make themselves very comfortable in all kinds of weather.

“Going primitive” proved to be a good choice for my research process. We were able to stay full time in the site, and we thus learned that the daily activities of rendezvous are a big part of both the experience and the attraction of rendezvous. As outside visitors, we had spent most of our time at formal events or among the trading tents. Here, we made friends with neighbors and I was able to find out a lot about how they experienced rendezvous, what got them started in buckskinning, and what kept them coming back. Preparing meals over the fire and tending our camp gave me hands-on experience and insight that I could not have gained otherwise. As a beginning camper, I did not have to feign interest in the setups of other camps, and people were most willing to take us into their tents and show us details of their equipment. It was then easy to start a conversation about primitive camping, enactment of history, and persona.

There were, of course, structured events at this rendezvous as well. The opening ceremony here was much less formal than that at Alafia, with no Indian elements. Mark “Gritter” Griffin, who was in charge of the rendezvous, was new to buckskinning; he had been approached by the local club because his property was an ideal site for an encampment. After the local club and those who had prepared the site and set up the rendezvous were acknowledged and applauded, there followed an amusing “ceremony.” Gritter, dressed originally in jeans and Western shirt, disappeared as he was surrounded by a group of local buckskinners. Items of his clothing were thrown out of this huddle, and then Gritter emerged dressed head to toe in brand new buckskins. He was then promptly rolled on the ground to properly dirty up this new outfit, and the rendezvous began.

Entertainments included bluegrass music at one of the food tents one night and informal music jams throughout the camp on other nights. During the days I walked through the trading tents and visited campsites. One woman offered a workshop on Swedish embroidery. There were simple Scottish highland games for men, women, and children. I had hoped to watch some of the shooting competitions at this rendezvous. I did watch some practice at the area set up for knife and tomahawk throwing, but on the day that the official competitions were to start it began to rain heavily. Keeping one’s powder dry (essential for successful ignition; wet powder quickly
loses its “bang”) in a downpour is truly a challenge, and some shooters were out on the range even in the deluge, but the competitions were delayed.

The Troy rendezvous, like the previous Southeastern rendezvous, had an official policy of keeping tourists out of the primitive camping area. The rules at Troy seemed a little more relaxed, though, as I saw some people in twenty-first-century clothes walking by our tent. In some cases, the clothing anachronisms were simply a part of setting up a new camp as people kept arriving through the week. New arrivals would unload and set up as quickly as possible, and would usually change into period clothing after their tent was up. The hooters and the spigot set up for camp water were set out in the open, and trucks drove through camp sometimes rather late in the morning to sell ice and collect trash. The local tourists visiting the rendezvous seemed to dribble in a carload or two at a time. I made no official survey of race or ethnicity, but all of the tourists looked to be of Euro-American descent. They would shop and eat at the trader tents and chat with the “residents.” Many were interested in getting involved in buckskinning, some were black powder shooters looking for supplies and ammunition, and others were simply local folks who were curious about this unusual event unfolding in their midst. This was the first rendezvous in the Troy area, and it had not been heavily advertised as a tourist destination.

The heavy rain started on the morning of the fourth day and continued unabated through the fifth day, when I had to leave to get back to classes at FSU. Our little squares of oiled canvas kept the rain off our heads if we ventured outside, but everything else got soaked. My moccasins were quickly saturated, so I went barefoot where I could. I also learned that farm women in the nineteenth century and earlier wore their skirts short enough so they would not pick up too much moisture from the grass. I had only one skirt, and it was plenty long to pick up the moisture from the grass, so I just stayed wet for the last two days. The rain slowed down all activities at the rendezvous, including shopping at the trading tents and some of the evening gatherings. Most people just “stayed home” in their tents. I had read that, during Lewis and Clark’s journey, the corps of discovery spent some days simply drying out their equipment before moving on after wet weather (or accidental soaking in a river). I could truly appreciate that process after we packed up a soaking wet tent, took it home, and spread it (and all our other gear) out to dry on the next sunny day.

**Chapter Overview**

I began my research with historical research, and so this dissertation begins, in chapter 1, with a review of some of the historical events that are behind the rendezvous re-enactments. I consulted published journals written by mountain men and their contemporaries and secondary historical works about the Rocky Mountain fur trade era. I read buckskinning publications, many of which include well-researched articles on historical events and material artifacts. Chapter 1 takes the form of a story, a form necessitated by the fact that it is a written text. I have shaped my story so that it explains how the lifeway of the Rocky Mountain trappers was different from that of previous fur trappers. The fur trade east of the Mississippi River, which began even before European settlement and continued as it was even as some trappers pushed westward, was centered around trading posts to which trappers would bring their furs for trade. In the Rockies, traders would bring the trade goods to the trappers, to be exchanged at the rendezvous. The rendezvous allowed the trappers to live year round in beaver country, which was also, at the time, Indian country. The trappers thus lived in a world part European and part Indian, a life very different from those of their contemporaries back east in the cities. I include
in chapter 1 some of the trappers’ comments about their lives and the effects of what they were doing on their environment.

In chapter 2 I argue that today’s rendezvous enactments are theatre – a unique performance form that takes the environment and the received stories from history and improvises with it. Even though most buckskinner do not think of what they are doing as acting or performance, I show how dressing in period clothing, using period tools, living in period dwellings, and engaging in activities that closely imitate those of historical persons can all be defined as theatrical performance. I take for my definition of theatre a situation in which A (an actor) impersonates B (a character) while C (an audience member) looks on. Theatre, in my definition, takes place in a special place and during a special time set aside for this activity. As theatre, latter-day rendezvous can further be defined as improvisations. They are governed by rules of historical authenticity that require period sets, props, and costumes but set few limits on the action that can occur within the period environment. Rendezvouers are thus free to play within the historical environment, and they do just that. I define play and its purposes and provide examples of playful enactment at rendezvous.

Both the environment at rendezvous and the toys within it are agreed upon by the buckskinning community as symbols of various aspects of the Euro-American past. I argue in chapter 3 that buckskinner are playing with these symbols as part of a process of exploring identity on personal and collective levels. I begin with a definition of the self as a collection of memories: we are what we remember. What we remember depends not just on what we live through – what happens to us – but the way we represent what we lived through to ourselves as individuals and as communities. What we remember is not, in fact, the past itself but stories and images about that past. We shape the meaning of our past as we shape the stories and images. When we go to act out these stories and images, which is what happens at a rendezvous, we can and do change the stories and images. We are thus changing memory itself, and the meanings attached to it. In chapter 3 I discuss memory and show how it is explored at rendezvous.

Chapter 4 extends the argument in chapter 3 to include national memory, also known as history. I discuss at length some of the arguments that surround the study and interpretation of historical evidence among professional historians, and then I contrast such academic study with popular perceptions of history. For most non-historians, perceived history is a combination of scattered facts and many historical myths that have been handed down the generations or that appear on television and movie screens. Latter-day rendezvous are concerned with early American history, and the activities there strongly affect how buckskinner think about the American past and about themselves as Americans. The experience of “living history” provides a strong subjective sense of knowing about it, and I discuss the dynamics of this at rendezvous.

In chapter 5 I go into more detail about just what happens when buckskinner encounter historical evidence that contradicts their beliefs about the American past. The rendezvouers who attend mostly for social reasons tend to avoid such contradictions altogether by taking as “history” the representations of it that appear at rendezvous. Buckskinner who go beyond the social and become interested in the history behind period firearms, traditional craftsmanship, and embodiment of persona do come into contact with primary historical evidence. The degree to which they can “see” contradictions between the evidence and their own belief system depends on the extent to which personal and collective historical myths shape how they think. In some cases, contradictory evidence seems “invisible”; I will show how this invisibility plays itself out particularly with regard to Native Americans. In other cases the contradictory evidence can correct misperceptions and change the historical mythos. I give examples of this, also. “Re-
enactment,” because it is so personally convincing and because it is lived in real time, tends to break up historical grand narratives that compress time for the convenience of a good story. Buckskinners, then, are in a position to see history from a unique perspective.

In my conclusion I reminisce about all of this and discuss just why this fairly obscure community of white guys (and a few women) with guns is significant to the larger American population. Buckskinners are effective teachers of history because they make it real, make it accessible to the many Americans who managed to get through high school without learning much about our past. Buckskinners are also conservators of traditional craftsmanship and lifeways. The rendezvous community, diverse as it is, is thus an affirmation and celebration of Euro-American identity and a way to pass cultural literacy on to future generations. The Euro-American “voice” in our history has traditionally been the loudest, and has been challenged in recent years by other groups seeking to tell their own stories. These other stories do need to be heard, but I also think that losing touch entirely with the Eurocentric point of view would be a mistake. The rendezvous community can become part of an ongoing dialog about what our country is and what it means to be an American citizen. Finally, this dissertation, as an exercise in exposing the workings of historical mythology, may have something to say about other historical mythologies: how they are formed, how they perpetuate themselves, and how they can be modified.

1 There is, of course, grave danger in the idea of privileging belief over evidence indicating that a belief is incorrect. One need look no further than people who insist, for example, that the Jewish Holocaust of World War II never occurred. Barthes, among others, has noted that there is a difference between ignoring physical evidence of past events and interpreting the events through the lens of one’s own belief system. A less extreme example of the “death of history” might be the popular perception of England’s King Richard III that is based on William Shakespeare’s play rather than on available physical evidence suggesting that Richard III was an admirable king.

2 This is no mere intellectual exercise. For example, the myths of the frontier tend to cast progressive Euro-Americans as engaged in a war against the evils of the primitive barbarism personified by Indians. I think that the metaphors and ideologies embedded in these myths shape our current “national” attitude toward the barbarism now personified by “terrorists.” Implicit in the myth is the idea that the only possible response to a terrorist attack is extreme violence.

3 I use the terms “ethnology” and (cultural) “anthropology” interchangeably, and I realize that I risk offending scholars in these fields, who seem to differ in their distinctions between the two. When discussing more than one writer at a time, I am in danger of getting mired in these conflicting distinctions, so I have simply conflated the two terms. I also tend to use “ethnography,” which is technically the writing and recording part of ethnology, interchangeably with “ethnology,” on the assumption that ethnologists who are not also ethnographers do not get published and I would therefore be unaware of their work. The discipline of anthropology does not have an equivalent term, “anthropography,” and I commend anthropologists for their economy of verbiage.

4 It is important to note here that humanistic psychology, although it derives many of its ideas from such philosophy, is not the same as what is generally called Humanism.

5 Humanistic psychology was also a reaction to behaviorism, which tended to conceptualize human life in terms of responses to external stimuli: attraction to pleasure and avoidance of pain. The behaviorists minimized the influence of internal drives as motivators of human behavior.

6 Carl Jung thought that the urge to grow derived from a collective unconscious that is trying to manifest itself through individual consciousnesses. Carl Rogers wrote in terms of an urge in a positive direction in human life. Maslow referred to the Freudian school as deficiency motivation and posited growth motivation as an alternative. Wilber, whose work fuses Western psychology with Eastern philosophy, thinks of it in terms of the manifestation of a spiritual source within each person.

7 “Yaro” told me that among the items that Lewis and Clark were strictly forbidden to trade to the Indians were guns and cooking pots. The cooking pots were considered of great value; they could be used for baking as well as for preparation of parched corn mush and stews made from the tougher cuts of meat. Jill’s cow stomach method would take most of the day to cook a meal.
CHAPTER 1
TO ENTERPRISING YOUNG MEN: THE RECEIVED NARRATIVE

TO
Enterprising young men

The subscriber wishes to engage ONE HUNDRED MEN,
to ascend the river Missouri to its source,
there to be employed for one, two, or three years.
Wm. H. Ashley

In this chapter I briefly outline the “real” history of rendezvous and describe some of the people who lived it. I will be referring to the information here as the received narrative, or received history, and I lay it out here so that I can compare the “facts” with the improvised tales that are such an important part of the latter-day rendezvous encampments. Of course, the “facts” here are tales themselves, the defining myths of our country’s early development; even a journal is a story, not what “really” happened. It is interesting, if beyond the scope of this dissertation, to compare different tales of a notable event; historians have always pieced together historical narrative from scattered stories that sometimes contradict each other. I will be addressing such mythmaking in chapters 4 and 5. In this chapter, I will provide some basic data as they are available to today’s buckskinners. Many have read extensively about the fur trade, and the buckskinning journals always include well-researched articles on the people and the things they made and left behind. The information in this chapter is important for understanding rendezvous because it outlines the cultural contexts and specific historical events that are evoked at today’s so-called re-enactments.

As much as possible, my information comes from the journals and first-hand descriptions of events and places. The authors of these primary sources are quite often the ordinary people of the day, who tell us the tales of the more famous among them. Some journals, like Russell Osborne’s, are full of the day-to-day details of trekking and camping in difficult terrain in sometimes severe weather. Jedediah Smith’s journal waxes eloquent, even religious, as he describes the countryside and his sense of personal mission. James P. Beckwourth seems bent on establishing himself as the main protagonist in the whole Rocky Mountain region during his lifetime. Other journals reveal simple curiosity about the terrain and the plants, animals, and people in it. Only a few show a sense of the importance of the fur trade era in the larger picture of United States history.
Emergence of the Mountain Man

The mountain man way of life began shortly before the first general rendezvous in 1825 and ended with the last rendezvous in 1840. This was a time of rapid expansion of the United States, as the Louisiana Purchase opened up “new” territory for adventure and exploitation by Americans. It also led, of course, to conflict with the peoples who did not consider the territory new at all. For the non-Indians, though, the area was terra incognita; those who chose to venture far west of the Mississippi River had no maps except those published by members of Lewis and Clark’s Corps of Discovery. They traveled on foot, on horseback, and in boats of all descriptions (all powered by human or animal labor with an occasional assist from the wind or river current). When they came to a river, they had to figure out how to cross it; there were no bridges. The trappers and traders communicated with each other by sending messengers over long distances in terrain made dangerous by weather, geography, animals like grizzly bears, rattlesnakes, and mountain lions, and hostile or opportunistic Indians. They carried with them only what they could pack on a horse. They slept mostly under open air or perhaps a canvas tarp or leather skin stretched on a rope to deflect the rain. The lucky ones had a blanket or buffalo skin (warm woolly hair attached) for warmth at night. To supply themselves with food, they hunted and foraged, traded with the people they met on the way, and sometimes stole from others. When their clothing or shoes wore out, they made replacements from the materials available. When their equipment broke, they fixed it. When their meager possessions were lost or stolen, they had to do without until they could trade for replacements. Loss of a gun could mean starvation or extreme vulnerability to attack by Indians. Injury was similarly serious in a country with no doctors and only medicines made from indigenous plants and minerals.

In order to demonstrate the uniqueness of this time period, I describe in this chapter some of the significant events that led up to the first rendezvous, provide an overview of the rendezvous themselves, and explain some of the factors that contributed to the end of the Rocky Mountain fur trade. I then describe some individual mountain men and their relationship with the environment and its animal and human inhabitants.

The North American trade in beaver and other peltries had been going on for over 50 years before Lewis and Clark noted the abundance of beaver on the upper Missouri River. As originally established under English rule, the fur trade depended on three key factors (Gowans 2002). First, the trade required trappers, and the very early fur trade relied mostly on Indians to do the trapping. The Indians of the then-frontier, from what is now upstate New York south to the states west of the Appalachian Mountains, would trade furs for highly prized items such as guns and metal tools and also for less costly goods such as blankets, beads, and assorted trinkets. (Another big trade item was, of course, alcohol.) Indians of the Iroquois tribes, in particular, distinguished themselves as professional trappers.

The second factor in the early fur trade was the (European) trader, who would build a fortified trading post (often called a fort) on the edge of the frontier. The trader would arrange for trade goods to be brought in from the east, preside over the exchange of these goods for furs, and then sell the furs to dealers in the eastern cities who would in turn send the furs to Europe. The pelts of an un-prepossessing rodent, the beaver, were particularly prized for their under-layer of fur, which was used to create the silky surfaces of the gentlemen’s top hats that were all the rage in Europe. The third factor required for the early fur trade was a large, navigable river on which to transport both furs and the goods that were traded for them. The early trading posts were built along rivers because at that time waterways were the most efficient routes of transport for heavy and bulky cargo. The emergence of the Rocky Mountain fur trade involved changes in
Lewis and Clark

Lewis and Clark did many things on their travels, from negotiations with Indians to scientific observation of flora, fauna, and minerals, but the main purpose of the expedition was to find a trade route to the Pacific Ocean. An overland trade route would provide an alternative to sailing all around South America to the Pacific. In 1793, the American Philosophical Society offered to give 1000 pounds to any person who could get to the Pacific Ocean and back overland (Ambrose 70). They knew that the continent was 3000 miles wide, but they had little knowledge of the terrain that lay between the Missouri River and the west coast. The Society chose French botanist André Michaux for the expedition, but the whole project was cancelled when it was discovered that Monsieur Michaux was a secret agent for the French government (71). A Scotsman, Alexander Mackenzie of the Montreal-based North West (fur) Company, did succeed in making an overland passage (through what is now Canada) to the Pacific in 1793 (73), and his account of his travels was published in 1801. Thomas Jefferson had been a part of the American Philosophical Society efforts to find an overland trade route, and he and Meriwether Lewis read Mackenzie’s report. When he became President, Jefferson managed to persuade Congress to outfit an exploratory expedition. Its economic emphasis was clear from the start. In his initial proposal, Jefferson applied to Congress for $2500 “for the purpose of extending the external commerce of the U.S.” (qtd. in Ambrose 75). His final instructions to Lewis also made his intentions clear:

The object of your mission is to explore the Missouri River, & such principal stream of it, as, by it’s [sic] course and communication with the waters of the Pacific ocean, whether the Columbia, Oregon, Colorado, or any other river may offer the most direct & practicable water communication across this continent for the purposes of commerce. (qtd. in Ambrose 95)

Information about the Indian tribes, mineral wealth, and plants and animals was part of a plan to open up trade from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Such a trade route would, of course, create a significant challenge to the British fur trade and establish the fledgling United States as a major force in worldwide trade.

Judged in terms of its mission, the Lewis and Clark expedition was a failure. They found no “direct & practicable” water route to the Pacific. However, their influence on the course of American history was profound. The Lewis and Clark expedition influenced the development of the Rocky Mountain fur trade in three significant ways. The first, of course, was their discovery of beaver in the rivers that flowed through and around the mountains. Beaver pelts were valid currency along the frontier. To the entrepreneurs of the time, abundant beaver meant abundant money to be made. The second event, noted by historian Robert M. Utley, was Lewis and Clark’s promise to trade guns to the Shoshone and Flathead Indians (7). These tribes had been at a disadvantage in their ongoing rivalry with the Blackfeet, who were armed with guns acquired by trading with the British. The receptiveness of the Shoshones and Flatheads to Lewis and Clark’s overtures of peace and trade may well have been motivated by a desire to even up the odds against their perennial enemies. These tribes and some others were to become an integral part of the Rocky Mountain fur trade. Indians outnumbered whites at most of the historical
rendezvous. The third way in which the Lewis and Clark expedition influenced the Rocky Mountain fur trade was Lewis’s violent encounter with Blackfoot Indians on the Maries River during the return trip to St. Louis (Utley 9-10). This encounter, in which a Blackfoot was killed (the only such death on the whole expedition), was the first of many between the Blackfoot and American nations, and Blackfoot attacks became a significant factor in the course of the western fur trade.

The River-Based Western Fur Trade

The discovery of beaver set in motion a race to become the first trappers on the upper (north of the Platte River) Missouri. As Lewis and Clark approached St. Louis in the fall of 1806, one of their men, John Colter, left the party to turn back upriver in the company of two French trappers. Returning from that winter sortie in the spring of 1807, Colter encountered a trading party under the leadership of Manuel Lisa, and once again headed back up river with them. Also among Lisa’s men was George Drouillard, another Lewis and Clark veteran. Lisa’s plan was to set up a trading post at Fort Raymond, on the mouth of the Bighorn River (on the Yellowstone River). The trading post, and another set up at the Three Forks (where the Jefferson, Gallatin, and Madison Rivers flow into the Missouri), failed for several reasons, among them bad location for winter trade (there were few Indians around) and raids by the tribes (Bloods, Piegs, Blackfeet) of the Blackfoot confederation.2 By 1810, the Blackfeet had essentially driven American trappers out of the prime fur country of the Three Forks area (Gowans 2002), and events of the War of 1812 and the Panic of 1819 temporarily halted any further efforts at trading for fur on the upper Missouri River.

The race up the Missouri river started again during the winter of 1821/1822. Several old and new fur companies began gathering supplies and hiring men. Among these were the Missouri Fur Company (Manuel Lisa’s company, run by Joshua Pilcher after Lisa died in 1820), the French Fur Company, the Columbia Fur Company, and a western division of John Jacob Astor’s American Fur Company (Utley 44, Berry 5). These companies all contributed to the development of the Rocky Mountain fur trade, but I will limit my story to the events that specifically influenced the shift from the trading post-based trade to the rendezvous-based trade. Thus, I will focus at this point in history on the partnership of William H. Ashley and Major Andrew Henry. In 1822, Ashley, a 40-something businessman with political ambitions, was Lieutenant Governor of Missouri. Henry, the front man for the business, was a skilled backwoodsman with experience with Indians and trading furs. In March of 1822 Ashley and Henry placed a now-legendary advertisement in the St. Louis paper, seeking “enterprising young men” to “ascend the river Missouri to its source, there to be employed for one, two, or three years.” This cryptic ad attracted the attention of – well, enterprising young men, several of whom would later become legendary mountain men: Jedediah Smith, David Jackson, Mike Fink, and James Bridger (Utley 44). These men sought employment with Ashley and Henry in part because of an innovation in the contract terms for some of the men.

As was customary, some men were hired as “engagés” and paid to man the boats and/or tend to the camps. Others were hired as hunters and guides, and several of these were given the option of earning extra money by trapping furs on the side. The deal was that the trappers had to give the company only half of their furs; the rest they could sell (to the company, or elsewhere in St. Louis, if they chose) for their fair market value. These terms of employment were the first step in the development of the mountain man way of life.
Things did not go well for the fledgling company. They outfitted two boats, with a plan to go up the Missouri River to the mouth of the Yellowstone river and build a “fort” (trading post). Henry departed with the first boat on April 3, 1822, and succeeded in working his way upriver to build the first of two forts called Henry’s Fort on the Missouri some quarter mile west of the Yellowstone (Utley 46). The second boat, captained by Daniel Moore, capsized (with $10,000 in cargo) after its mast caught on a tree branch overhanging the river (Utley 46, Berry 16). Moore went back to St. Louis with the bad news, and Ashley outfitted another boat and took it himself up the river to meet Henry on October 1, 1822 (Berry 18).

Ashley then returned to St. Louis, leaving Henry and his party at the fort to trap furs and trade with local Indians over the winter. Unfortunately, most of the “local” Indians were camped elsewhere for the winter, so there was no trade, and the trappers who went out in assorted groups were several times attacked (with men killed) by traveling groups of Blackfoot Indians. Still more trappers lost their lives when a dispute between two of them, Mike Fink and a man identified only as Carpenter, ended up with both of them dead. Fink shot Carpenter after persuading Carpenter to hold a glass of whiskey on his head as a “target”; their companion, Theodore Talbot, realizing that he had just witnessed a deliberate murder, promptly shot Fink dead on the spot (Utley 47). (Such was what passed for the law on the upper Missouri River in 1822.)

In the spring of 1823, Ashley outfitted another boat with supplies for the trade. This time, his crew consisted only of engagés (that is, did not include contracted trappers), but among them were men who would later become the movers and shakers of the fur trade: Thomas “Broken Hand” Fitzpatrick, William Sublette, Hugh Glass, James Clyman, and Moses “Black” Harris (Utley 48). Ashley’s 1823 expedition ran afoul of the Arikara (also known as Rickaree or Ree) Indians who lived on the Missouri River. This tribe already had a reputation for unpredictable behavior toward Europeans and Americans moving up and down the river; sometimes they were friendly and ready to trade, and at other times they were openly hostile. Ashley stopped in the Arikara villages to trade for horses; after the trade arrangements were made, Ashley and his men camped on a sand bank on the opposite side of the river. Some of Ashley’s men remained in the village during the night.

As Robert Utley delicately describes it, “Arikara women had always aroused the masculinity of white visitors” (49). Fred Gowans says flatly that the men raped the Arikara women (2002). With yet another take on events, Berry ignores the sex issue entirely and attributes the ensuing violence to encouragement by the British to attack Americans (33). In any case, the Arikaras attacked Ashley the next morning. Ashley’s hired boatmen were uncooperative, and the battle ended with 15 of Ashley’s men killed; Ashley finally managed to move the boat and his men downstream, and he sent messages upriver to Henry and downriver to St. Louis for help. What happened next is a long story, with many contemporary accounts and historical interpretations, but the gist of it is that the U.S. government, in the person of Colonel Henry Leavenworth, got involved, along with some 75 mounted Sioux Indian warriors and a party of around 50 men brought downriver by Henry. There was a battle, mostly fought by the Sioux and the Arikaras, which the Arikaras theoretically lost. However, Leavenworth mismanaged the ensuing peace treaty, and the Arikaras fled during the night after having made few concessions (Hafen 17-20, Utley 51-53).

The war with the Arikaras is significant to my story because it effectively closed the upper Missouri River, the only water travel route through the area, as a trade route for all of the fur companies. Ashley, near financial ruin, was forced to look at other options, and he and
Henry made the momentous decision to seek overland routes to the mountain beaver country. In this way, the trappers and traders could avoid both the Arikaras and most of the Blackfeet who operated along the upper Missouri. The decision to work overland was a significant departure from the previous dependence on river transportation for the fur trade.

The First Rendezvous

Andrew Henry split his men up into several groups in the fall of 1823. These men trapped the rivers during the fall and early spring, and Henry took the furs back to St. Louis in the fall of 1824. At that point, Henry decided to retire from the fur trade, and he remained in St. Louis. Ashley, having lost his business partner, set out himself with supplies for the trappers. Because he set out in November, he was unable to reach Henry’s party before snow and ice made further travel impossible; Ashley and his men spent the winter among the Pawnee Indians (Gowans 2002). Meanwhile, the trappers stayed in the mountains, living off the land and continuing with their trapping. They broke up into small brigades for the actual trapping and later came together to spend the winter of 1824/1825 in Cache Valley, near what is now Cove, Utah. The stories of their travels and adventures are part of the rendezvous lore, but here again I must select the events most significant to the fur trade and the rendezvous.

The treaty ending the War of 1812 left the territory of Oregon with ambiguous status. Theoretically, it was under the joint control of the U.S. and England. (I am going to ignore, for the moment, the politically thorny reality that there were indigenous peoples already living on the land in question.) Although official hostilities had ended, the struggle for control of the area (and its potentially rich beaver harvest) continued via Indian conflicts and clashes among the American and English trappers on the rivers. During the fall of 1824, Jedediah Smith, one of Henry’s men and his eventual successor as Ashley’s business partner, encountered Alexander Ross and a party of trappers from the British Hudson’s Bay Company. Much to the distress of Ross and his superiors, Smith followed Ross’s company back to their winter quarters, Flathead House, in territory previously unknown to American trappers. Ross’s suspicion that the Americans were spies was not without justification, as travel through the new countryside meant new “maps” in the minds of Smith and his party, and knowledge of terrain was very valuable.

Partly as a result of Jedediah Smith’s visit, the Hudson’s Bay Company devised a plan to protect the fur-rich Snake River country by trapping so heavily that they effectively wiped out the beaver population (Utley 73-75, Berry 89). This would create a beaver skin-free barrier between British and American trapping territories. The idea was that American trappers would turn back when they came to an area where trapping was unproductive. Peter Skene Ogden was engaged to take charge of this “Snake Brigade.” In the spring of 1824 both Ogden and Smith set out for the Snake River country. An encounter between parties led by Ogden, Smith, Étienne Provost (an American operating out of Taos, in Mexican territory), and others led to an interesting standoff. An American, Johnson Gardner, decided to challenge the British presence by marching up to the British camp with American flags flying and camping right next to the British (Utley 75). Gardner later demanded that Ogden leave the area, claiming it as American territory. (It was, in fact [again ignoring those Indians], Mexican territory.) Ogden refused to leave, and Gardner finessed his way out of the encounter by offering Ogden’s trappers such high prices for their furs that many of them (significantly, a group of Iroquois Indians) deserted the British company and joined up with the Americans.

Meanwhile, Ashley had left his winter camp among the Pawnees and made his way to the Green River. The assorted groups of American trappers, the English and Iroquois Hudson’s Bay
Company deserters, and other Indians managed to meet and camp together on what Ashley called “Randavouze Creek,” probably on Henry’s Fork of the Green River between Burnt Fork and Birch Creek near what is now McKinnon, Wyoming. This original rendezvous took place on July 1, 1825, and lasted only a day. Ashley waited for all the company trappers to arrive before setting out his goods on blankets and trading for beaver pelts. The mountain men were eager to trade for replacement beaver traps, steel weapons, gunpowder and lead, blankets, clothing and cloth, beads and other items for trade with Indians, tobacco, and such “civilized” food staples as corn and wheat flour, sugar, and tea.

Although elements of the mountain man way of life (trapping, survival in the wilderness) were in place before that first rendezvous in 1825, the events of that day changed the way the American fur traders conducted their business and the way the trappers lived. The Hudson’s Bay Company trappers traveled, like their Indian companions, with wives and families (Berry 120). This way of life was much like the nomadic life of the Indians themselves, and traveling as a small village was safer (in the case of attack by enemies) than traveling in brigades of just a few men like American trappers. When Gardner bribed the Hudson’s Bay Company trappers to work for him, the wives and families deserted along with the husbands, so there were women (and probably children) present at the first rendezvous. Ashley had not come prepared to trade items appropriate for women and families, but he made notes indicating plans to bring such items with him for the next rendezvous (Berry 121). (He also neglected to bring alcohol to the first rendezvous, but he and those who traded after him always included it after that.)

The first rendezvous was a success, and it was clear to Ashley that the way to make money in the fur trade was to go to the mountains to trade supplies for furs (Berry 122). For one thing, the supplier could inflate the prices of goods and turn a handsome profit. Then, there were the furs to be sold back in St. Louis for even more profit. From the point of view of the mountain men, they did not have to make a trip all the way back to civilization to sell their furs. They would simply stay in the mountains all year and trade furs for supplies at the rendezvous. Many eventually married Indians and traveled with their families, sometimes in small groups and sometimes in larger villages that included Indian families as well. Thus, the Indian trappers, permanent trading posts, and rivers of the early fur trade were displaced by American (or European or Indian) trappers, the rendezvous, and overland travel (Gowans 2002). This new system of trade was more efficient and gave the American fur trade an advantage over the British, who continued to use the trading post system.

Rendezvous, 1826 through 1840

I will go into a very brief history of the rendezvous, which occurred annually through 1840. Here again, there are colorful stories to tell, but my intention is to simply give a sense of what happened at the rendezvous in terms of the competition among fur companies, clashes with Indians and wild animals, assorted visitors who attended, and some other details pertinent to today’s “re-enactments” of rendezvous. For this account, I rely heavily on Fred Gowans’ book, Rocky Mountain Rendezvous because it is an extensive compilation of first-hand records (from journals, traders’ account books, and newspapers) of rendezvous. Dr. Gowans, Professor Emeritus at Brigham Young University and acknowledged expert in Rocky Mountain fur trade history, has also researched the locations of the rendezvous and includes photos and maps of the sites. Buckskinner use this book as a resource, and Dr. Gowans was featured as a lecturer at the 2002 Fort Bridger rendezvous.
The 1826 rendezvous took place in Willow Valley (also known as Cache Valley) near the present Cove, Utah, just south of the Idaho border (Gowans Rocky, 21). Ashley once again brought out supplies from St. Louis, over a route that would eventually become the eastern part of the Oregon Trail. At the 1826 rendezvous, Ashley sold out his business to Jedediah Smith, David Jackson, and William Sublette. Ashley never returned to the mountains and went on to a successful political life, eventually becoming Governor of Missouri. He did continue to do business from the St. Louis end of the fur trade, and he arranged for the supplies for the 1827 rendezvous to be brought out by Bernard Pratte and Co., who were contracted by John Jacob Astor’s American Fur Company (33). At about the time the supplies arrived in Willow Valley, the Snake Indians, who were traveling with or near some of the American trappers, were attacked by some Blackfoot Indians. The trappers fought on the side of the Snakes and drove off the Blackfeet. Later in the summer of 1827 Joshua Pilcher, Lucien Fontenelle, W. H. Vanderburgh, Charles Bend, and Andrew Drips formed a separate fur company, which disbanded within a year.

In the fall of 1827 Ashley sent out another train of supplies, but they did not reach the trappers, who were dispersed in three winter camps, until the spring of 1828 (Gowans Rocky, 37). There was still an 1828 rendezvous, without the supply train; it, too, started off with a battle with the Blackfeet (39). The owners of the fur companies now had to take the furs back to St. Louis themselves, rather than relying on the supply train to do so. William Sublette went with the Smith, Jackson, and Sublette Company furs. Sublette, accompanied by Joe Meek, brought out supplies for the next rendezvous. The first of two 1829 rendezvous took place on the Popo Agie River near the present Lander, Wyoming, with just Sublette’s company (47). The later, larger rendezvous was at Pierre’s Hole, just west of the Grand Teton mountains in Idaho. The most notable event of the 1829 rendezvous was the appearance of Jedediah Smith, who had been thought dead but who had spent the winter traveling to and from California (49).

The supply train of 1830, once again under William Sublette, was much more substantial than past trains. It included ten mule wagons, two carriages, beef cattle (most of which were consumed along the way), and a milk cow (which was allowed to live and actually made it back to St. Louis) (Gowans Rocky, 56). The American Fur Company sent out a supply train that spring, but it never reached the rendezvous (56). That year, Smith, Jackson, and Sublette sold out to the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, comprising Thomas Fitzpatrick, James Bridger, Milton Sublette (William’s brother), Henry Fraeb, and Jean Gervais (57). Smith, Jackson, and Sublette remained involved with procuring supplies for the trade.

Fitzpatrick, the business brains of the new company, took over responsibility for bringing out the next supply train. He ran into some complications, getting to St. Louis too late to find his suppliers, so he followed them to Taos (then part of Mexico) to get the supplies (Gowans Rocky, 61). In Taos, he hired a trapper named Kit Carson, who later went on to fame in fact and fiction as an Indian fighter after the fur trade ended. Meanwhile, the mountain men had gathered for a rendezvous (on the Green River, in Willow Valley, or perhaps both) and found no supply train (61). Henry Fraeb went to find Fitzpatrick, who turned the supplies over to Fraeb. By the time Fraeb made it back to the mountains, the trappers had dispersed for the fall hunt. Fraeb then spent much of the fall getting the much-needed supplies to the trappers. The furs for 1831 were cached and not returned to St. Louis until 1832.

Competition among the fur companies heated up considerably during 1831/1832. There were more American Fur Company trappers in the mountains (Gowans Rocky, 63), and the Rocky Mountain Fur Company was in a bind because they had no furs to trade for the 1832
supplies. Fritzpatrick was forced to make a deal with William Sublette that gave Sublette considerable control over the Rocky Mountain Fur Company (64). William Sublette was in charge of the spring caravan, and Fitzpatrick traveled with them for most of the route. Toward the end of the journey, Fitzpatrick left the caravan to go ahead of the group. The caravan reached the rendezvous (at Pierre’s Hole) to find that Fitzpatrick had not yet arrived. He eventually showed up in the company of two Iroquois who had found him nearly dead on the trail (65). There were some 1000 people at the 1832 rendezvous (66), including trappers from the American Fur Company, the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, the Hudson’s Bay Company, and other independent companies. The American Fur Company had once again sent out a supply train that did not get to the rendezvous (66).

All went well, despite bad weather including rain, snow, and hail, until the rendezvous started to break up on July 17. A large party of Blackfeet showed up, and there are many (sometimes conflicting) accounts of what happened next (Gowans Rocky, 71-76, 199-211). Most agree that Antonio Godin, a half-breeder Iroquois with a personal grudge against the Blackfeet, rode out with a Flathead Indian to meet the Blackfoot chief as if to parley. As Godin reached to shake the chief’s hand, he signaled the Flathead to shoot the chief, which he did. The Blackfoot fell dead, and a major battle was joined. After this point, the several accounts of this Battle of Pierre’s Hole diverge considerably. The general gist of the stories is that the Blackfoot party (which included women and children) retreated into a wooded thicket and dug trenches behind piles of brush. They held out all day against repeated attacks by the trappers and their Indian allies and escaped during the night.

Rivalries among the fur companies, particularly between the Rocky Mountain and American Fur Companies, intensified during the fall hunt of 1832 (Gowans Rocky, 78-79). The Rocky Mountain Fur Company was weak financially, particularly because it was under the control of William Sublette’s trading interests, but its trappers knew the territory. The American Fur Company had money, but its trappers were less experienced. The American Fur Company men made up for their inexperience by simply following the Rocky Mountain trappers around. This was a problem for the trappers, because there were only so many beavers within any given area, and too many traps meant fewer pelts per trapper. So the Rocky Mountain trappers led the American Fur Company into Blackfoot country and let the Indians pick off a few of their rivals for them. The two companies camped quite near each other for winter quarters and then continued their “almost warlike” competition through the spring of 1833 (79). Meanwhile, during that winter, William Sublette and Robert Campbell formed the St. Louis Fur Company and built several trading posts along the Missouri River near American Fur Company posts (80).

It was Robert Campbell who took the supplies to the 1833 rendezvous. Among the party was one William Drummond Stewart, a wealthy Scotsman who might be considered the first tourist to go to a rendezvous. They met up with Rocky Mountain Fur Company’s Henry Fraeb, who traded for supplies. Both groups proceeded to the rendezvous, which began at Fort Bonneville on the Siskeedee Agie (now known as the Green River) and later moved to spread out along the river some five to ten miles downstream of Fort Bonneville (Gowans Rocky, 81). Captain Bonneville’s journal provides a detailed account of contests like shooting and horse racing and notes competition among the trappers for the favors of Shoshone women. Because he describes events that later became part of rendezvous re-enactments, it is worth quoting Bonneville’s description at length:

The caravans of supplies arrived at the valley just at this period of gallantry and good fellowship. Now commenced a scene of eager competition and wild
prodigality at the different encampments. Bales were hastily ripped open, and their motley contents poured forth. A mania for purchasing spread itself throughout the several bands – munitions for war, for hunting, for gallantry, were seized upon with equal avidity – rifles, hunting knives, traps, scarlet cloth, red blankets, garish beads, and glittering trinkets, were bought at any price and scores run up without any thought how they were ever to be rubbed off. The free trappers, especially, were extravagant in their purchases. (qtd. in Gowans Rocky, 86)

Bonneville also noted in his journal that relations among the trappers from the different companies seemed friendly enough at the rendezvous. This was to change in the next year. As Stewart wrote in his own papers, “1833 was the last good year, for with 1834 came the spoilers – the idlers, the missionaries, the hard seekers after money” (qtd. in Gowans Rocky, 96).

During the winter of 1833/1834, those hard seekers after money made some moves to eliminate the competition among the fur companies. John Jacob Astor retired from the American Fur Company, selling out to Pratte, Chouteau, and Company of St. Louis (Gowans Rocky, 103). Their man, Kenneth McKenzie, effectively destroyed the St. Louis Fur Company by luring many free trappers away from other companies with payment of extremely high prices for furs (98). There was also competition between two suppliers, Nathaniel Wyeth and the partnership of William Sublette and Robert Campbell (the St. Louis Fur Company), who raced each other to the rendezvous site in the spring and summer of 1834 (103-106). The Rocky Mountain Fur Company, with their new partner, Edmund Christy, had secretly contracted with Wyeth for supplies. William Sublette found out about this and put together a supply train that managed to reach the rendezvous before Wyeth’s party. Sublette convinced the trappers of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company and Christy to trade with him, so when Wyeth arrived he had no buyers. The Rocky Mountain group dissolved and formed the (Lucien) Fontenelle and (Thomas) Fitzpatrick Company (which still included Milton Sublette, Jim Bridger, and Andrew Drips) (109-110). To add to everyone’s financial distress, there were some signs in the international fur trade that demand for beaver pelts was soon to decline (120). Several trappers also noted that the beaver themselves were declining in population because of the heavy “harvest” by the trappers.

During the winter of 1834/1835, the Fontenelle and Fitzpatrick Company purchased Fort William (later to be known as Fort Laramie and located along the future Oregon Trail) from (William) Sublette and Campbell and were thus able to bring out their own supply train to the rendezvous (Gowans Rocky, 121). Along with them traveled two missionaries, Dr. Marcus Whitman and Reverend Samuel Parker, sent by the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions to look at the possibility of missionary work among the Flathead and Nez Perce tribes. The 1835 rendezvous, held once again on the Green River, attracted not only the missionaries but large numbers of Hudson’s Bay Company trappers and more than the usual number of Indians (122). Dr. Whitman famously removed an arrowhead that had been lodged in mountain man Jim Bridger’s back for some three years (122). The surgical operation was a public event that was of particular interest to the Indians present. Another public event of note was the first church service at a rendezvous. In his detailed and amusing account of one service, Joe Meek notes that the Indians listened with great interest while the trappers were “as politely attentive as it was in their reckless natures to be” (qtd. in Gowans Rocky, 128). The service came to an abrupt end when someone announced that a herd of buffalo was nearby. The trappers and
Indians ran for guns and horses and joined in the hunt, leaving their would-be spiritual shepherd without a congregation.

Apparently the preliminary missionary work was enough of a success to bring the return, in 1836, of Whitman and Samuel Parker, along with their wives and a young missionary by the name of William Gray. (They were headed for Walla Walla, in what is now the state of Washington, and were escorted there by Hudson’s Bay Company people after the rendezvous.) As the missionaries drew near the rendezvous site, a wild party of mounted trappers and Indians charged up to the supply train and rode in circles around it, whooping and shooting guns into the air (Gowans Rocky, 134-5). This greeting was received with mixed emotions by the missionaries, who did not realize at first that it was, in fact, a welcome to rendezvous. The missionary women held court to all manner of trappers, military people, and Indians, who plied them with gifts and offered such entertainments as “scalp dances” and displays of horsemanship.

Meanwhile, there were some serious business dealings going on. Fontenelle and Fitzpatrick’s trading post, Fort William, had been steadily drawing the trade away from the former American Fur Company (now Pratte, Chouteau, and Company) (Gowans Rocky, 133), and during the 1836 rendezvous Joshua Pilcher succeeded in buying the fort for Pratte et al. (143). This left the American fur trade under the exclusive control of Pratte, Chouteau, and Company, but control of the territory of Oregon was still disputed by the Americans and British. Yet another complication for the fur trade was the growing popularity of silk hats, which would lead to sharply decreased demand for beaver fur (144).

The Green River rendezvous of 1837 brought the return of the tourist William Drummond Stewart, who brought along a young artist, Alfred Jacob Miller (Gowans Rocky, 145). Miller’s sketches and written descriptions of the scenes he sketched have become valuable primary sources for academic and lay historians. Upon his return to city life, Miller went on to a very successful career creating paintings based on his on-site sketches. There was a skirmish between the Bannock and Nez Perce Indians at the 1837 rendezvous (151). The Bannocks had reportedly stolen some Nez Perce horses, and the Nez Perce went to the Bannock village, took the horses back, brought them to the rendezvous, and gave them to some trappers. When the Bannock appeared demanding the horses, one of them tried to forcibly take a horse away from Jim Bridger. The Bannock was shot, and his comrades fled. The Nez Perce and trappers pursued them, killing several and plundering their village. There were fewer than the usual number of Indians in 1837 because of an epidemic of smallpox along the upper Missouri River. The many Indian deaths due to smallpox in 1836 and 1837 also affected the Blackfeet, who were weakened to the point where they made few raids on trapping parties during this time (Grant 39).

Reports on the 1838 rendezvous, held at Wind River, indicate friction between the Americans and British and among several missionaries who were present (Gowans Rocky, 169-184). The Americans had, in fact, tried unsuccessfully to keep secret the location of the rendezvous. Many trappers did not even attend the 1838 rendezvous, either because they did not know about it or because they chose to go directly to trading posts with their furs (188). Some of them had left the mountains completely for various reasons (184). But leaving such a unique way of life proved difficult for many of the mountain men. The journal of a German physician, Frederick A. Wislezenus, who attended the 1839 rendezvous at the junction of the Green River and Horse Creek, contains the following description of the free trappers: “… this daily danger seems to exercise a magic attraction over most of them. Only with reluctance does a trapper abandon his dangerous craft; and a sort of serious home-sickness seizes him when he retires from his mountain life to civilization” (qtd. in Gowans Rocky, 190). But the trappers eventually were
left with no choice but to abandon their lifeway. By the time Andrew Drips arrived with the supply caravan for the 1840 rendezvous, the U.S. Government had begun to offer emigrants parcels of 640 acres of land in the western territories (193). The former mountain men went on to settle on farms themselves, guide settlers along the hazardous trails, work for the United States military or government, live among the Indians, or forage as best they could. Some turned to a life of crime. The journal of Robert Newell notes, “The horse thieves about 10 or 15 are gone to California for the purpose of Robbing and Stealing such thing never had been Known till late” (qtd. in Gowans Rocky, 197).

The Mountain Men

Who were these men who left their homes and families to venture into the Rocky Mountains? The primary and secondary historical literature about individual mountain men includes journals, memoirs, collections of short biographies, and extensive historical analyses. Many of these, even older books, are still in print and are often available at rendezvous. Many traders and other re-enactors have encyclopedic knowledge about the mountain men, and stories from journals and books are included among the tales told at rendezvous. One hears about John Colter, a Lewis and Clark veteran most famous for his “run for life.” Colter was captured by Blackfeet Indians, stripped naked, and told to run away. Pursued by several Indians armed with arrows and knives, Colter managed to escape by outrunning the Indians, hiding in a river under a pile of brush, and eventually making his way back to camp. Hugh Glass is another favorite subject of rendezvous tales. Glass was captured by pirates, but escaped by jumping ship and swimming to the (now) Texas coast. He made his way into the mountains only to be attacked by a grizzly bear. Glass was so severely wounded that his companions (Andrew Henry and his men) assumed that he would die. Since Henry was in a hurry to reach his winter camp, he called for volunteers to stay with Glass and bury him after he died. James Bridger and a man identified only as Fitzgerald stayed with Glass, who lived for several days. For undisclosed reasons, Bridger and Fitzgerald left Glass for dead, taking his guns and knives and following Henry’s group to their winter quarters and telling them that they had buried Glass. Glass was, in fact, very much alive and eventually hunted down both of the men who had deserted him, vowing to kill them. He let Bridger live because of his youth, and he was unable to murder Fitzgerald with impunity because Fitzgerald had enlisted in the army and Glass confronted him at a fort. Glass did get his rifle back and went on to further adventures, being adopted by one Indian tribe and later killed by the Arikara Indians (Berry 61).

Would-be mountain men came to the trade for various reasons, most prominent among them the opportunity for adventure and financial gain. The “job” was certainly hazardous duty; the fur trappers encountered hostile Indians, grizzly bears, scarcity of food and/or water, and extremes of weather. Among the fur trade community there was a kind of hierarchy. At the top were traders such as Ashley and, later, Fitzpatrick and others as the “booshways,” the controllers of the fur trade economy with their valuable supplies. Beneath them, in descending order in the hierarchy, were the “free trappers,” who owned their own equipment and could trade their skins with whomever they chose, the “hired trappers,” or company men, who used company equipment and whose “earnings” in beaver skins belonged to the company, and the “engagés,” who tended to the camp and took care of the pack animals. It is worthwhile quoting mountain man Joe Meek’s description of the free trappers:

[T]he genuine free trapper regarded himself as greatly superior . . . He had his own horses and accoutrements, arms and ammunition. He took what route he
thought fit, hunted and trapped when and where he chose; traded with the Indians; sold his furs to whoever offered highest for them; dressed flauntingly, and generally had an Indian wife and half-breed children. They prided themselves on their hardihood and courage; even on their recklessness and profligacy. Each claimed to own the best horse; to have had the wildest adventures; to have made the most narrow escapes; to have killed the greatest number of bears and Indians; to be the greatest favorite with the Indian belles, the greatest consumer of alcohol, and to have the most money to spend, i.e. the largest credit on the books of the company. (qtd. in Victor 49-50)

It should come as no surprise that most latter-day mountain men adopt free trapper personae, and informal improvisations and campfire activities mimic the boasting Meek describes.

Meek’s memoirs are useful in delineating sometimes self-contradictory details of mountain man life. He describes men playing cards using the corpse of a “comrade” as their table (Victor 51) and notes a general stoicism in the face of death (59). Mountain men avoided talking about men who had died, but they were extremely emotional when greeting a living comrade who had been thought dead (59). Their apparent indifference, even defiance, toward their own cultural traditions was tempered with efforts at self improvement. Meek, for example, learned to read while at winter camp; he describes a Bible and a Shakespeare play (he does not give the title) that were carried with camp (84). Warren Angus Ferris, another trapper, came upon a Cheyenne lodge containing the remains of two adults and a young boy who had been killed by Crows. The bodies, though mutilated, were laid out in a seemingly ritual fashion. Noting an Indian custom of taking enemy lives in specific retaliation for relatives killed by the same enemy tribe, Ferris goes on to make a quite literary comparison of this scene with Achilles’ sacrifice of the young Trojans at the tomb of Patroclus in Homer’s Iliad (34). Still another literary reference is made by James Clyman, who noted with regard to the men he recruited for Ashley’s 1923 expedition, “Fallstaff’s Battalion was genteel in comparison” (qtd. in Berry 26).

Kit Carson’s memoirs similarly evoke the seeming recklessness of the trappers’ lifeway and their attitudes toward money. He describes a return to his home base of Taos and how he and his fellows spent the money they had made:

The amount due us was paid, and each of us having several hundred dollars, we passed the time gloriously, spending our money freely never thinking that our lives were risked in gaining it…Trappers and sailors are similar in regard to the money that they earn so dearly, daily being in danger of losing their lives. (qtd. in Grant 20)

Carson’s comments indicate that many of the mountain men lived for the moment, handling difficult situations as they came up and enjoying life’s pleasures, brief though they might be, to the fullest.

The exigencies of life in the mountains tended to favor personalities (and physiques) that could endure extreme hardship. Mental attitude seems to have played an important role in survival. Most trappers were not religious. Jedediah Smith, on the other hand, was famously religious. Several contemporary journals note both his piouness and its rarity among his kind. Smith’s reasons for going to the mountains are prosaic enough:

I started into the mountains, with the determination of becoming a first-rate hunter, of making myself thoroughly acquainted with the character and habits of
A journal entry notes that Smith “wanted to be the first to view a country on which the eyes of a white man had never gazed and to follow the course of rivers that run through a new land” (Brooks 37). Smith clearly had practical reasons for going west, but his letters home and journal entries show his religious concerns and a thoughtfulness unusual among his peers.

Smith’s wanderings led him, among other places, to California and back over the season of 1826/27. On his return journey east, he led his men into a mountain range through which he could find no passage. His men hungry and cold, Smith climbed a mountain and contemplated his situation:

Far as the eye could see on every side high rugged Peaks arose covered with Eternal snow turning to the East the frozen waste extending rough and desolate beyond the boundaries of vision . . . The sight in its extended range embraced no living being except it caught a transient glimpse of my little party awaiting my return in the snows below. It was indeed a freezing desolation and one which I thought should keep a man from wandering . . And is it possible thought I that we are creatures of choice and that we follow fortune through such paths as these. . . Surely of all lives the hunters [sic] is the most precarious, we endure all the extremes of heat and cold hunger and thirst our lives and property always at hazard . . But the recollection that my party were entirely depending on my movements broke my reverie and convinced me of the necessity of immediate and powerful exertion to extricate myself and party from the surrounding difficulties. (Brooks 159-60)

These are the words of a man with a high degree of awareness of his practical situation, his place in the cosmic scheme of things, and the gravity of his responsibility to his men. This is also the man who, after an attack by a grizzly bear that tore much of his scalp and one ear right off of his head, had the presence of mind to give step by step instructions to one of his men, James Clyman, for sewing hair and ear back on (Utley 56).

Life as a trapper was not for everyone. William Marshall Anderson, a well-educated and refined young man, felt out of place among the traders and trappers (Morgan 53-4). In 1834, Anderson went west with William Sublette’s supply train for the adventure of it. His journals comment with wonder at such sights as the plains covered with buffalo and the awesome Rocky Mountains and with shock at the nonstop drinking and carousing at rendezvous. Yet Anderson is honest about his fears of Indian attack and is quite frankly homesick and travel weary by the end of his memoir. At the opposite extreme is James P. Beckwourth, a mulatto who left his home in Virginia, went west, and became an important chief among the Crow Indians. He is also known as the most outrageous of the flamboyant tall tale tellers, dictating a memoir in which he is the hero of adventures that happened hundreds of miles away from where he actually was. For example, Utley notes a tale in which Beckwourth says he rescued William Ashley by jumping into a river to pull Ashley to the bank. Beckwourth claims to have handed Ashley to Thomas Fitzpatrick on the bank of the river. However, several other historical sources have placed both Beckwourth and Fitzpatrick far away from the river at that time (Utley 80). Such tales have led
some historians to suspect most of Beckwourth’s memoirs as fabrications, but in many cases his versions of stories prove to be important verifiable additions to the historical record. When the end of the fur trade business forced mountain men to seek out a new means of livelihood, or when for their own reasons they left the fur trade, they went in many directions. John Colter, who finally made good on the third of three vows to leave the mountains if his life was spared in a close brush with the Blackfeet, settled on farm in Missouri, married a woman named Sally, and died in 1813 of jaundice (Harris 152-62). Osborne Russell went to settle in the Willamette Valley (near the present Oregon City) and notes with irony that, after surviving nine years in the Rockies trapping beaver and dodging bears and Indians, he lost the sight of his right eye while assisting in the construction of a flour mill in his new home town (126). Thomas Fitzpatrick went on to guide westward-bound settlers along the Oregon Trail and later worked as an Indian agent for the U.S. government. Fitzpatrick, in another ironic twist after years of survival in the wilderness, died of pneumonia in a hotel room in Washington, D.C. Warren Ferris, who created a detailed map of the Rocky Mountain fur trade area that unfortunately was not published until the 1930s, ended up as a surveyor for the state of Texas. Kit Carson went on to fame as an Indian agent, Indian fighter, and the protagonist of numerous pulp fiction tales of derring do. George Drouillard, Jedediah Smith, and Hugh Glass were all killed by Indians. William Goetzmann cites a study of 117 mountain men for whom data are available about professions or activities after the fur trade; listed are 21 ranchers, 17 traders, 15 farmers, 8 miners, 7 politicians, 6 distillers, 5 scouts, 4 Indian agents, and other professions ranging from tailor to clockmaker to vintner. Other mountain men simply went native and lived among the Indians for the rest of their lives, or became thieves and wreaked havoc on the relationships between whites and “friendly” Indians, who tended to hold all whites (as a “tribe”) responsible for the actions of individuals (Victor 259). Still others, many others, met unknown fates in the wilderness.

Mountain Men and the Rocky Mountain Fur Trade

The appeal of these roguish “heroes” to latter-day mountain men is enormous, with many re-enactors regarding the historical free trapper as some kind of manly ideal. However, the reality of the trappers’ situation belies the boasts and assertions of independence. Certainly, the trappers were adept at wilderness survival and had a great deal of choice about how to conduct their personal and business affairs. They were not subject to the drudgery of life on a farm or the legal restrictions and social obligations imposed in a busy city. Their wealth, measured in beaver skins, depended on their trapping ability, their skill and luck in avoiding or overcoming attempts by hostile Indians to steal their traps or kill the trappers themselves, their hunting prowess, the vagaries of weather and terrain, and their choices about where to trade their furs. The successful mountain men were those who could endure adversity, knew the ways of the wilderness and of game and fur-bearing animals, and formed personal alliances (with Indians and other non-Indian trappers).

However, the mountain men were essentially powerless within the capitalistic system of the fur trade. The value of their furs – their wealth itself – was determined not by them but by the traders who brought them supplies or paid in promissory notes for skins. A trapper had three choices: he could trade skins for assorted supplies with Indians and others encountered in the mountains, he could travel to distant trading posts to trade, or he could go to the rendezvous and pay the exorbitant prices demanded by the suppliers. Many trappers ran themselves into debt to the fur companies by buying on credit at the high prices at the rendezvous. These prices, in turn,
were determined to a certain extent by the prices the traders could get for the furs once these had been transported back to St. Louis. And the whole fur trade was controlled by a fleeting fashion fad in Europe. Thus, the “independent” fur trapper was, in reality, dependent on city style for his livelihood. The fur trade, and the mountain man way of life, ended abruptly when fur hats went out of fashion.

**Mountain Men and Indians**

Living in the mountains, among native peoples who had lived there for generations, the historical mountain men relied on European technologies but also adopted many native practices. The natives, in turn, began to trade for and use European guns and ammunition, metal weapons (knives, tomahawks) and tools (needles, cookware), and woven fabrics. The Rocky Mountain culture in the early nineteenth century was a unique blend of European and native lifeways. At this point in history, it was by no means inevitable that the European invaders would prevail in the North American west. If anything, the balance of power at the time favored the natives. At the historical rendezvous, native peoples of several tribes outnumbered the white trappers, and the journals of the time describe winter camps at which white trappers and Indians camped side by side in apparent amity. Many trappers married Indian women, and some of them, like James Beckwourth, lived for extended periods of time within Indian communities.

In some cases, the adoption of Indianness was self-conscious. As noted by Washington Irving, “You cannot pay a free trapper a greater compliment, than to persuade him you have mistaken him for an Indian brave; and, in truth, the counterfeit is complete” (qtd. in Utley 14). A German physician, Frederick A Wislizenus, who attended the 1839 rendezvous, noted in his journal:

In manners and customs, the trappers have borrowed much from the Indians. Many of them, too, have taken Indian women as wives. Their dress is generally of leather. The hair of the head is usually allowed to grow long. In place of money, they use beaver skins… (qtd. in Gowans Rocky, 190-1)

The trappers, then, dressed and sometimes acted like Indians. The general boastful nature of the mountain men revealed itself in display of finery, much of which was made by their Indian wives or by the men themselves in imitation of and improvisation on Indian work. The adoption of Indian lifeways was a practical matter in that it enabled survival with locally available materials, but it was also a point of vanity as display of “wealth.” Beaver pelts were used to obtain trade goods, which in turn could be used to purchase wives from their fathers. Missionary William Gray, passing through the 1837 rendezvous on the way to find a (white, Christian) wife back east, describes in his journal the buying of women from their fathers and also the trading (sometimes on a wager) of wives among the traders themselves.

These intercultural marriages, like marriages in general, varied in their nature. Some (non-Indian) diarists and later historians claim that Indian women perceived trappers as desirable husbands because of their wealth. As noted by artist Alfred J. Miller,

A Free Trapper (white or half-breed), being ton or upper circle, is a most desirable match, but it is conceded that he is a ruined man after such an investment, the lady running into unheard of extravagancies. She wants a dress, horse, gorgeous saddle, trappings, and the deuce knows what beside. For this the poor devil trapper sells himself, body and soul, to the Fur Company for a number of years. (qtd. in Gowans Rocky, 158)
Joe Meek’s marriage to a Snake Indian beauty named Mountain Lamb shows that some marriages were true emotional bonds (Victor 104-7). Mountain Lamb and her father were instrumental in saving Meek and his companion, Milton Sublette, from execution by their tribe, and Meek’s memoirs indicate that both he and Sublette were smitten by the young woman when she handed them the reins on the horses used for escape. Sublette later returned to the tribe and married Mountain Lamb; Meek married her after Sublette’s death. James Beckwourth’s memoirs show a darker take on marriage. He stoutly defends his brutal public murder of an Indian wife who disobeyed him by dancing with her friends in celebration of the arrival of three white scalps (that is, news of three white men killed) at the Crow Indian camp (Oswald 114-8). Beckwourth claims that the wife’s father defended Beckwourth’s action, explaining to the tribe that his daughter deserved death because she had disobeyed her husband.

The journals of the members of the Lewis and Clark expedition indicate a particular interest in the lifeways of the various tribes of Indians met along the way. This interest also manifests itself in many of the journals of the later fur trappers and mountain men. Direct contact with tribal cultures that differed radically from each other made it a matter of survival to be able to recognize the tribal affiliation of Indians encountered along the trail. Back east in the United States, and further east in Europe and beyond, writers of various disciplines were theorizing about “the Indian,” some kind of generic being, and “his” place in the cosmic order of things. The traders and trappers in the Rocky Mountains understood that each tribe had its own culture, and that within each tribe were individual persons to be reckoned with, each on his or her own terms.

The straightforward way in which most of the tales of violence against Indians are told reveals little concern about the “appropriateness” of the attacks. Joe Meek, for all his affection for Mountain Lamb and the Indian woman he married after Mountain Lamb died, seems to advocate violence against Indians known to be hostile as the best defense against them. He recalls killing an Indian just because he looked like he might steal a beaver trap (Victor 122). He defends actions like this and an unprovoked attack on a Blackfoot village (217) by claiming that “among these unfriendly Indians, not to attack was to be attacked” (218). For Meek and many other trappers, living in constant danger of attack by Blackfeet, it made sense (in terms of survival) to shoot first and ask questions later. Kit Carson, whose memoirs also reflect this attitude, describes an attack by trappers on a Blackfoot village just “to discover who had a right to the country” (Grant 40). In the Rocky Mountains at that time, the “right” to a “country” was something taken by force, not determined by law, custom, or precedent. Meek describes another situation in which the men of an unidentified tribe of Indians, who were unknown to and by the trappers, began to crowd around the trappers’ camp, touching and stealing various portable items. After some effort to get the Indians to leave, the trappers opened fire on the Indians, who were unfamiliar with guns. Several Indians died, and the rest fled (Victor 146). Meek also tells of hungry trappers who raided some gardens planted by the relatively un-warlike tribe of Moqui Indians. When the Indians objected, they were slaughtered (153).

Even among tribes generally known to be friendly to Americans, treachery was always a possibility. Warren Ferris describes being among a small party of trappers visiting with some Snake Indians. The Snakes were considered to be friendly, and the Indians in this band were behaving in a peaceful and welcoming manner. Then the “Horn Chief” of the tribe suddenly began to harangue his people, seeming to challenge them and shame them. Only after the crisis was over did Ferris and his companions learn that the Snakes had weapons underneath their
clothing and had intended to slaughter the white trappers (Ferris 70-3). The journals and histories of the time tell many tales of men killed, mostly by members of the Blackfoot confederation but also by Cheyennes (Jedediah Smith), Arikaras (Hugh Glass), and others, and in many cases the bodies of the trappers were mutilated. It is difficult to accurately assess what we would consider today to be atrocities in the treatment of enemy dead. Both Indians and trappers were known to take scalps. There are several descriptions in diaries, particularly those of the missionary couples at the 1836 rendezvous (Gowans Rocky, 129-135), of “scalp dances” performed by Indians. The ladies, in particular, were horrified by the sight of the scalps and the apparent pleasure taken in displaying them. Father DeSmet, a Catholic missionary at the 1840 rendezvous, recorded in his journal the fate of Blackfoot women taken as prisoners by their enemies, the Snake Indians. The Snakes would turn the prisoners over to their own women, who “immediately butcher them with their hatchets and knives” and curse them and their people (Gowans 196). I have found no descriptions of similar butchery of Indian bodies by white trappers, but then it seems likely that such actions, if they occurred, would not make it into diaries or into print because European and American readers would find them barbaric. The oral lore at the latter-day rendezvous suggests that the worst thing a trapper could do to a slain enemy was to leave him unburied and thus “make wolf meat out of him.”

The ethnocentricity of many trappers is evident in their writing, even when they are simply describing the different Indian tribes. Osbourne Russell, for example, appends his journal with a natural history section that lists and describes species of animals and tribes of Indians almost as if the Indians were but another category of the Rocky Mountain fauna. Jedediah Smith, in his journals, makes careful notes of distinctions among the tribes he encountered. During his journey to California in 1826/27, Smith and his party encountered many Indians who had not had any previous experience with Europeans or Americans. His journal specifically notes generalizations about Indians but also awareness of individuality within a given tribe. He wrote,

It is a general characteristic of Indians to answer your questions in the manner that they think will please you but without any regard to the truth. There are however some individuals of different tribes in the mountains on whose word you may depend. (Brooks 64).

Smith describes the “Utas” (Utahs) as “clean” and not given to theft; according to Smith, members of this tribe “make a nearer approach to civilized life than any Indians I have seen in the interior” (43). He describes another (unnamed) tribe as “in a mental scale lower than any I have yet seen” (49). The Indians were always measured against Euro-American standards. Smith tried to maintain friendly relations with the Indians he met, but he found himself in one situation much like that described by Meek and cited above. The Indians were crowding around Smith’s party, and Smith sensed that they perceived the whites as weak because they did not attack and carried only knives and tomahawks for weapons. (That is, no bows and arrows or spears, the long-distance weapons of choice. Guns just looked like oddly shaped sticks.) Smith finally chose a moment for two of his men to fire on the Indians. The two targets fell dead, and the rest of the tribe quickly dispersed (156-7).

Violence, then, was part of life in the Rocky Mountains. Whether we see it as right or wrong by today’s ethical standards, this was a world in which the aggressive, healthy, and strong intimidated, dispersed, or slaughtered the weak. Thrown into the mix by the Euro-American explorers, trappers, and traders, Jared Diamond’s “guns, germs, and steel” eventually tipped the
balance of power against the Indians. It is significant that the fur trade era revisited in today’s rendezvous was a time before that balance of power had been tipped, a time when personal courage, survival skill, and readiness for warfare were held in high regard, partly because they were necessary for survival.

**Mountain Men and the Environment**

I would like to briefly address the relationship between the mountain men and the natural world they lived in because it is an important concern for many re-enactment groups. It also reveals some of the assumptions that underlie current attitudes toward the environment. The historical mountain men were drawn to their rugged lifeway partly because they preferred living in the wilderness to life in the cities or on frontier farms. Their journals indicate appreciation for the beauty of the mountains, fascination with the flora and fauna of the area, and interest in the details of the daily lives and customs of the Indians. Trappers were humbled by encounters with weather extremes, hostile Indians, and grizzly bears and elated when they succeeded in overcoming adversity of all kinds. For the most part, theirs was a pragmatic existence untroubled by philosophical or religious angst. (The notable exception, of course, was Jedediah Smith.)

The trappers seemed to regard their natural world as dangerous at times but otherwise available for exploitation. Americans, in particular, trapped the beaver streams without concern for the long-term survival of the beaver. Both Utley (73-75) and Berry (89) note that the British trappers took care to leave some beaver colonies in place, so as to ensure future harvests of pelts, but that the Americans took no such precautions. In fact, the trappers significantly depleted both beaver and game animal populations. Osborne Russell, for example, notes in his journal in November of 1839 that “[t]he trappers often remarked to each other as they rode over these lonely plains that it was time for the White man to leave the mountains as the Beaver and game had nearly disappeared” (123). European settlers in the Americas had a long tradition of taking what they wanted from the wilderness and moving on when resources were depleted. The fur trappers were no exception, and they trapped heavily solely for the purpose of making money.

**Chapter Conclusion**

The received stories of the history of the Rocky Mountain fur trade need no embellishment to stand as rollicking tales of personal courage and no small amount of luck. The plots are thick with intrigue among traders, alliances among Indian tribes and Europeans of several nationalities, and encounters with grizzly bears, rabid wolves, and rain-swollen rivers. The rendezvous themselves were scenes of formal English-style visits, cultural exchange of dance and music, drunken brawls, and competitions in athletics and marksmanship. The mountain men and Indians were colorful characters whose sometimes outrageous behavior might have landed them in a city jail. The underlying historical myths and habits of mind that come from this period of history are significant and enduring in United States culture. I will outline them briefly here and return to them in my discussion of mythmaking in chapters 4 and 5.

The expansion of the fur trade is a clear example of the attitude behind what was later called “manifest destiny”: the idea that Euro-Americans had not only the right but some kind of divine mandate to expand the country, and with it their lifeways, as far as possible. The expansion proceeded as official government policy (treaties, the Louisiana Purchase) but also on an individual basis as enterprising young men sought to make their fortunes in unknown lands. America’s continuing expansionist tendencies are evident in our recent (2003) foreign policies.
like crushing governments of which we do not approve. Manifest destiny is closely tied to myths surrounding the American form of capitalism, with its dream that any hard-working person can become wealthy. This spirit of opportunism, in turn, is enmeshed with an underlying belief that the planet is ours to plunder. American fur trappers took every beaver they could trap, and they killed what game they needed to eat. As noted above, even the trappers themselves could see that their activities had changed their world, that game and beaver had become scarce after only 15 years of intensive trapping and hunting. The foregrounding of immediate and personal gain, in wealth or in survival, over the long-term and collective good, underlies current government policies that are allowing “healthy forest initiatives” that, in fact, decimate natural parklands once set aside as forever wild.

I must also mention here the attitudes towards First Nations peoples that spring not only from the Rocky Mountain fur trade era but also from the very first contacts between Indians and Europeans. As noted above, most mountain men adopted at least some aspects of Indian culture: technology and skills for survival (making shelter and clothing, finding and preparing foods) and social traditions as men married into Indian families and raised children within the wives’ cultures. This unique mix of cultural traditions is revisited in a variety of ways among buckskinner at the latter-day rendezvous encampments. The blending of cultural traditions also has significance in the United States today as we negotiate diversity among the many peoples from all over the world who seek residence here.

The Rocky Mountain fur trade era appeals to buckskinners in many ways. Some are drawn to the way of life, to the ability of these men and women to survive hardships that are truly difficult to imagine. Others are fascinated by the material cultures of the mountain men and their Indian families and friends. Still others are attracted to the colorful characters, with their self-reliance and scorn of soft city life. For buckskinners who actually live in the country where mountain men trapped and lived, the details of place help them connect more deeply to their homelands. In the next chapter, I show that this sense of connection is developed via enactment, and I categorize this enactment process as an improvisational theatrical form.

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1 Speculations on what the west was like and who lived there are fascinating. One map shows Welsh persons living there, and several show a river that connects Great Salt Lake with the Pacific Ocean. Such a river does not exist, but it persisted on maps for many years.

2 For simplicity’s sake, I will refer to this confederation as “Blackfeet” throughout. It should be understood that these Indians were acting with both active and tacit support from British fur traders. Likewise, in fights between the Blackfeet and the Shoshone or Flatheads, American trappers would join in battle on the side of their allies.

3 I am ignoring the issue of European and American intrusion on Indian lands not because it is unimportant but because historically, for the most part, Europeans and Americans acted as if the land was theirs to fight over. The historical mountain men varied a great deal in their attitudes toward Indians, and they were keenly aware of differences among tribal groups.

4 Caching involved digging a bottle-shaped hole (narrow on top, wide at the bottom), lining it with dried sticks to keep the contents away from the damp earth, putting the furs (or other goods) inside the stick lining, layering more sticks on top of the stash, and covering the whole thing with the original turf. The trick was to keep everything dry and to dig and cover the cache so that it would not be found by Indians or rival fur companies. Thus, all the dirt had to be carried away from the mouth of the cache, and much care was taken with the final covering to make the site look undisturbed. Lewis and Clark reported using caches on their journey, and they were common throughout the frontier in situations where people had too much to carry. Many caches were destroyed by water (flooding, or bad cache building) or robbed, but some were opened two or more years later with no damage to the contents.

5 The local fauna, however, were less accommodating, and several men from different companies were attacked by a rabid wolf (Gowans 1985, 85-88), to die horrible deaths over the next few months.

6 Exceptions to the rule of selling only period merchandise include how-to books on making clothing and accoutrements, books about the Rocky Mountain fur trade, and flyers for traders’ own businesses.
A mispronunciation of the French “bourgeois.”

It should be noted here that exaggerating and adding fictitious details to stories was a trait quite common among mountain men; indeed, a good liar was applauded for his temerity. The campfire tales at today’s rendezvous attempt to capture this tradition of tall tale telling.

It is difficult to assess the circumstances under which trappers bought wives. In some tribal cultures, the purchase of a wife was the accepted way of things. For example, in her ethnographic novel *Waterlily* (originally published in the 1940s), Lakota Ella Cara Deloria describes her female protagonist as being flattered that a would-be husband paid a high price for her. Other tribes may have had different ways of perceiving the exchange of material goods for women. It is also worth noting that the traditional English-American system of negotiating marriage was in many ways an economic agreement between the father of the bride and the future husband; the economic aspects of marriage were, of course, masked by social customs and rituals.

The sources’ European bias is significant. Among many Indian tribes, the accumulation of personal wealth is considered to be anti-social, since the materially fortunate are expected to give away material goods to those in need.
CHAPTER 2
LIVING TRUTHFULLY UNDER IMAGINARY CIRCUMSTANCES:
RENDEZVOUS AS IMPROVISATIONAL THEATRE

…living truthfully under imaginary circumstances . . . is my definition of
good acting.

--- Sanford Meisner (15)

The “real” history of rendezvous outlined in the last chapter comprises the factual basis
for today’s rendezvous encampments. Efforts to recreate the historical events began as simple
shooting contests with period guns and evolved into social gatherings that included merchants
and the families of shooters and merchants. I see this evolution as a movement toward
theatricalization, from simple imitation of shooting techniques to increasingly detailed
embodiment of “characters” in settings that have become more and more elaborately imitative of
the historical encampments. Today’s so-called rendezvous re-enactments, framed by others as
flawed attempts to re-create history, are more accurately framed as theatrical events; that is, they
are performances about history rather than performances of history. I define them as theatrical
events because they fit the oft-cited definition of theatre as a special space and time in which
person A (an actor) impersonates person B (a character) while person C (a spectator) looks on.

In support of this argument, in this chapter I describe today’s rendezvous in terms of theatrical
settings (special time and place), characters (A, B, and C in the above equation), and actions
(imitation and/or impersonation). I also argue that the specific theatrical form that is active at
rendezvous, since it is unscripted, is improvisation. The overall improvisational scenario is
based on the historical events described in the last chapter, and the improvisations themselves
involve enactment of personae and engagement with mutually accepted symbols of historical
material culture. I see these experiments with persona and improvisations as a kind creative
symbolic play. I discuss the implications of such play in the chapters that follow.

History of Rendezvous Re-Enactments

As noted in chapter 1, the Scot William Drummond Stewart twice attended rendezvous as
an interested observer, paying the Rocky Mountain Fur Company for the privilege. The artist he
brought with him in 1837, Alfred Jacob Miller, was similarly an observer, not involved in the fur
trade. One might suppose that many of the Indians present at the original rendezvous went
simply out of curiosity and to take advantage of opportunities to trade for goods not generally
available in the area in the early 1800s. Thus, from the very beginning, rendezvous held some
attraction for “tourists.” Stewart was so enthusiastic about rendezvous that in 1843, three years
after the last “real” rendezvous, he organized and paid for another trip to the Rocky Mountains to
revisit his experiences there (Hubbell 2). More than 100 years would go by before others would seek to recreate the fur trade rendezvous.

Wayne Stringfellow, in his dissertation, traces the development of the contemporary rendezvous back to the 1930s recreational activities sponsored by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration during the Great Depression (9). The earliest events were shooting contests in which muzzle-loading firearms were used. The first shooting contest took place in Friendship, Indiana, on December 23, 1932 (10). An early shooting enthusiast, Red Farris, was among the first to promote the establishment of the National Muzzle Loading Rifle Association (NMLRA) in February of 1933 (13). The NMLRA sponsored shooting matches and created a newsletter that in 1939 became Muzzle Blasts, which is still published today (18).

By 1940, the shooting contests were drawing more and more enthusiasts; the shoots became associated in the minds of the participants with the Rocky Mountain fur trade era (Stringfellow 22). Contestants began wearing period clothing; the men wore fringed buckskin jackets, and one woman showed up in a buckskin dress in an Indian style. In 1941, historical shelters (tipis, period tents) appeared at the annual national “shoot,” and some participants demonstrated and sold craft work from the period (23). The simple shooting contests were thus expanding to include supporting activities and materials. The clothing, shelters, and historical accoutrements changed a simple historical activity (shooting) into a more environmental experience. I see wearing historical costume as a step toward enactment of persona, the use of period shelters as a step toward creating a theatrical setting, and the practice of traditional crafts skills along with the shooting contests as a step toward theatrical action.

In 1948, trading became a traditional part of the activities at competitive shoots (Stringfellow 29). As William Ashley did at the first rendezvous in 1825, the traders would spread out blankets with their wares on them and barter with buyers. The gatherings thus grew beyond the original bond of interest in old guns, becoming social events with people creating their own “traditions” and a unique kind of culture (30). The first conscious re-enactment of a rendezvous, which took place in 1959 near Wapakoneta, Ohio, involved primitive shelters and camping equipment, period clothing and accessories, and shooting and tomahawk-throwing contests (35). The activities of daily life at rendezvous – cooking meals and camping with historically authentic gear, trading – began to shape themselves after the historical events as a conscious effort to recreate the past.

The NMLRA hosted the first national rendezvous at their home base in Friendship, Indiana, in 1960 (Stringfellow 37). A “Commercial Row” of sheds was built on the grounds, and a tradition of unique mountain man games was initiated with the creation of a contest called “the Seneca.” The Seneca took place along a 300-yard course and involved running with an empty gun to a shooting station, loading the gun, shooting at one of five targets set up along the course, and then running to the next shooting station (37-8). The Seneca was imitated at other gatherings and gave rise to increasingly complicated contests which have enough of a story line to qualify as scenarios for improvised performances of mountain man culture.

In the mid-1960s, women began attending rendezvous (Stringfellow 41), bringing with them their own handicraft and camping skills. The addition of families increased the apparent authenticity of the encampments, since the historical events had always included families. Buckskinners became interested in sharing their knowledge and activities with the public (42) and did demonstrations and workshops with the Boy Scouts and school groups. They also began to appear at events like public historical re-enactments, civic celebrations, and parades. As demonstrators of historical culture, buckskinners were self-consciously performing this culture,
as what I will call theatre, for a clearly defined audience. These performances were geared
toward teaching, but the instructors were dressed in costume and manipulated historically
authentic props in their demonstrations.

In 1968, NMLRA member Walter “Griz” Hayward started a group called the American
Mountain Men (AMM), a men-only group focused on survival skills (Anderson 160). AMM
activities began as survival events (wilderness camping, hunting, and treks) with high-tech gear
and later developed into similar activities with historically authentic clothing and equipment.
This shift from simple survival experience to imitation of historical models marks another step
toward theatricality because it involves a strong sense of identification with historical mountain
men and a self-conscious imitation of their activities. The AMM often attend rendezvous in
addition to their own events.

By 1972, the NMRLA membership had swelled to almost seventeen thousand, over two
hundred of whom were residents of countries other than the United States (Stringfellow 43). The
inclusion of women and eventually children in rendezvous events led to increasing use of
buckskinning activities as a way to explore family heritage and to go back to the roots of (white)
American culture. Simple practice of historical material culture thus began to expand into living
of historical story. During the 1970s and 1980s, rendezvous encampments became increasingly
popular. Some five hundred people from all over the country attended the 1973 rendezvous in
Chadron, Nebraska (47). Commercial traders, many of whom had permanent retail or mail-order
stores, came in increasing numbers (63). Rendezvous thus developed its own economy, with
traders supplying the clothing and equipment necessary for camping at a rendezvous. Such
commercial activity recalled and expanded on the original purpose of historical rendezvous: to
exchange furs (“money”) for supplies and tools. The traders’ tents, piled as they were with
historically authentic “props,” also contributed to the atmospheric setting of a rendezvous.

Non-re-enactors also began attending some rendezvous, bringing an outside “audience”
into the environment. Many of them wanted to learn about the activities, crafts, and clothing
with the idea of eventually joining the rendezvousers. In response to this, classes on primitive
leather tanning, beadwork, clothing, medicinal herbs, and a wide variety of other subjects were
offered at some rendezvous (Stringfellow 83). These overt performances served to teach new or
potential buckskinnners and also provided education and entertainment for the simply curious. A
1982 rendezvous near Plant City, Florida, included an Indian Pow Wow (67) and workshops on
traditional crafts. Native Americans (71) and Boy Scouts (72) were included in several
rendezvous events and in teaching activities outside of the formal events. A women’s group, the
Hyu Eenas (“many beavers” in the Tchinook language), was formed in 1984 (their perhaps
unfortunate choice to refer to themselves as beavers had to do with their beaver-like
industriousness and their value, measured in the currency of beaver pelts, to their men) (72).
Rendezvous also went international, in South Africa in 1981 and near Germany in 1982 (67). In
the early 1990s “Mountain Mike” Garden taught a non-credit course on buckskinning at North
Idaho College in Coeur d’Alene as part of their community education program (87). In this way,
buckskinnners sought and drew larger and larger audiences for their performances.

**Defining Rendezvous as Theatrical Enactment**

Rendezvous have thus developed over the years from shooting contests, in which only the
guns and bullets could be described as historically authentic, to entire encampments with a high
degree of verisimilitude with reference to historical material culture. Within these historically
authentic settings, the activities have expanded from manipulation of the period weapons during
practice and competitions to whole days spent interacting with historical materials of daily life: clothing, shelters, furniture, cooking and eating implements, lighting, and so forth. The practice of wearing historically authentic clothing has evolved, for some buckskinner, into research on and performance of historical persona. All of these developments, in my view, constitute a general trend toward theatrical performance. If theatre is defined as a special time and place in which an actor impersonates a character while a spectator looks on, then rendezvous, which today include all of these elements, qualify as theatre. In the sections that follow I will examine each of these theatrical elements in detail.

**Special Time**

Rendezvous are defined as such by rules of historical authenticity that are enforced by the groups that set up and run the encampments. That is, the difference between a rendezvous and the everyday life of a buckskinner is that the buckskinner must adhere to these rules during rendezvous. The rules are, then, what defines the “special time” for the theatre of rendezvous. They also define the characteristics of the theatrical “special place” of rendezvous, because the details of the settings must be period correct. On a broad scale, the rules require that all material items (shelters, equipment, clothing, and accessories) be “period” or “primitive,” which in the buckskinning world means that they reflect actual materials or technologies that existed before 1840 (the year of the last historical rendezvous). The National Rendezvous and Living History Foundation (NRLHF) is the largest organization that concerns itself with the rules of rendezvous. Even smaller groups not affiliated with the NRLHF accept their rules as guidelines, so it is worthwhile here to look at NRLHF regulations.

The NRLHF is a specialized branch the National Muzzle Loading Rifle Association. In addition to rendezvous, this nonprofit organization produces educational programs, exhibits, museums, re-enactments, and other history-related events. The NRLHF website posts an extensive list (6 printed pages) of rules and regulations for rendezvous. In addition to emergency plans and health and safety rules (all required by law), the rules address the concern for historical authenticity. The opening paragraph of the Rendezvous Rules and Regulations reads as follows:

*Attendance at a Foundation Rendezvous event means: All clothing, lodges and accouterments must be in the period of 1640 through 1840 in North America. Absolutely no modern footwear and sunglasses of any kind, unless medically required. Period eyewear is encouraged for those wearing glasses. Eye & hearing protection is encouraged on the firing line only! All modern items (coolers, bottles, cans, plastic, etc.) must be kept out of sight at all times. All Photography equipment (cameras, camcorders, etc.) must be covered when not in use and NO flash photography. Cell phones should be kept out of sight at all times. (“National Rendezvous and Living History Foundation”)*

I want to call attention here to the provision that modern items be kept out of sight. This provision acknowledges that such non-primitive things are, in fact, present at rendezvous. The NRLHF is not saying here that one must leave cameras and cell phones behind. The point is to minimize the intrusion of present-day technologies into the theatrical “set” of a rendezvous.

The NRLHF sponsors one rendezvous per year in each of eight geographical regions within the United States, including Alaska and Hawaii, and one national rendezvous at the NMLRA “home” in Friendship, Indiana. Rendezvous that are not sponsored by the NRLHF (for example, the Fort Bridger and Alafia River Rendezvous) have their own sets of rules and
regulations, but the spirit of maintaining the look of historical authenticity is fairly consistent across rendezvous. Besides ensuring the safety and health of participants, the main purpose of whatever rules do apply is to create and maintain a “period” environment for each rendezvous. The rules of historical authenticity thus serve as a set of theatrical conventions that define rendezvous as rendezvous. When the rules are in place defines the special time of rendezvous, and the places where the rules apply define the special place of rendezvous.

Rendezvous are scheduled sometimes years ahead of time, and the larger regional rendezvous sponsored by the NRLHF offer discounts to members who register before cutoff dates some weeks in advance of the events. Rendezvous vary in length from simple overnights to events that include two weekends and the week in between. Many offer early setups during the days before the more formal rendezvous begins, extending the total time for several more days. Most have a clear ending time by which all camps must be removed from the site.

Within the span of time designated as “rendezvous,” there are chunks of time that can be differentiated from each other by variations in how the rules of historical authenticity are applied. During the early set-up period, for example, the rules of authenticity are relaxed somewhat as campers drive motor vehicles in and out of a site, setting up camp homes and trader tents. While they are doing so they are not required to dress in period clothing, and non-primitive materials can be left in the open. During the early set-up time last-minute preparations, like installation of portable toilets (popularly referred to as hooters) or cutting and splitting of firewood with chain saws and hydraulic splitters, may be going on. The overall effect of the juxtaposition of realistic set pieces and construction machinery is much like that of a stage set being loaded in. In theatrical terms, the real show has not yet started; there may be some rehearsing going on, but it is scattered throughout the encampment.

The beginning of the official rendezvous – show time – is marked by more strict enforcement of the rules of historical authenticity. These rules are interpreted and enforced by the “Booshway” and his “Segundo,” aided by a group of “dog soldiers” who patrol the camp. In theatrical terms, at this point the set must be masked so that all stage machinery is hidden backstage. However, some breaks in the rules of historical authenticity are permitted. During specified times, newly arriving campers can drive in to a site, unload their gear (they usually have an hour to do so), and drive out. (Similarly, as they leave they have an hour to load up.) Depending on the rendezvous, they may or may not have to wear period clothing as they set up camp. At the 2003 Southeastern rendezvous, most campers changed into period clothing only after the camp was set up. At the 2004 Alafia River Rendezvous, campers had to be wearing period clothing to even enter the site. (A changing tent was set up at the registration gate.) Brief breaks in historical authenticity occur throughout any large rendezvous – a kind of “backstage” that happens in time rather than in space. Trucks enter the rendezvous for distributing ice, collecting trash, and attending to medical emergencies. A “mountain man” might pull a camera out of his possibles bag to capture a quick shot, or a trader might keep in touch with international news on a hidden radio turned on at very low volume. The illusion of living in the nineteenth century is shattered briefly and then restored. Despite these breaks, most of the camp during most of the official rendezvous complies with most of the rules of authenticity.

Yet a third clearly defined special time at rendezvous occurs when tourist visitors, persons dressed in non-period clothing, may enter the site. There are then two separate groups of people, those who are complying with the rules of historical authenticity and those who are not. When these outsiders are present, the dynamics of the theatrical performance change from re-enactors performing for each other to a meta-theatre in which the audience is enlarged to include
the tourists. The visitors ask re-enactors to pose for photos, buy from traders, ask questions, and simply by being there make buckskinners more conscious of their performance as historical “characters.” Visitors may or may not be allowed to enter the primitive camping or shooting areas, but they are welcome along traders’ row. In every rendezvous I have attended, visiting hours were limited from mid-morning to early evening. At the Alafia River Rendezvous, the entire camp is closed to visitors until the second weekend of the event.

Rendezvous that allow tourist visitors have some “closing time” at which all persons dressed in non-period clothing and all non-emergency motor vehicles must leave the encampment. The site then belongs to the re-enactors, and the atmosphere changes to resemble rendezvous that are completely closed to tourists. The meta-theatre that includes tourists shrinks to include only those who have tacitly agreed to play the game of rendezvous. Much of this time is spent in non-historical conversation, sharing music and food, and sitting around a campfire. Sometime these small gatherings turn into history lessons or tall tale telling in the mountain man tradition, but many conversations are about life back home, current politics, or which are the best rendezvous. In theatrical terms, this is “green room” time, when actors backstage get to know each other in ways there was not time for during rehearsals. The shared interest in acting, in this case playing at rendezvous, builds a sense of community among people who are “really” quite diverse.

In terms of my theatrical definition, then, rendezvous take place during special times set aside for the events. They are planned well in advance and have clear beginning and ending times. Within many of the larger rendezvous, there are subdivisions of time that are differentiated by the degree to which the rules of historical authenticity apply to these events: the early set-up stage-building time during which the rules are frequently broken out of necessity, formal primitive rendezvous time in which rules of authenticity require that the total environment maintain a period look, and then more open time when outside visitors, who are not subject to the rules of historical authenticity, are allowed to enter into the encampment.

**Special Place**

The encampments, as the “special place” for what I am calling the history-based theatrical performance at rendezvous, are, like the special times, defined by the rules of historical authenticity. For the purposes of my discussion, I will include in the “special place” category all of the visual elements at rendezvous: settings large and small, properties, and costumes. All of these visual elements contribute to the total look of rendezvous and thus help differentiate the rendezvous environment from that of the outside world; that is, the look defines the special place.

Many rendezvous settings are beautiful, with scattered white tents and tipis contrasting with the lush greenery of the surrounding landscape. The equipment and clothing are quite photogenic, and books and journals prominently feature richly textured photos of campsites and their inhabitants. Latter-day rendezvous are often set in locations near the historical sites, but the spread of the rendezvous tradition throughout the country and the world has led to encampments in places that are very different from the high river valleys among the Rocky Mountains. Mountains, apparently, are not required for today’s Rocky Mountain rendezvous. The main requirement seems to be a rural setting with minimal intrusion of city lights and sounds. The rural setting is integral to the atmospheric “stage world” of the nineteenth century. I was surprised to find how quickly I could become drawn into the setting: I became used to seeing only canvas dwellings, night lighting only from campfires and candles, and people walking
around dressed in period clothing. A pickup truck looks truly peculiar in this setting, as did a one-person flying contraption that flew noisily back and forth over the 2003 Southeastern Rendezvous with the (probably curious) pilot waving at the curious crowd.

Many of the NRLHA rendezvous sites change from year to year, and local branches of the NMLRA may compete for the privilege of hosting a regional event. A rendezvous, particularly a large one with hundreds of camps and dozens of trading tents, takes up a lot of acreage. The Fort Bridger Rendezvous, as noted in the introduction, is set in a National Park. Often a local landowner donates or rents the use of his or her property for a site. Other groups may purchase property on which to hold rendezvous, hunt, camp, and engage in other bucksiskinning activities. Ownership of land allows a sponsoring group to build structures or shooting ranges that remain in place throughout the year. The Alafia River rendezvous, held on club property, features a beautifully made permanent horse camp that evokes a historical trading post, and the club has constructed stockade-like fences that mask the portable toilets and even a huge dumpster in the middle of camp. Their shooting range is situated among excavated rows of earth berms to catch bullets. The simpler small camps can take place anywhere a tent can be pitched. The American Mountain Men often forego even tents on their treks and solo camps, setting up simple shelters constructed with rectangles or triangles of canvas stretched strategically with ropes and pegs.

As is the case with the time aspects, there are breaks in authenticity within the special space for the meta-theatre that is rendezvous and also specific sites for which there are different rules about what level of historical authenticity must be maintained. The ideal situation would require that everything in the site be period authentic. For very small rendezvous or those that are set in places so removed that one must hike or ride a horse into the site, it is possible to keep almost everything “on stage” during the event. (That is, there is no break in historical authenticity.) At the larger rendezvous it is difficult to avoid “backstage” spaces within the environmental “set”: within tents, behind the barricades that hide hooters and dumpsters, and under fabric, leather, and wooden covers for everything from coolers to crude showers. Food vendors are permitted to use propane tanks, but these are concealed by canvas or other barriers. Obvious trash cans at the Alafia River Rendezvous were covered with burlap to look less obtrusive. Rendezvous resemble stage sets in that it is what “reads” that counts. The stage illusion works because participants will tolerate small or brief anachronisms without losing their willingness to suspend disbelief.

Within the larger environmental stage of the camp itself are a variety of smaller “stages.” Not all rendezvous have all of these playing areas, but I will describe them briefly. There is always a primitive camp, which may or may not be separated from the traders’ row (many traders live in their camps in an area partitioned off at the back of the trading tent or in a separate nearby tent). The day-to-day improvisational interactions occur throughout both camping and trading areas. There is almost always some area set aside for shooting and other competitive events. Safety concerns are primary here, and gun ranges are set well away from the camps. Bow-and-arrow target ranges and tomahawk and knife targets (usually cross sections of large tree trunks set on stands) are similarly set up in places where people will not stray into danger. Target ranges of all kinds are clearly marked, open only at specific times, and usually patrolled by dog soldiers. Some mountain man skills events, which include opportunities to shoot a gun and/or bow and arrow, use knife and tomahawk, start a fire with flint and steel, and so forth, take place in “woods walk” areas that are open to participants only for most of the contests. Competitors walk from station to station to shoot at designated targets in a woodland setting.
Woods walks are overtly theatrical; for example, they may feature cardboard or plastic animal (or Indian) targets, some stationary and some swinging on visible mechanical cable systems. Where shooters must stand is clearly marked, and an official scorer goes along with the competitors. Breaks in the action occur for scoring or retrieving arrows and for explanations of rules or scenarios.

Other “sets” at rendezvous include the meeting and entertainment areas in camp. There may be a simple wooden stage, or benches set up around a bonfire, an arbor of trees, a tent set up for seminars or school, or simply an open area. Some all-camp events at the Fort Bridger Rendezvous were held at the gazebo, a blatantly anachronistic structure that was accepted (along with the historical buildings of the fort, built after 1840) as part of the environment of the rendezvous. These stages hold the opening and closing ceremonies, administrative camp meetings, storytelling sessions, weddings, feasts and dances, musical entertainments, and so forth.

The smallest “stages” at rendezvous are the family camps or groups of camps centered around a common cooking and meeting area. Some camps are elaborate “sets” in themselves, including some kind of shelter, a cooking area, a place to eat and/or gather for conversation, sometimes a shower of some kind, and perhaps a craft area or trade blanket set out with some goods on it. These camp sets range from simple mountain man tarp lean-tos to box or marquee tents to Plains Indian tipis and other Indian-style shelters, all with appropriate furniture and cooking set-ups. Some of these sets are quite elaborate and pay great attention to historically correct detail. The common stage areas and family or group campsites provide a visual backdrop for daily life at rendezvous. The rules of authenticity require that all such areas contain only items that would have been available before 1840. They therefore shape the overall look of the campsites as discrete theatrical sets with historically authentic props.

The props at rendezvous are an integral part of the settings. For some buckskinners, authentic props serve as displays of historical knowledge. That is, a knowledgeable “mountain man” wears, carries, and uses the clothing and accessories appropriate for his role: buckskin shirt and leggings, moccasins, fur cap, leather “possibles bag” (a kind of purse for men), flintlock, powder horn, water container, knives, etc. A student of Creek Indian culture would be identifiable through her palm leaf-roofed shelter, simple camp, and Creek-style clothing with perhaps a touch of European influence (like covering the breasts in public). A marksman with gun or bow and arrow is likely to use equipment that is sometimes exquisitely made. Just as knowledge about history shows up in one’s clothing and accoutrements, lack of knowledge signals itself in inappropriate or new-looking clothing; buckskinners who know a lot about history or have been involved in the rendezvous community for any length of time can easily pick out a beginner.

Although wearing period clothing is sometimes part of an impersonation of character, and thus has bearing on my discussion of enactment below, I include it here in the “special place” discussion because costuming is part of the overall look of the theatrical environment. Buckskinners are identified as such by what they wear. All it takes to go from tourist “audience” to “actor” at a rendezvous is a change of clothes. Period clothing works as a marker to identify the wearer as an insider, and I found that traders and others responded more openly to me when I wore my “frontier” clothing than when I was dressed in jeans. Traders have told me that they charge more for some goods when the customer is dressed as a twenty-first century tourist. Period clothing is also the “ticket” to events at rendezvous that are closed to outsiders. When I
was dressed appropriately, I could stay in the primitive areas past the official closing time for visitors.

Approaches to costume at rendezvous make people watching a most entertaining activity. Tourists sometimes make a gesture at period garb, and their efforts are often hilarious. It seems that attending a rendezvous gives some people permission to dress up in ensembles that take creative anachronism and postmodern pastiche to the limit. A man might wear a leather mountain man shirt over nylon cargo shorts or an elaborate fur cap with a cowboy outfit. Women tend to wear long skirts or dresses, perhaps with a mountain man touch like a wide leather belt, a mountain man shirt tucked into or worn belted over a skirt, or trade beads. One woman at Fort Bridger wore a beautiful outfit that looked like it came straight off of an antebellum Southern plantation. It is when tourists go with leather that things get really interesting. The men wear all manner of leather loin cloths, leggings, vests, and shirts that may or may not look like anything an Indian ever wore. The more fringe the better, it seems. For the women, there are some gorgeous leather dresses and skirt/shirt combinations that are derived from Indian traditions but have clear European stylistic influences. Some of the leatherwear owes little to the Native American tradition. My personal favorite was a woman dressed in what Brittny Spears would wear if she did buckskin: a kind of asymmetrical halter top with a strap over one shoulder, the midriff exposed, and a short “skirt” made from an untrimmed deerskin wrapped around the hips. A kind of neo-cave woman look, but with heavy makeup and a diamond stud in the navel.

Although many tourists disregard historical accuracy entirely, their creativity is very much in keeping with the historical mountain men, many of whom dressed flamboyantly. Some buckskinnerders have elaborate outfits featuring fur, fringe, feathers, bear claws, elk teeth, beads, trade silver trinkets, scraps of scarlet fabric, and other decorative trim. A costume competition at the 2002 Fort Bridger Rendezvous provided an opportunity to see some historically authentic clothing. The competition featured categories for children, First Nations men and women (judged separately), mountain men, and eastern (Mississippi and Missouri Rivers and eastward) men and women. This event was clearly the high point of the rendezvous for some competitors, particularly the women. Most, men and women, had made their own costumes and accoutrements. The detailed work – thousands of beads on the Indian dresses and accessories, brain tanned leather, yards of hand stitching on the eastern outfits – was beautifully done. Contestants were judged on authenticity of materials used and construction, coordination of an entire outfit appropriate for a single historical person, and knowledge about the clothing and the person who would have worn it. Each contestant was invited to stand center stage and talk briefly about her or his costume. Some spoke in first person, like a Euro-American woman dressed in Crow Indian clothing who told a tale of adoption into the tribe. Another woman in an elaborate Lakota ceremonial dress with hundreds of rows of blue beads probably lost points with the judges because she was quite shy and did not offer historical details, simply saying that she had made everything herself. The woman in the antebellum hooped skirt was disqualified because her costume came into fashion after 1840. The winner in the First Nations women division was praised for a beaded bag made from the toe of her husband’s worn-out moccasin; such thrift was judged to be true to the spirit of historical tribal peoples. One man in the mountain man division got the prize over a similarly dressed competitor because he had brought along his rifle as an essential part of his costume.

The reflexivity of rendezvous shows itself in these costume competitions. There were no such competitions at the historical rendezvous, of course. Nor was a historical mountain man
likely to critique the ensemble of one of his peers, Euro-American or Indian. I see the costume
competitions as efforts to reward buckskinners who make a serious study of history. The
winners of the competitions had to have made their own costumes, and they had to know not
only the details about the costumes but some detail about how the people who wore them lived.
To gain such knowledge, they had to have gone back to primary sources or to secondary sources
with well-documented primary evidence.

In between the Brittney in buckskin and the costume competition winners are the many
buckskinners who do the best they can to dress their parts. What they wear may reflect their
sewing skills, how much money they have to spend, and their knowledge about history. When
they dress in period clothing, rendezvousers themselves become part of the theatrical setting of
rendezvous. Other buckskinners and tourists look at them and see moving parts of an overall
historically authentic picture. The clothing itself is what makes them “actors” in the theatre of
rendezvous. To return to the definition of theatre at the beginning of this chapter, buckskinners
are the A impersonating B while C looks on. Wearing period clothing is a part of this
impersonation.

A Impersonating B While C Looks On

First of all, wearing period clothing is in itself an imitation of a historical model. One
way that A can impersonate B is simply by wearing what B would wear. The choice of style of
clothing is a choice of historical model. There are all kinds of “characters” at rendezvous:
mountain men, Indians from a variety of tribes, eastern city dwellers, longhunters, ancient Celts,
Mexicans, and frontier settlers. Buckskinners choose what they want to look like for many
reasons, from the superficial to the profound, but the choice brings with it a choice of experience
that will dictate the physical, social, and personal aspects of life in camp.

The physical experience is significant because dressing in such clothing alters the way a
person moves and because choice of character brings with it choice of daily lived culture.
Regardless of whether the wearer is also adopting a period persona, she or he is consciously
behaving in an out-of-the-ordinary manner, specifically in the manner of a historical person.
Anyone with acting experience knows how a costume can aid in portrayal of a character, and
putting on period clothing can feel subjectively like putting on another person. Even
buckskinners who do not consciously enact a “character” at rendezvous have to deal with simple
daily activities that are altered by the physical characteristics of the clothing. My husband found
it frustrating to have no pockets in his trousers, and I had more than one humorous moment
gathering my skirts around me and trying to keep long apron strings from dangling in the hooter.
I also discovered that aprons can be very useful for carrying things.

Choice of character type sometimes brings with it choice of the style of a buckskinner’s
“home” at camp. For example, an “Indian” is likely to live in a lodge appropriate to his or her
tribe, a mountain man may have a simple shelter with minimal period props (or, if he has an
“Indian” wife, a tipi furnished with a blend of cultural traditions), and the more “urban” camps
have more European-style furniture. Choice of character, then, is also choice of set in some
cases. In other camps, the look of the set has little to do with who is living in it. This is
particularly true of camps of buckskinners who change character from one day to the next as they
wear different styles. They may do Indian one day, European the next. But the camp itself is
still an imitative choice, a choice of environment and a choice of props for daily use.

The camp set and props, like the clothing, physically alter the movements of daily life.
Take, for example, a basic task like cooking a meal at rendezvous. If a buckskinner starts a fire
with flint and steel and bakes biscuits in a cast iron Dutch oven with charcoal from that fire, it is likely that he or she is doing things that are not part of the daily routine at home. If a woman is doing the cooking, she must be careful that her long skirt does not catch fire – a concern that is irrelevant when wearing shorts or trousers. I consider even these daily tasks as part of the enactment at rendezvous, simply by virtue of the fact that they are imitative of historical models and also substantially different from those in twenty-first-century life.

Similarly, I regard the practice of traditional craftsmanship as a kind of enactment. Here again, the use of the period tools changes the whole process – and, more significantly, the experience – of making things. Sewing a garment by hand can turn a five-hour project into one lasting several days. Brazing silver or copper with an alcohol lamp takes different skills (and far more patience) than using a high-tech acetylene torch. Casting lead bullets over a campfire and making an intricately carved gunpowder container out of a rough cow horn are things that few people outside of the buckskinning community would ever consider doing.

Choice of clothing and character affects buckskinners socially because other buckskinners and outside visitors will react to the costume, to the perceived persona, regardless of whether the person in the costume is “in character.” A woman in a buckskin dress will be seen as representing an Indian regardless of whether what she says and does affirms the initial visual impression. Both physically wearing the buckskin and responding to the social reactions to it and her apparent persona will affect the woman’s subjective personal experience, as well. That is, she may come to feel like an Indian when she looks like one and is responded to by others as one. Her subjective experience may in turn lead to her act more like she thinks a nineteenth-century Indian would act. In the complex performance world of rendezvous, such negotiations of character and experience occur in subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) ways throughout camp, night and day.

Just as there are different approaches to acting in the theatre world, there are different approaches to impersonation in the rendezvous community. At one end of a range of acting styles are those who wear the costumes, use the props, and live in camp while remaining their twenty-first-century selves. Some of these buckskinners, those who are most serious about studying history, are like serious actors who approach a role from the outside in. Like Anna Deavere Smith (or David Garrick, for that matter, to use a more period-appropriate example), they carefully study and imitate the surfaces of their character models. Since these models are observable only through primary-source images, journals, and other written work, some of the “imitation” is by necessity imaginative. Other outside-in buckskinner actors are much like casual community theatre amateurs who simply like dressing up and getting on stage and entertaining their friends by doing things they do not get to do in ordinary life. They take the structure of the theatre seriously enough – they learn their lines and blocking, and they care about how they look – but tend to ride rough shod over the finer points of character development. I would place the vast majority of buckskinners I have met in this outside-in category, either serious or playful. For them, buckskinning is about the experience of being in camp and using period technologies, not about deliberately entering into the consciousness of another person.

What is known in the living history and buckskinning communities as third-person character interpretation is much like the acting style of Bertolt Brecht: the actor both enacts and comments on the enactment, sometimes sequentially and sometimes simultaneously. “Doc Mark” Rutledge, described in my introduction, was dressed like a doctor of the French and Indian War era as he handled period tools of the trade (some real artifacts, others reproductions) and explained their use. He used the pronoun “we” to refer to himself as identifying with
historical doctors as he described the medical theory and techniques of the mid-1700s, but he occasionally (particularly in response to a question) stepped outside his role to explain details. As a member of the American Longrifle Association, a buckskinning group that is focused on the late Colonial era and requires its members to adopt historical personae, Rutledge has had to document extensive research for everything he wears and uses and everything he says about eighteenth-century doctoring. When his doctor demonstration is over, Rutledge is happy to come out of character and talk with an interested visitor like my husband about details of his firearms (hanging in his tent, which serves as stage and home) and who makes the best period guns.

At the 2004 Alafia River Rendezvous, I met a young man, known by his persona name of Colin, who told me that he enjoys assuming his character in the first person, particularly at period fighting events with specialized weapons. He was out of character, of course, as he told me this, so he evidently switches back and forth between embodying Colin and talking about him. Colin was unique among the re-enactors I met in that he was the only one who regularly attends re-enactment events from different time periods. He remains a Celtic/Scottish character named Colin but changes his clothing to conform with the appropriate medieval, Renaissance, rendezvous, or early Celtic environment. As he described it, he is playing different generations of the same family tree, exploring his Celtic heritage as it manifested itself at different times in history.

There are also some buckskinners who enter into their roles quite fully, living them as completely as actors trained in the Stanislavski-influenced style of psychological realism. I was chatting with Doc Mark’s goodwife at the 2002 Fort Bridger Rendezvous when we heard a commotion along the pathway. The activity was initiated by a young man named Chester Miller, who lurched around dressed in filthy rags, with badly rotted (fake) teeth and his face smeared with dirt, carrying (suspended from a wooden shoulder yoke) two pails of water of questionable potability. He loudly offered “Water for the parched!” in a Cockney-esque accent and engaged in constant interaction with both tourists and re-enactors. Miller was both highly entertaining and a little frightening, but in his improvisations with children he seemed sensitive to those who shrank away from him. He would tone down his brash persona just enough to play with these more timid children. Miller is rather famous within the local re-enactor community for always staying in character and serves as a good example of what is known among living historians as first-person historical interpretation. Even when he took a break from his water sales he would not break character: at one point I saw him sprawled out on the grass between two tents, his water pails next to him, looking convincingly asleep.

Staying in character in the first person is somewhat difficult to do full time at rendezvous. The many breaks in authenticity almost demand separation of person from persona. A historical mountain man most certainly would not dump his trash into a plastic bag to be picked up by a truck in the morning. A nineteenth-century woman, Indian or Euro-American, would not have a clue about what a portable toilet is. So persons who do adopt a persona at rendezvous must either move in and out of character frequently or maintain a kind of double identity as a re-enactor and as a twenty-first-century self. This sense of double identity is not unlike that of an actor on a stage. An actor must remember lines and blocking, and must be ready to improvise in character if need be, and so cannot abandon her or his actor self completely and begin to hallucinate another identity.

Representations of persona in appearance only, third-person interpretation, and first-person enactment are all forms of acting, in my view. The differ a great deal in terms of the
subjective experience of the actors, and I explore the implications of this in the next chapter. Depending on their approach to characterization, buckskinners may feel more or less as if they are living in the past as they go about the camp. A first-person enactor, always in character, may begin to identify with his or her persona to the point where the line between self and persona becomes difficult to define. A third-person interpreter may move back and forth between identification and self-observation. An outside-in buckskinner actor may not identify with a role at all but will still have a rendezvous experience that is theatrical because, as I have said, it is done in imitation of a historical model and also involves social responses from the community.

If a buckskinner is the actor in my theatrical equation, A acting the part of B, then who is C, the audience? Who is watching the theatre of rendezvous? In the primitive camp, and at rendezvous that limit entrance to those dressed in period clothing, buckskinners are their own audience. Most are simultaneously both actors and audience members to different degrees at different times. This blurring of the actor/audience boundary is one of the more unique and interesting features of rendezvous as a theatrical form. Tourists from outside the buckskinning community – defined as those dressed in twenty-first-century clothing – are clearly definable as audience. They come to see the “characters” at rendezvous as they go about their daily activities. Such audience members include schoolchildren and their teachers, curious locals, potential buckskinners, and students and teachers of American history, among others. Their presence in itself alters the feel of a rendezvous. They make those dressed in period clothing feel more “on stage” than they do when tourists are not present.

Tourists can also enter into the environmental improvisation in overtly theatrical ways. I was walking through the 2002 Fort Bridger rendezvous with my husband on Sunday morning. We were both in jeans, looking quite twenty-first century. A large, bearded “mountain man,” who looked as if he was still partying from the night before, came along, looked at me, and asked my husband, “Is that squaw fer sale?” At that point the politically aware part of me cringed at the racism and sexism, the researcher part of me perked up at the opportunity to observe rendezvous culture in action, and the actor part of me jumped at the opportunity to play. The actor part won. Our little scenario continued:

GREG: Uh, no. Not really.
MOUNTAIN MAN: I’d treat her real good.
GREG: Um, no thanks.
MOUNTAIN MAN: I’d give her mink.
PAGE (moving toward MOUNTAIN MAN): Ooh, that sounds good…
MOUNTAIN MAN (to GREG): I wouldn’t hurt her none.
GREG: No, I don’t think so…
MOUNTAIN MAN (to GREG): Tell you what. I’ll just borrow her. I’ll give her back to you next year, good as new.
GREG (moving away): Thanks anyway…
PAGE (following GREG): Bye!

I would like to note here that all of us characters in this mini-play were aware that the mountain man’s proposition and our responses to it were consciously acted out as a game. That is, none of us acted as we would have if the situation had been real. I make this perhaps obvious point because it is significant to my later argument that rendezvous, as a kind of theatre, fosters self-conscious and self-reflexive imaginative play that shapes perceptions of history. Interactions like this one occur often throughout camp and may include buckskinners, traders, and outside
visitors. They may or may not be played to or observed by any kind of outside “audience.” The young men with the wagon described in my introduction were simply playing with each other, assuming accents and characters as they joked about their work. The above scenario, playful and even silly as it is, does reflect factual history. A painting by Alfred Jacob Miller,11 entitled “A Mountain Man Takes a Wife,” shows a pretty Indian woman being bought (traded for) from her father by a mountain man. Contemporary journals describe trading women or using them as “currency” in gambling activities. Thus, the idea of using a woman for a year and returning her “good as new” to her previous owner is not completely a fantasy invention of our hirsute acquaintance at Fort Bridger.

Beyond the simple everyday routines and playful interludes like the above proposition, there are structured forms of enactment, of A impersonating B, at rendezvous. Many are announced in an official rendezvous program. These performances, which are more overtly theatrical and have clearly defined performers (As) and audience members (Cs), include teaching workshops, professional performances of culture, and scenario-based competitions.

Buckskinner’s and sometimes tourists can attend presentations and workshops on history, craftsmanship, period clothing or equipment, and how to do rendezvous. The teachers of these workshops are usually dressed in period clothing12 and are often working on what they are teaching about as they “lecture” more or less formally about their subject. The enclave of the American Mountain Men at the 2002 Fort Bridger Rendezvous (see my introduction) was an ongoing demonstration of history and traditional craftsmanship. The AMM were dressed with meticulous historical authenticity (a hallmark of the AMM as a group) but spoke in the third person about everything from period guns to saddle making to beaver trapping to cross-cultural syncretism. Much of the factual information was embedded in stories gleaned from journals of the historical mountain men. Some of these AMM “teachers” simply went about their work, like Jill with her cow stomach soup and a man who was quietly engraving beautiful powder horns like those displayed for sale or trade on his blanket. Jill and the scrimshaw artist were happy to answer questions, but they were teaching more by demonstration than by explanation. They were simply performing history-based activities, and an interested observer could learn a great deal by asking questions and watching the process.

A large rendezvous may feature scheduled performances, usually by paid professionals, from various cultural traditions. The 2002 Fort Bridger Rendezvous featured daily performances by a professional troupe of Indian drummers, singers, and dancers from various tribal traditions. The same rendezvous also included an opening ceremony begun with a Scottish bagpipe-and-drum corps marching in formation and dressed in full regalia. David Hubbell describes a storytelling performance by one Bobby Bridger, who claims descent from the James Bridger, founder of the fort that bears his name (57). Bobby Bridger dresses like his mountain man ancestor and tells stories and sings songs. His performance is theatrically complex. He is dressed like the characters in his own stories. He tells stories about trapping and about rendezvous, in the tradition of the tall tale swapping that characterized the historical rendezvous. He also sings songs that can only have been composed after the events that they recount. He thus blends myth and factual history, an idea to which I will return in chapter 4.

At the 2002 Fort Bridger Rendezvous, the main social event was a Saturday night “buckskinner’s ball” with live music and dancers in an array of “dress” costumes (as opposed to the “undress” everyday wear). This gathering was evocative of similar historical social events in communities on or near the frontier. Gathering together to dance to live music is a venerable European tradition, and the ball serves as a celebration of European culture and also as a display
of its history. The live music and candle and lamp light contrast sharply with twenty-first-
century gatherings in bars with flashing lights and recorded or amplified music. I was unable to
attend the Fort Bridger ball because I did not have an authentic costume at that time, so I do not
know to what extent period persona came into play at that event – that is, whether some dancers
stayed in character.

The 2003 Alafia River and Southeastern rendezvous both featured professional musical
performances. At Alafia, the performance took place in a large community tent that also served
as a rainy-day schoolhouse. There were some benches provided for the audience, and some
people brought along little folding wooden seats. All were huddled close together on that night,
as the temperature dipped well below 30°F. At Southeastern, the performance was in one of the
tent restaurants along traders’ row. In both cases, the music was a mix of Celtic, folk, and
bluegrass traditions. Audience members could sing along, and occasionally someone joined the
band for an impromptu solo. Here again, the gathering around music evoked days long before
radios and recorded music. People were making their own entertainment in a traditional way.

Celtic tradition was also celebrated in the simple Scottish highland games held at the
2003 and 2004 Alafia River Rendezvous and the 2003 Southeastern Rendezvous (see my
introduction). These performances of Scottish-ness, like the dancing and singing, come from a
long tradition of communities gathering for friendly low-tech competition. Some Scots carry
tradition still further; at one camp at the 2003 Southeastern Rendezvous a kilt-clad rendezvouser
played bagpipes for the daily raising and lowering of the British Union Jack in front of his tent.

Many buckskinner bring their musical instruments to rendezvous, and jam sessions large
and small are heard all over camp. Rules of historical authenticity may be relaxed for these
performances, which include musical instruments and songs dating well after 1840. I have read
of no European-style musical instruments at the historical rendezvous, but it is hard to imagine
that the historical mountain men lived entirely without music. A musical instrument would be a
fragile thing in the wilderness, and not a necessity for survival, but the Lewis and Clark journals
document one corpsman who carried a violin and played for the entertainment of his fellows and
curious Indians.

The dancing, singing, and game-playing all serve as frames for performance of Euro-
American ethnicity. Occurring as they do within the environmental setting of a period
encampment, they celebrate history and also connect it in a vital, living way to the present.
Similarly, in performance terms, enactment of a persona from the past connects with present-day
identity. The immediate and personal quality of this connection with history is one of the
attractions of rendezvous, and I explore this connection in detail in chapter 3.

A form of “historical” game-playing that is truly unique to rendezvous is what eastern
buckskinner call “woods walks,” because they usually occur in woodland settings. I have also
heard them referred to as mountain man games or, at Fort Bridger, as “Trappers’ Follies.” I will
be describing some of the more elaborate woods walks in later chapters, but as “plays” they are a
significant part of the theatricality of rendezvous. They are based on historical situations like
hunting and trapping expeditions or travel through hostile Indian territory. These events, which
are descendants of the Seneca race described above, reflect the terrain in which they are staged
and the particular interests and creativity of the persons setting up the contests. All involve
shooting at targets with assorted weapons, and they may include surprise tests of mountain man
skills like lighting a fire with flint and steel, remaining alert to attack by Indians and grizzly
bears, and hunting ability. For example, one shooting station in a woods walk I participated in
had two targets: a strutting gobbler (male tom turkey in full display, tail feathers fanned out)
facing away from the shooting spot and another, hen turkey facing the shooting spot. Shooters (in this case, archers) had two shots, but they could only take the second shot if they chose the correct first target and actually hit it. The correct first target was the hen, who could see the shooter and would have flown away after a first shot at the other bird. The tom, with hormones in high gear and back to the shooter, might just be so distracted by his display and the sounds of his own gobbling that he would not notice the first shot. This little hunting scenario was highly theatrical. The plastic targets, the fact that several shooters took turns, and the questionable reasoning behind being able to take a second shot in that situation were all theatrical conventions accepted by the shooters. Nobody was actually hunting; they were all playing a game based on hunting situations. The game required not only skill with bow and arrow but some knowledge about turkeys and a willingness to act “as if” the situation had been real. Woods walks thus can categorized as embodied narratives, enactments with neo-artifacts (guns, bows) that recall and represent history.

All of these history-based activities—wearing period clothes, using historically authentic tools, demonstrating traditional crafts, living in camp, playing music, telling stories, imagining a hunting expedition—are forms of impersonation. They are conscious imitations of activities that actual historical persons would have engaged in. To return to my definition of theatre, they are clear examples of A (bucksckiners) impersonating B (historical models) while C (bucksckiners and tourists) looks on. They all take place within the environment of rendezvous, that special time and place set aside for such impersonation. Thus, I argue, rendezvous can be defined as theatre. Specifically, rendezvous are best categorized as improvisational theatre because they are unscripted and because they bend the rules of historical authenticity that are so significant to the settings and other surface appearances of rendezvous.

Rendezvous as Improvisational Theatre

Although rendezvous recreate settings that are based on historical settings, and bring together characters who would have been present at these historical settings (or at least during the historical times in question), they do not attempt to re-play historical scripts. Some of the activities—trading, shooting contests, campfire conversations—are in imitation of those at the historical rendezvous, but there is no effort to shape them to match their historical precedents. There is no recreation of the attack by rabid wolves in 1833 or the visit of the missionaries in 1836. The traders present do not imitate the arrival of caravans brought in by William Ashley or the later traders of history, and the mountain men do not re-play, say, the surprise appearance of Jedediah Smith in 1829. There is no re-enactment of the treachery that led to the battle with the Blackfeet in 1832. Rendezvous are not “living history” in the tradition of museum settings like Plimoth Plantation, with its perpetual rerun of the year 1626, or Civil War battle re-enactments, with their carefully choreographed troop movements. Rather, rendezvous bring together an overall historical setting and a set of historical character types in a broad historical “scenario.” From there, in and around a few formally scheduled contests, performances, and workshops, rendezvous are completely improvised. The improvisational plots generated daily in individual campsites and in the environment of the whole rendezvous work much like performances by improv groups who solicit ideas for characters, situations, and sometimes props from their audiences and then create a scene from these ideas. The materials, situations, and characters of latter-day rendezvous are historical, but the scenes themselves may be far removed from history.

I have made much of the rules of historical authenticity at rendezvous, since they define rendezvous itself in terms of time and place and even possibilities for characterizations. The
rural setting, the primitive camps, and the historically authentic props and costumes are what makes rendezvous rendezvous. The material culture at rendezvous may be defined by the rules of historical authenticity, but many of the actual activities at a given rendezvous are not subject to these rules. As I have noted, wearing period clothing and using period implements require a certain amount of historically correct activity simply to use them properly and thus are indirectly subject to such rules. Similarly, I have described buckskinners who have researched and who consciously “re-enact” a period persona, also subject to rules of authenticity. But beyond these situations, what one can do at rendezvous is not defined by rules of authenticity.

As long as they live in period shelters, use period implements and technologies, and dress in period clothing, buckskinners can do pretty much whatever they want as long as they do not harm others or disrupt the historical authenticity of their environment. As the website for the 2003 Southeastern Rendezvous put it,

1. No fighting
2. No stealing
3. No pets
4. No fishing
5. No grousing
6. Everything else is pretty much ok.

To be sure, as noted above, many of the activities at rendezvous are necessarily historically authentic simply because they use period implements (like the shooting competitions) or are conscious imitations of historical craftsmanship. And some buckskinners, like Chester Miller, stay in character all the time. But the improvisational milieu of rendezvous is quite permissive in terms of what people do or talk about as they go through the day. Rendezvous, then, are environments in which buckskinners can quite literally play with history as they interact with symbolic representations of pre-1840 material culture. How and why they are doing so, and the implications of such play, are the subjects of the chapters that follow, but here I would first like to look at the nature of play itself.

Playfulness is a quality that human beings share with many other animal species. Play is a curious phenomenon, because by definition it is not “necessary” for survival. And yet wolves do it, cats of all sizes do it, turkeys do it, and so on. We recognize play by specific signs or clusters of signs that mean “this is play” (Bateson 179) and establish agreement that the actions of the players do not mean the same thing as what they stand for (180). For example, the growling and nipping of dogs playing together “stand for” real fight actions, but in play they do not indicate real intent to inflict harm. Such “this is play” signs are certainly recognizable between members of the same species but are often recognizable across species. We know when a dog wants to play with us, and a cat and a dog in the same household sometimes develop an elaborate form of play that would be deadly if it were in earnest.

J. Huizinga has noted several features of play that make it different from our other activities (4-9). Play is irrational; that is, it is not necessary for survival, has no obvious purpose. Play is voluntary; we choose to do it of our own free will. Play is separated in some way from everyday life. It may happen in a special place, or it may occur during a specific time set aside for the activity; play is over when the players leave the place or the time is up. Play is also “disinterested,” as Huizinga puts it, in that it has no profit or serious consequences. (Even in situations with fierce competition the consequences of losing are not serious in true play. By this definition, professional sports become work, or business, not play.) Huizinga makes the important point that play is not therefore innocent: he says, “All play means something” (1).
It is easy to see how rendezvous activities fit these definitions of play. They are certainly not necessary for survival, and buckskinners freely choose to participate. Rendezvous are set in places and times removed from daily life, and participating in them has no serious consequences. Even the shooting competitions or woods walks are merely playful evocations of the hunting and warfare that were vital to the survival of the historical frontiersmen and their families. And playing rendezvous, like all play, means something.

The meaning of play depends on the kind of play and the age of the player. Psychologist and play therapist Linnet McMahon distinguishes between five main kinds of play, all of which change form through the life span (5). The first kind is sensory/creative play. Infants learn about their world by feeling it – at the beginning by putting everything in their mouths. Later on they may learn to draw or play a musical instrument, and as adults they may continue these activities or learn some kind of creative work. For buckskinners at rendezvous, sensory/creative play would include the craft work and even the sensory experiences of living in primitive camp. McMahon’s second category of play is physical play. Sports may help children acquire physical coordination. Buckskinners in shooting competitions or highland games are engaging in physical play. A third kind of play is social. Children play school or imitate a TV show in imitation of the social relationships there. Group sports teach them leadership, teamwork, and sportsmanship. The social aspects of rendezvous are obvious, and the informal surveys from Belk and Costa, Hubbell, and my own work indicate that the social aspects of rendezvous rank high among the reasons for attending rendezvous. Buckskinners may “try on” characterizations and social interactions without having to take them seriously.

McMahon’s fourth category of play is symbolic, and it can take the form of daydreaming, logical thinking, and role playing. Symbolic play is by definition meaningful play, and it is significant for participants at rendezvous. McMahon’s fifth category of play is exploratory. Playful exploration has no serious consequences and thus allows for creative freedom without fear of failure. For young children, such exploration can help form personal identity, improve skills, or enhance creativity. Exploratory play can occur via any of the first four categories of play; that is, a person can explore via creative sensory play, physical play, social play, or symbolic play. It is the exploratory symbolic kind of play that is most significant in the improvisational play at rendezvous.

All of the material culture at rendezvous – the site, the shelters, the clothing, the tools, and other objects – is part of its symbolic world. A flat site alongside a busy highway represents a river valley among the Rocky Mountains, canvas tipis represent historical buffalo skin lodges, a beautifully crafted and synthetically “aged” new rifle represents a historical survival tool, and so forth. The buckskinners moving within the rendezvous settings similarly represent historical characters. As they compete with their muzzle loaders, prepare meals, and socialize around campfires, that is, as they manipulate symbols of the American past, buckskinners recall and evoke similar historical activities. They are not re-enacting the past in the strict sense, because they do not follow historical events in sequence or attempt to duplicate them. Rather, they take the material symbols and character types and improvise with them. Rendezvous, then, are not performances of history itself. They are, instead, performances that use history as a point of departure for improvisation. These improvisations are shaped to a certain extent by the rules of historical authenticity that define setting and character, but otherwise there are no constraints on their form and content. What this means is that buckskinners can take the forms of rendezvous – the symbols – and make whatever they want of them. Since these symbols are historically authentic, they can lend an aura of authenticity to the improvisations. That is, the improvisations
can look or feel subjectively like “real” history, because they take place within the history-based setting.

The historical symbols of rendezvous are both literal and mythic. That is, a reproduction flintlock rifle symbolizes not only literal past rifles of similar make but also the mythic idea of a gun. The rosy side of this myth valorizes self-reliance and self-defense, and the darker side encompasses violent aggression and conquest. A buckskinner in the role of a mountain man represents a literal historical model, but also evokes a mythic symbol of cultural syncretism, the blending of things European with things Indian. And the latter-day rendezvous encampments represent not only literal past gatherings but also the myth of the frontier, again with the cultural interactions, peaceful and violent. Thus, the symbolic play at rendezvous can be framed as playing with American mythology and, I will argue, as quite literally playing with history. The implications of such play are the subject of the rest of this dissertation.

Chapter Conclusion

Today’s rendezvous encampments have developed over the years from shooting contests with historical muzzle loaders to what I have argued is theatre. They take place during clearly designated times in places that are defined as “rendezvous” by observance of rules of historical authenticity. The encampments resemble environmental theatrical sets with shelters, trading tents, and gathering areas that consciously evoke historical material culture. These theatrical environments are inhabited, temporarily, by persons who represent historical characters and engage in activities that recall events and daily lives of historical models. They are thus impersonating characters, and they do so for an audience that includes each other and also outside visitors who are not “acting.” The performances at rendezvous are improvisational, because for the most part they are not scripted or shaped to re-play specific historical events. Within this freewheeling improvisational milieu, buckskinnners are playing with symbols of American history and thus with history itself. In the next chapter I examine this play in terms of its individual meaning. That is, I discuss how impersonation of historical character informs the individual identity of the impersonator. In chapters 4 and 5 I discuss the collective (national) implications of such play with identity and history.

1 As I noted in my introduction, tourism as we think of it today is a relatively recent concept. I am using the term here for persons attending the rendezvous who were not directly involved in the fur trade business that was its purpose.

2 The term “muzzle loading” refers to the method of loading gunpowder into the gun. Modern firearms have the gunpowder already contained in cartridges with the bullet, so that one simply puts the cartridge into the gun to load it. The older weapons used in the Colonial and fur trade eras require that gunpowder be measured out and loaded into the end of the muzzle. Then the bullet, usually a round lead ball but sometimes shaped more like a modern bullet with one end flat and the other rounded, is placed on a small piece of fabric and pushed with a ramrod down the barrel so that it is next to the gunpowder. For flintlock weapons, a small amount of gunpowder must also be put into a shallow groove, called the pan, which is connected to the stock end of the barrel by a small hole. When the trigger is pulled, the mechanism brushes a piece of flint against steel, creating a spark. When all goes as it should, the spark ignites the powder in the pan, which in turn ignites the powder in the muzzle of the gun. The resulting explosion pushes the bullet out of the gun. When things go badly, one is left with the proverbial flash in the pan: the powder in the pan fails to fire the gun. Sometimes there is a delay in the action so that the shooter must hold the gun steady during a pause between the flash and the firing of the bullet. The flintlock rifles and pistols were the standard during the fur trade era. The early 1820s brought the invention of the percussion firing mechanism, which replaced flint, steel, and the powder in the pan with a cap that was ignited by quick hammer pressure activated by pulling the trigger. The percussion locks quickly replaced the flintlocks in the east and eventually found their way west with trappers who brought them to the mountains or converted their flintlocks with percussion locks obtained.
by trade. Both flintlocks and percussion locks are fired with “black powder,” the traditional charcoal-sulfur-potassium nitrate gunpowder, and thus the use of these weapons is also referred to as black powder shooting.

3 Smaller encampments, particularly those held by local clubs and limited to members, may be more casual about advance registration and also about scheduling within the rendezvous.

4 “Booshway” derives from the French “bourgeois,” which during the Rocky Mountain fur trade era designated the person in charge of a trade caravan. “Segundo,” designating the second-in-command, derives from the Spanish word for “second.” Both Booshway and Segundo are usually men, although their wives may share in some of the responsibilities. The term “dog soldiers” comes from Plains Indian tribal traditions of warrior societies whose members are called dog soldiers. The dog soldiers I have seen at rendezvous, some of which were women, were not enacting personae based on these Indians. Many were dressed as eastern men or women.

5 I was at the Southeastern Rendezvous during the early days of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. The war was very much an undercurrent at the rendezvous. Several people who would not normally bring a radio to a rendezvous did so in order to keep in touch with what was happening to friends and family in the military. I was surprised to find that, in a setting celebrating U.S. heritage, many people were deeply troubled by the war. I expected to find more blind patriotism, but many campers clearly differentiated between love of country and support for “Operation Iraqi Freedom.” Conversations about the war were held in hushed tones, since the subject is clearly anachronistic within the rendezvous setting.

6 Some, particularly young men, come to rendezvous with not much besides a tarp, bedroll, and gun. They wander around camp looking hungry and carrying a plate or cup, and people happily invite them to eat.

7 They also drive the economy of rendezvous. Most of what is for sale in the trade tents is for use at rendezvous or for making things to use at rendezvous. When it comes to period camping, shooting, and dress, buckskinners are most definitely consumers. It is all about having the right stuff, and for many, especially as rendezvous ages, it is all about comfort.

8 The cowboy era was in the late 1800s, well after the Rocky Mountain fur trade era.

9 My husband, who eschews flamboyant clothing and jewelry in his daily life, proudly wears a hat band made from the skin of a small rattlesnake that wandered into our yard and a necklace made of turkey spurs from birds that have graced our Thanksgiving table over the years. The turkey spurs are understood by other hunters as a marker for Greg’s considerable hunting skill.

10 Lest I appear to be categorically denigrating community theatre, let me hasten to add here that I know some community groups whose artistic standards are as high as any professional troupe. But there are also many groups run by persons whose understanding of the theatrical arts is limited and who truly do not care that this is so. They are in it for the fun of it.

11 Miller, as noted above, was present at the 1837 rendezvous and presumably made the paintings from observations and drawings from his trip. Miller’s paintings are among the most important primary sources of information about costuming and equipment in the Rocky Mountain fur trade era. He also wrote notes about rendezvous activities on his sketches.

12 An exception to this was a set of two historical lectures given by Dr. Fred Gowans, Professor Emeritus at Brigham Young University, at the 2002 Fort Bridger Rendezvous. His lecture concerned the lives and adventures of trappers John Hoback, Edward Robinson, and Jacob Reznor. His “students” were mostly buckskinnners of all ages, and the setting of his lecture was eclectically anachronistic: Dr. Gowans in jeans and cowboy boots standing next to a recently built gazebo, his students in all manner of mountain man and Indian garb sitting on the grass or on the small collapsible chairs that serve as period portable seating. The theatricality of the moment was complex: a present-day historian telling a story to persons dressed like the people in the story but who were “really” present-day students of history who wanted to learn how to act like the people in the story. This was a scholarly lecture, a storytelling performance, and a method acting class all rolled into one.

13 Camp schools enable buckskinners with school-aged children to attend rendezvous that take place during the school year.

14 After a performance of a song mentioning a bird on a telephone wire at the 2003 Alaffia River rendezvous, one audience member called out, “What’s a telephone wire?” The performer said, “um, like a telegraph wire.” Another audience member said, “No, not that either.” There followed a brief murmured debate among audience members on when the telegraph was invented. I knew I had been bitten by the authenticity bug when I went home after the rendezvous and looked it up: Samuel Morse, who also invented the code that bears his name, gave a public demonstration of his telegraph apparatus in 1838, but installation of telegraph systems was not publicly funded until 1843, after the rendezvous cutoff date (The History of the Telegraph and Telegraphy).
CHAPTER 3: TO BE HUMAN IS TO REMEMBER: MEMORY AND IDENTITY AT RENDEZVOUS

To be human is to remember.
-- Stephen Bertman (6)

As a graduate teaching assistant at the School of Theatre at Florida State University, I had the opportunity to teach a class entitled “Race, Gender, and Performance,” in which we examined the constructed and performed nature of identity. Following the lead of my faculty advisor, Dr. Anita Gonzalez, I began the class by asking each student to prepare a short performance of her or his identity, framed as the student wished in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, or some other category. Some students sang, some read poems, some danced, and some told stories or talked about their families. In each case, the student’s sense of identity was connected to the past history of a group or community. Dr. Gonzalez’s experience had prepared me to expect some anxiety on the part of some Euro-American students, particularly heterosexuals whose families have lived in the United States for several generations. Indeed, these students were quite confused by the assignment, describing themselves as “just a mutt” or “a regular American” and being unable to define themselves in terms of ethnicity. For these students, and for many who had clear ethnic identities, to be a white American was to have no ethnic community to belong to. The whole point of this exercise (beyond introducing the students to me and to each other) was to come to just this realization – that heterosexual Euro-American-ness has been “normalized” into invisibility – and to move on from there to explore how this normalization is affirmed and sometimes challenged in theatrical performance. But one aspect of the self-described mutts’ experience that fascinated me was their lack of perceived connection to a community with a common and unifying past. They identified with being American because they were born in this country, but defining themselves as Americans was confusing. I think that the experience of these students sheds some light on why buckskinners do what they do. I will show in this chapter how buckskinners are exploring personal and collective identity through immersion in symbols of the past and how rendezvous support an environment in which Euro-Americans can search for their own roots in history. Buckskinners explore personal identity via embodiment of persona, and the group identity is established by going about daily camp life and participating in competitions and other activities with history-based scenarios. In this chapter I address individual identity within a small social group, in this case the rendezvous community, and in chapter 4 I extend the analysis to include national (American) identity.

Although my point of view is academically unfashionable at this time, I want to state here that I have a strong belief, based on my own life, academic study, and professional experience as
a psychotherapist, in a personal human self. That is, I make a differentiation between an essential self, born into this world, and that self’s identity, which I define as how the self perceives itself. Because of this essential self, I believe that we as human beings have the will and ability to make choices about our lives, choices that are certainly influenced but not entirely determined by our social contexts. I am happy to render unto materialists that which belongs to materialism, but to my mind many of the materialist theories from poststructuralism and postmodernism tend to reduce human beings to just so much “frisky dirt,” as psychologist Ken Wilber puts it (55). These theories fail to explain to my satisfaction why some dirt is friskier than other dirt and why the forms of friskiness differ from person to person within the same culture. The issue of friskiness, of human motivation, is significant to the events at rendezvous. The question that came up at my first rendezvous and that has sustained this whole dissertation endeavor is, why do grownups do this? In chapter 2 I argued that they are, in fact, playing, and that the “toys” they are playing with are symbols from American history. Here, I argue that the “game” they are playing is exploration of personal and collective identity. As individuals go about life at rendezvous, which I have defined as improvisational theatre in the last chapter, they are exploring identity by playfully experimenting with identities based on historical models.

Identity as Memory

I begin my discussion with the assumption that our very identity, individual and collective, is made up of memory; that is, we literally are what we remember. What we remember is a construction created by constant negotiation between our individual selves and the smaller and larger communities within which we live. From the inside, being a self means organizing the events of our lives so that they make sense. Events need to make sense so that we know who we are and how to interact with our physical and social environments. The construction of an identity happens simultaneously with creation of memory. We define ourselves by the images we have of ourselves and the stories we tell about ourselves. A person who loses memory loses identity or sense of self. Whether the memory loss is from trauma or a degenerative disease like Alzheimer’s, friends and family have a sense that the person they knew is somehow no longer present. The person no longer recognizes familiar images (people, places) and does not remember events (as stories told to the person or as experiences the person lived). Without these memories, the person is “lost” to him or herself and to family and friends with whom these memories were shared.

We learn how to make sense of experience from other people, from family and larger social groups, and so they strongly influence the possible meanings we establish for those experiences. Our sense of identity includes a sense of belonging to a group of persons who are like us. These persons define the ethnic identity discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Identity-as-memory is therefore a social experience, a construction negotiated between self and communities. I use the plural “communities” because an individual lives within interconnected and sometimes overlapping groups that range from a few persons in the immediate family to an extended family, a neighborhood or social circle, a town or university, and a nation. The buckskinning community that is the subject of this study is one such social group within which members construct meanings. Communities and nations form an identity that is similarly based on what they remember as a group and how they remember it. As a corollary, they lose their sense of identity if they forget their history.

Memory can be erased completely, as in the case of Alzheimer’s disease and some head traumas, but it can also be changed. Change is possible because the memory of a past experience
is not the same as the experience as it was lived. Events happen; they have no intrinsic meaning. They gain meaning only when we organize our personal memory of them and communicate with each other about them. That is, the very process of organizing personal memory and communicating it to others is the process of building meaning. Therefore, personal memory – identity – is always embedded in collective memory, and both become meaningful only when we communicate to each other about the events from which memories are constructed. We do so by producing images and by telling stories. We also combine the two media by “showing” stories via enactment. As we show the stories to others, we are also having an internal experience of the enactment. This combination of what others see and our internal experience is a unique way to express and to think about the subject matter of the enactment – that is, a way to think about and create identity.

Such enactment has built into it potential for changing identity by changing memory. The idea of changing memory underlies much psychotherapeutic and counseling work. Such therapies focus not on how a problem started but on how a client thinks about it; the goal is to change a client’s perception of the problem. Therapeutic dramatic techniques, in particular, can directly change the phenomenology of memory. For example, in the case of a victim of sexual abuse, the problem for an expressive therapist is not that the abuse happened (that cannot be fixed) but that the client’s specific memory of the abuse, with its attendant images and explanatory stories, is interfering with healthy function in life. The client’s memory, as a construction, is not the same as the things that happened to her or him. A psychodrama director guides a client/protagonist through a carefully constructed re-enactment of the events leading up to a trauma, but during the process adds elements that help the protagonist express or clarify feelings, experience empowerment, assign blame more appropriately, or simply gain some emotional perspective. The use of full-body enactment, rather than simple discussion of the issue, moves the therapy out of the intellect and into the senses. The experience of living a memory in a way different from the original memory actually contaminates the original “story” and images that surround the real event. After a successful psychodrama, the client/protagonist will no longer be able to remember the original trauma without such contamination. If the psychodrama has provided comfort or insight, these will always accompany and therefore modify the original memory. The client thus gains a certain power over a memory that previously had power over the client. Psychodrama, and the free play encouraged in other forms of dramatic therapy, changes self-perception – identity itself – by changing memory.

Identity, then, is a mutable thing intimately connected to memory. We are what we tell ourselves we are and/or the images we have of ourselves, and if we change the images and stories we change our subjective sense of self: our identity. My contention is that this sort of memory-changing happens at rendezvous, in this case without benefit of a psychodrama director. Another difference, of course, is that the “selves” being explored are “characters” of history. Other writers (Hubbell, Belk and Costa) have described the situation as embodying the “historical Other.” It is convenient to use the language of ethnography to write about historical re-enactment, but I question the assumption that historical Others are Others. Most of the people who adopt rendezvous personae are either descended by blood from persons like those they portray or have otherwise “inherited” the culture that was shaped in part by mountain men and other frontiersmen. Many buckskinnners feel a strong connection with the historical characters they portray or with the culture that they practice while in camp. In other words, buckskinnners tend to think of the so-called historical Others as their own source culture, as their ancestors either literally or culturally. If this so, are these historical Others really Others? If they are
Others, who isn’t? At what point in the past does one’s own family and culture become Othered? It is relatively easy to conceive of the mountain men as Others, since they lived so long ago, but can we say the same for the soldiers of the Vietnam War? Is it some Other who walked on the moon? Continues to pollute the environment at an alarming rate? Invented the Internet? Invaded Iraq and captured its dictator? If these are all Others, who is Us? These questions beg parallel questions about all cultures who engage with their past in some way. They also bring up the issue of national culture, specifically American national culture, and personal identity.

As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, one way that marginalized groups assert their identity is by claiming or reclaiming their group’s history or by preserving or rediscovering old traditions. Are these people, also, Othering their ancestors? Did Alex Haley Other Kunta Kinte by writing *Roots*? Do feminist historians who uncover previously ignored artworks or accomplishments by women of the past Other these women? When a Jewish American goes to Auschwitz to see what remains of the concentration camp in which her great grandparents perished, is she Othering the great-grandparents? Is the Lakota who makes a summer pilgrimage to a Sun Dance Othering the elders of his own culture? If he was raised among such elder practitioners of “traditional” Lakota culture, is he Othering them less than would another Lakota who was raised as a Christian in New York City, outside of the Lakota “family” with which he is now trying to connect? The answers to these questions are not simple; they address basic questions about group identity and the kinds of personal identities that are interpellated by a group’s definition of itself.

I contend that laying claim to one’s ancestors, be it by writing a book, participating in ritual, or “re-enacting” history, is a process of construction of personal identity, framed within a chosen group identity. Buckskinners choose rendezvous as a milieu for this construction for an assortment of reasons I will discuss in later chapters. They choose buckskinning, and rendezvous, because the activities and symbol systems within this community give them a sense of identification with a group that has a shared history. At rendezvous, individuals can confirm identity or change it by playfully experimenting with alternative identities. Enactment modeled on historical characters creates a sense of connection with them and their world. Enactment creates meaning because it is what anthropologist Edward Bruner has called an expression of experience.

**Expression of Experience**

Bruner’s work explores how individuals experience their culture – that is, how events enter into consciousness. Bruner’s conceptual framework is useful for analysis of rendezvous because he breaks cultural experience down into components that can be examined separately. Bruner is hardly the first to acknowledge that such experiences are socially constructed. Like others, he differentiates between objective reality (what is out there in the world, life as it is lived) and our constructions about it. However, he also differentiates between constructions of the experience itself (subjective reality, how reality presents itself to individual consciousness; this is what I am calling personal identity) and constructions of expression of the experience (cultural reality, how an experience is communicated among people; this is what I am calling collective identity) (Bruner “Introduction,” 6). An event happens (this is Bruner’s “reality”). It then enters into the consciousness of one or more persons (Bruner’s “experience”) and is incorporated into identity. Then several persons may communicate with each other about it (Bruner’s “expression”). If two (or more) different persons have two (or more) different
versions of a given story, and the problem for the community to which these persons belong becomes how to integrate these different story versions into a larger story with a commonly understood set of meanings. The fact that stories are commonly understood to have a specific set of meanings defines the community, even creates it.

Each of these aspects of experience has significance for interpretation of rendezvous. The events described in the received narrative outlined in chapter 1 are the objective reality. The sources cited and referred to in that chapter indicate that the varied people present during those times had various experiences. We cannot know what, exactly, these experiences were, because we cannot become those people. What we can know, however, is how they expressed their experiences in their diaries, letters, drawings, and paintings. Chapter 1 and its sources, then, are all part of Bruner’s expression of reality. Rendezvous, likewise, is a form of expression of historical reality.

**Forms of Expression of Experience**

The meaning of an event for any given individual or community is created not only by what information or experience is expressed but also by the form of its expression—that is, by both what it expresses and how it expresses. An individual must somehow organize the experience into a memory. The person selects images, words, and sequences of events from among what has been perceived and then shapes them into some kind of meaning by making connections among them. If no connections are made, the experience has no meaning. To illustrate how this works, I will give an example of what happens when it does not work. A professional colleague told me once about one of her clients, a person who was born without the ability to organize visual information. His eyes were functional; medical tests indicated that he could perceive light and dark, movement, and color. But he was unable to translate that information into any kind of meaningful kinesthetic sense; he had to feel things to recognize them, could not navigate through a strange room without feeling around for obstacles, and could not read or perceive photographs as meaningful images. This person was functionally blind, even though his eyes had “normal” vision. The visual imagery he received was without meaning because he was unable to organize it in any way.

Those of us who are fortunate to live without such a physical challenge are constantly connecting visual symbols into forms of useful remembered information: a door that is likely to hurt us if we try to walk through it when it is closed, a human face, black marks on a white paper that are organized into words. We connect such organized visual information into expectations that are shaped by our lived experiences: we come to recognize the doors to our homes, the faces of those we love, and what is signified by the writing. In our daily lives, we organize information in ways that ensure our survival and that also bring us a sense of order and meaning in our lives. We do this on an individual level within a social context that both informs and is informed by our personal meanings for complex information. Something happens to us, and, in Bruner’s terms, we shape it into a memory of an experience. That memory finds its meaning by how it is shaped: how the visual images, narratives, and lived kinesthetic experiences are configured. This configuration, by shaping the meaning of experience, shapes individual identity. When we communicate to each other about an individual experience, the creation of meaning becomes a social process that defines the community and the individual’s place within it.

**Narrative expression of experience.** When people tell each other about an event, they relate a sequence of smaller, simple events that make up the more complex event; that is, they
tell a story. Simply choosing from among the events themselves and then deciding the sequence in which they are told shapes meaning. Descriptive embellishments, tone of delivery of the story, and the milieu in which a story is told also affect the meaning of a story for a community. A sense of “the way things should be” is implied in every significant story that is shared within a culture. Cultural meanings are often shaped as stories, as narratives, but they can also be shaped (communicated about) ideographically and kinesthetically. Narratives, images, and embodied actions all have their own ways of shaping meaning by both creating and limiting possible meanings. At rendezvous, some of the historical narratives are told around campfires. Also, buckskinning journals feature articles that cite primary sources but may expound on primary quotations as they weave a tale around them.

**Ideographic expression of experience.** In the case of a static drawing or photograph, the expression of experience is ideographic; the many parts of the image are presented simultaneously. A visual artist has much less control than a storyteller or writer does over the sequence in which parts of an image are perceived and therefore the relative importance of the parts. Over the centuries of human culture, artists have found various ways to control the viewer’s eye, but a person viewing an image still has more “power” over its interpretation than does a person listening to a story. For example, it is easier to ignore a visual ad in a newspaper or magazine than it is to ignore one on the radio or television. On the other hand, the visual images in a news magazine story may attract more attention than the accompanying text does and may even lead to an interpretation that is markedly different from that proposed by the written article. A viewer can choose the amount of time spent with an image and can more easily foreground or ignore details. For a moving image, as in a movie or a play, the time element is inserted back into the equation; any given momentary image is immediately lost and replaced with another image. Rendezvous, as a collection of symbolic historical images, provides participants (both tourists and re-enactors) with a rich array of visual information, most of it in motion. The visual information takes the form of the costumes, props, and settings described in chapter 2. Participants are free to choose which images to pay attention to and which to ignore; I return to the implications of this freedom of interpretation in chapters 4 and 5.

**Kinesthetic expression of experience.** At rendezvous, which are improvisations with general rules but without a director, images and actions have free play. Kinesthetic expression, expression via enactment, happens simply by virtue of doing a rendezvous together. Such expression through action shapes meaning in one way for an observer and in a different way for the actor. For the observer, action creates a moving image, often one with accompanying words that tell a story. At rendezvous, participants cannot help but observe each other, taking in the moving images of persons in period clothing engaging in historically based activities. For the actor, the expression becomes experience; the bodily experience of imitating a historical event creates a false memory of having lived through it.

The elements of story (narrative expression), imagery (ideographic expression), and action (kinesthetic expression) interact at rendezvous to imbue the experience of buckskinning with meaning for its practitioners. The historical stories from primary sources and the stories that have evolved along with the rendezvous re-enactments shape meaning in a narrative way. For example, buckskinners revisit Mike Fink, attacks by hostile animals and people, and the simple process of cooking a meal over an open fire. The primary images, the iconic aura of the frontiersman/mountain man, and the scenery and costumes in camp shape meaning in an ideographic way. The rules of authenticity that require a period look “on stage” enhance the environmental imagery. And the actions – the craft work, the competitions, the community
events, daily living in camp – create meaning in theatrical and kinesthetic ways. Rendezvous is like a smorgasbord of symbols, ready for selection and manipulation. The rules for improvisation are liberal, leaving participants with a wide range of choices about what to do with the symbols and how to interpret them.

**Construction of Individual Identity at Rendezvous**

I stated at the beginning of this chapter that I see rendezvous as an effort on the part of participants to celebrate and define their own culture. The 1960s saw changes in the politics of identity as many marginalized groups rejected the melting pot version of American identity and declared their refusal to “melt” into some kind of generic American-ness. With assorted ethnic or religious groups, women, homosexuals, and others claiming their cultural uniqueness, separate from what would come to be called the dominant ideology, what was to become of whoever was left? How were white heterosexual men of European descent to define themselves? What identities were to be passed on through their families? Other groups turned to the past to reclaim lost or overlooked histories, and so it is not surprising that the black powder shooters did likewise. Re-enacting history is one way to reclaim it. The return to what is perceived as tradition can be framed as a parallel to similar returns on the part of African Americans, Native Americans, and others who celebrate music, dance forms, visual arts, and other practices of the past. Reclaiming history is literally reclaiming collective memory for a group and a sense of individual self as belonging to that group. There is a very fine line between reclaiming history and inventing it.

Construction of individual identity at rendezvous happens primarily via embodiment of persona. That is, identity is constructed by what I defined in chapter 2 as acting. Assuming a persona includes creating a visual image of the persona (putting on a costume) and then behaving like the persona would behave. As I noted in chapter 2, dressing like a persona, living in his or her home, and using the tools that the persona would have used all affect the day-to-day experience of living in camp. Embodying a persona also affects the social experience of a rendezvouser as others see and respond to the costume as well as the person wearing it. The individual experience of being at rendezvous is affected by three factors: the choice of persona, the quality of research in which the enactment is grounded, and the level of identification with the persona.

**Choice of Persona**

To participate in rendezvous at all, buckskinners must choose a persona. As I noted in chapter 2, the choice of clothing that is the “ticket” to rendezvous is necessarily a choice of the kind of person who would wear it, regardless of whether conscious enactment of character accompanies the change of clothes. The choice to wear a buckskin dress is a choice to represent an Indian woman. The choice of linen hunting frock and leggings is a choice to represent an eastern longhunter. The character types represented at rendezvous are part of the symbolic imagery described in the last chapter, and so choice of persona is choice of symbol. I will return to the implications of this in chapter 4.

There are classes at rendezvous and other gatherings that can help beginners choose a character model and offer tips on how to research history in general and persons in particular. There are also books that help beginners get started. The most comprehensive of these is Cathy Johnson’s *Who Was I?*, which is printed on yellowish old-looking paper in a font that evokes hand-set line type. A long-time re-enactor, portraying a naturalist and healer who uses herbs in
her practice, Johnson weaves her own choices and experiences in with a practical guide on approaching enactment of living history. She notes that persona is more than clothing, that “what people did and thought, believed and fought for (or against) were always more important than what they wore” (v). Johnson sees enactment of a persona as a way to focus on specific aspects of history, but she acknowledges the importance of having fun by dressing up and playing a role (1). Brent and Karen Kemmer, who portray members of Colonel Jonathan Bagley’s Third Massachusetts Regiment, Company C (a unit in the French and Indian War), have also published their own book on historical persona. The Kemmers’ focus is primarily on military re-enactments, rather than rendezvous, but their book still has some information for a person in the process of choosing and researching a persona. A third book, a pamphlet by Damin and Barbary de Folo, gives no indication of the authors’ personae, nor does it help with choice of a persona, but it is designed as an aid to helping the reader create a more fully developed character impression (3).

The development of a persona involves choices of historical period, geographical area, class, ethnic or cultural identity, and occupation. Beginning with the historical period, as the Kemmers suggest, makes sense because it narrows the field of necessary research considerably (21). There are persons in the United States re-enacting eras from ancient Rome to medieval Europe to the Vietnam War. The Kemmers suggest that research begin with reading a broad history of the time period (21). For persons who want to attend latter-day rendezvous, the historical era is by definition (NRLHF rules) limited to the years between 1640 and 1840. My own observations indicate that most rendezvous personae derive from the mid-1700s to 1840. Reading a general history can give the reader an idea of the kinds of people who lived at the time and what their occupations were. From there, a would-be rendezvouser can narrow the reading to more localized information, including more time-limited and focused histories, biographies, journals, and other sources.

It may be historical readings that pique an interest in a specific persona, but personal background and interests may also affect choices (Johnson 4-9). For example, many latter-day mountain men grew up hunting in rural areas, so primitive encampments and hunting expeditions are simply a backwards-in-time extension of a long-time interest. A twenty-first-century gunsmith might become interested in recreating period flintlocks. A would-be re-enactor might become interested in her or his own ancestors; genealogical research may turn up a Pilgrim, a Confederate soldier, Indian ancestry, an escaped African slave, or a craftsman working in a specific medium of interest. Events that occurred near the place where a person lives might precipitate a foray into re-enactment. Tony Horwitz’s funny and incisive book on Civil War re-enactment, Confederates in the Attic, grew out of a childhood passion rekindled by the appearance in his front yard of latter-day Confederate soldiers re-enacting a historical battle.

Still another source of ideas for personae comes from rendezvous itself. There are those who skip the historical reading completely and simply look around to see what the other people at rendezvous look like and decide from there what to wear. They may simply like how a certain costume looks, and choose to wear it for that reason only. Several of my acquaintances changed costumes (and therefore the corresponding culture or historical era) from one day to the next: a calico prairie dress on Monday, a buckskin Indian-style dress on Tuesday, and so forth. This casual approach to costume and persona is typical of the category of rendezvousers that I define as “party people” in chapter 5.
Quality of Research on Persona

For these buckskinner party people, the best way to research a persona is to go shopping along traders’ row. The research begins and ends at the tertiary source that is rendezvous. However, persons who wish to embody a historically authentic persona look further than traders’ row and begin in-depth historical research. They may look at art from the period, read published journals, or even do primary archival research with documents and artifacts. Journals like *Muzzle Blasts* and *The Tomahawk and Long Rifle* feature articles that would not be out of place in a scholarly anthropology journal. They reference primary sources, feature photographs of historical artifacts, and address subjects as varied as Plains Indian war shirts, silver trade jewelry, primitive bows and arrows, the diets and cooking methods of different Indian tribes, trade beads and beadwork, and the lives of historical fur trappers. Some buckskinnners become quite knowledgeable about history and its relics; many are also skilled at replicating historical artifacts. Their work, displayed in places like the Museum of the Mountain Man in Pinedale, Wyoming, also serves as a secondary historical source for re-enactors.

Some buckskinnners make a point of going to the sites of the historical rendezvous or other events pertinent to the life of the chosen persona. Fred Gowans’s book provides maps to significant sites, accompanied by scholarly analysis of sometimes conflicting theories about their exact locations. Visiting such a physical environment helps a re-enactor envisage the setup of the historical encampment and provides a bodily experience of “being there” that informs the experience of going to a latter-day rendezvous. Some buckskinnners go on primitive treks along routes that follow historical paths as much as possible. Much of the fur trapping territory has changed little since the early nineteenth century, and trekkers and hunters can duplicate quite closely the physical acts of trappers in daily life. They may hunt game and cook it for dinner, trap beaver and harvest their pelts, gather and eat native vegetable food sources, cover miles on horseback, and camp with minimal equipment. Some do all of this in the middle of winter, as the historical mountain men did. Experiences like these are significantly different from simply reading about fur trappers and, like visiting historical sites, provide a bodily sense of knowing history. Persons who have done a primitive winter trek are likely to wear clothing and use gear that reflect what they have learned about what is necessary for survival over extended periods of time without benefit of technologies developed since 1840. In other words, what they wear and use comes not from looking at what else is at rendezvous and not just from historical research, but from practical experience.

Buckskinnners sometimes find craftspersons who can teach them period techniques and the traditions behind them. Cathy Smith, for example, has lived among Lakota Indians as part of her study of Lakota history and culture. Her articles on quillworking include not only how-to tips but also information on the traditions and beliefs behind the craft. The gun makers in the rendezvous community learned their craft by seeking out artisans who had kept alive the tradition of making black powder guns by hand by handing the skills down through the generations.

Embodyment of character at rendezvous, then, may involve significant knowledge about the history of the character and his or her daily life and skills, simple imitation of the “look” of the character, or something in between these two extremes. There are also differences in the degree to which re-enactors endow their personae with personal history and depth of character and the extent to which they come to identify with their personae.
Level of Identification with Persona

The de Folo book on persona champions character development with questions that would not be out of place during the table work in early rehearsals of plays. The de Folos suggest finding an “illustration” of the persona and encourage their readers to specify character name, details of personal possessions and clothing, routines of daily life, physical surroundings such as the home and town the character lives in, religion, health, legal issues, and even diet. Such intensive character work is very much in keeping with some approaches to stage or screen acting today. However, a compliment to a buckskinner on his acting ability may bring a quick response to the effect that the re-enactor is doing “historical interpretation,” not acting.

The subjective experience of a buckskinner, whether he or she thinks of it as interpretation or acting, depends not only on the type of persona but also on the degree to which the buckskinner identifies with the historical model. A sense of identification can be achieved by either creating a detailed persona with a personal past and an inner life (acting from the inside out) or by closely imitating the actions of the persona (acting from the outside in). In the last chapter I noted that some rendezvousers present their personae in the first person, some do third-person interpretation, some move back and forth between the two, and some simply dress the part and remain themselves. Any of these forms of impersonation can be informed by extensive historical primary research, formal or casual secondary-source research, or “research” in the trade tents of rendezvous. That is, some persons who are relatively ignorant about history may put on some kind of accent and play at first-person interpretation, and some of the most authentic-looking buckskinners may never endow their surface persona with any kind of personal history or inner life.

The final factor of the subjective experience of a buckskinner is the extent to which the person actually lives the primitive life – at rendezvous or another buckskinning event. A person who has a kerosene heater inside a tent, or who sleeps in a goose down sleeping bag, is going to experience a very cold night differently from another person who has a canvas lean-to shelter and a wool trade blanket or buffalo robe. Reheating canned stew, or even homemade stew prepared ahead, is different from making the whole stew from scratch and boiling it over a fire and very different from cooking up freshly slaughtered game shot that day with a flintlock rifle. If the impersonator adopts the camp lifeway of the historical model, that is, if a “Plains Indian” lives in a tipi with historically appropriate furnishings and equipment or a “mountain man” sleeps under a tarp, that person may come to some insight about how the historical model lived day-to-day life. This insight in turn may lead to increased understanding of the historical person’s point of view of past events as they were lived. The “Plains Indian” may come to perceive the Euro-American trappers and traders as invaders, and the “mountain man” may begin to grasp why his models were likely to shoot (unfamiliar Indians) first and ask questions (about their intentions) later. If an impersonator pays attention to historical authenticity of the model’s lifeway, such understandings may have some historical validity. If an impersonator does not adhere to any rules of historical authenticity, there is a possibility that the sense of “living history” that that person develops will be mere fantasy. Fantasy that feels like history (and it is likely to, if it happens in a historical environment like rendezvous) can lead to false beliefs about a real past. It requires considerable effort, and often considerable discomfort, to reproduce the experience of historical persons. While some rendezvousers work hard to re-live the “real” experience of a rendezvous, many simply mask non-period aspects of their daily activities. These polar attitudes, and everything in between, are absorbed into the general atmosphere of a large rendezvous.
All of these factors – the research, the style of interpretation, and the quality of daily life – affect how involved a buckskinner gets with a persona. Therefore, they affect the depth of subjective identification with the historical experience. That is, they affect how much the person identifies with the persona and therefore the extent to which the experience of the persona affects the person’s identity. I noted above that people are what they remember. As lived memories, latter-day rendezvous affect the total person by becoming part of his or her overall life experience. As lived memories of history, they affect a person’s sense of being a self-with-a-history. The intensity of the memories of rendezvous is shaped by the level of interpretation and the historical authenticity of the lived experience. Buckskinners who are immersed in the experience of rendezvous, whether via adoption of character or close imitation of the lifeways, are going to have full-body memories that may be perceived as significant identification with persons of the past. They may come to believe that they are truly living as persons in the past did.

Handler and Saxon have described the “magic moments” experienced by re-enactors as times when they feel like they are actually in the historical moment in their historical personae (245). Tony Horwitz’s Confederate re-enactors refer to this feeling as a “period rush” (7). A period rush feels like total identification with a historical person, but Handler and Saxon identify it (correctly) as a time when the person is most outside of the role but is intensely focused on the experience of the role (256). The theatrical literature on acting can add to the understanding of this phenomenon. Some actors who work within the tradition of psychological realism actively seek, and report, a similar feeling of total identification with a character they portray. However, the fact that they still manage the role, that is, they say the lines in the script and do the blocking established at rehearsals, indicates that the identification is not really total. These actors are not hallucinating on stage; they are acting. What I think is happening in this situation is what psychologists Abraham Maslow and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi refer to as “peak experience” and “flow,” respectively, defined as a state of expanded consciousness that characterizes total involvement with an activity for its own sake. In the case of a re-enactor or a stage actor, this expanded state of consciousness includes the consciousness of both the actor and the imagined character. The experience of “being” a character can sometimes leak out into life outside the role; an actor (or a re-enactor) may begin to talk or otherwise act like a stage (or historical) character in his or her “real” life. The consciousness of the character can literally become part of the consciousness of the (re-en)actor.

I believe that the moment that feels like really being in history is, in fact, a moment of being totally in the present and fully involved in the here-and-now. Such total absorption in an activity for its own sake can be extremely pleasurable, as suggested by the use of the drug culture word “rush” (referring to the initial sensations of a psychoactive substance as it changes consciousness) to describe it. It can also lead to a strong sense of ownership of a historical person’s experience, a sense of having actually lived history. This ownership can bring with it strong beliefs about what historical life was like. For a person who has carefully researched history and modeled persona and activities in close imitation of historical persons and activities, such beliefs might have some validity. For a person who has learned history from rendezvous itself, the strong beliefs about history may be quite erroneous. It may feel like living history, but it is really living latter-day rendezvous, which is improvisation with history-based symbols. The experience of living history, false as it may be, seems real and can lead to a strong sense of ownership of history. I return to the implications of this in chapter 5.
Construction of Social Identity at Rendezvous

As I noted above, the development of an individual identity happens in a social context; this context interpellates the individual and shapes to a large extent how that individual defines his or herself socially. If personal identity is individual memory, then the social identity is memory that is collective. Just as an individual human being’s sense of self (identity) is constructed from memories, communities are formed around a common history – the experienced events themselves and the stories that come to be told about these events. The construction of social or community identity happens at rendezvous when the personae gather and participate in simple daily activities, informal social gatherings, and more formal scenario-based activities. The memories at rendezvous include the activities there but also the larger memory of shared national history.

The social aspect of these events, the desire to connect with other persons with similar interest in history, is one of the major attractions of rendezvous. Respondents in David Hubbell’s survey of what they liked most about rendezvous consistently included the other people there as a big part of the fun (32). Chris Miller, in an article on how buckskinning groups can recruit new members, notes that people join the group for the same reason they join other groups and clubs: to socialize and have fun (76). Regardless of other reasons for rendezvousing, participants go there for the people and the play. Perley Urquhart, in his article “Why Rendezvous?,” notes that he goes for mostly social reasons and for the lasting friendships that he has developed over the years (32). In a letter to me, Mark “Bad Heart” Claypool wrote that “it’s fun to be with ‘the guys’.” For David “Alexander McKeag” Congdon, also writing in a personal letter, attending rendezvous always “lifts the spirits”; his wife, Kim, regards rendezvous as “a trade fair with a dress code, a social event and a chance to go camping.” Several rendezvousers told me that the people they meet at rendezvous are among the most significant in their lives. I personally found buckskinnners to be an open, friendly, and honest bunch.

The other people at rendezvous are clearly a major draw. But it takes more than just people to motivate traveling sometimes long distances, setting up sometimes elaborate (and expensive) camps, and engaging in other rendezvous activities. If people want to socialize, they can go to a local party or bar. If they want to socialize while camping in the great outdoors, there are plenty of non-primitive campgrounds all over the country. So socializing within the particular milieu of rendezvous is somehow different from simple social interaction or camping at Kampgrounds of America. What makes rendezvous different from such public campgrounds or parallel convocations like Renaissance Faires is the specific environment – historical setting – created. Rendezvous attracts people who are interested in early American history. It is significant that both the history itself and the interest in it are shared. People are attracted to rendezvous because, within the “historical” environment and the community of others with an interest in that history, they can explore their own identities by exploring their collective past. They do so by adopting personae and then entering into what I defined in chapter 2 as improvisational enactment. As improvised environmental theatre, rendezvous enables free play with story, image, and the combination of the two via enactment. Such play with meaning reveals itself most tellingly in some of the more formal scenario-based events at rendezvous. It is also apparent in the events that are derived from the tradition of latter-day rendezvous.

History-Based Scenarios

David Hubbell describes a “Mike Fink shoot” based on the famous story (see chapter 1) about a trapper, Mike Fink, who killed his buddy “by accident” after persuading the buddy to put
a glass of whiskey, as a shooting target, on his head (43). That fatal shot is the objective reality behind the latter-day shooting contest. The experience of that reality was described by the third man, the one who shot and killed Fink by way of frontier justice, to others. The story that has come down to today’s buckskinners – the expression of the reality – derives from the third man’s story. The expression of the reality that happens at rendezvous takes theatrical kinesthetic form: it is acted out. The “re-enactment” includes a humorous theatrical convention in that it substitutes a melon for the buddy’s head (43). (I would also venture to guess that a latter-day mountain man would not waste good whiskey by using it as a shooting target, but I was not present to check on that.) A contestant who aims too low at the intended target on top of the melon will thus “recreate” “history” by blowing the melon to bits. The shooting contest takes a serious historical event – cold-blooded murder – and puts an outrageously hilarious spin on it: the object of the shoot is to hit the target, not the melon, and it is a “failure” in the game that results in the historical “recreation.” It should be clear that this little shooting game makes only a passing nod to history as it provides a playful diversion for grown men with guns. However, it does evoke history in that the guns in question are period pieces and the target is not just an ordinary melon with no story attached. It is, then, an “expression” of experience in Bruner’s sense: a theatrical expression with a set, props, characters, and plot.

Some of the more complex scenario-based competitions recall the day-to-day lives of the historical trappers. Hubbell describes a team competition beginning with a scenario in which Indians had raided the trappers’ camp and stolen their furs and the Indian wife of one of the trappers (77). Each four-man team had to go through a wooded area full of targets shaped like Indians (they had to shoot down all of these targets) to rescue the woman (represented by a stuffed dummy) without being “shot” by “Indian fire” consisting of tennis balls shot out of small cannons controlled by the persons who were running the competition. The method of representation for the Indians, including the woman, is rather telling, in a political sense. None of them has a voice or an active role to play in this story. The event tests the mountain man skills of shooting and avoiding enemy fire; the contestants are acting the roles of mountain men, and representations of other elements in the drama are secondary to the main purpose of the competition. The narrative and its embodiment are clearly told and experienced from the point of view of the historical Euro-American trappers. The meaning being explored here is most definitely not the experience of the Indians, male or female. These little games explore the skills and knowledge of historical Euro-Americans living in the Rocky Mountains in the early 1800s. I discuss the significance of the erasure of other possible perspectives in chapter 5.

Buckskinner Mike Nesbitt describes an elaborate “mountain man combat course” for teams of four men who were instructed to come to the course with all the equipment they would need for a real three- or four-day trek in the wilderness (46). Nesbitt followed one group through the course. They received or lost points for what they were wearing and for the equipment they had chosen to carry: points gained for blankets and tools and points lost for inauthentic items. They then chose a “leader” and a “hunter” among themselves and proceeded down a trail. A cardboard “deer” provided a target for the hunter; the deer was successfully shot, and contest judges told the group to go take care of the meat. The hunter went in alone without reloading his rifle; he tripped a wire that activated a cardboard “grizzly bear” and was pronounced dead for the remainder of the competition (47). His fellows took his remaining ammunition and some other items and continued down the trail. They shot at various targets and were awarded points for hits; at one place there were four “grouse” on the trail, and the group received extra points for lining up and shooting all at once at the birds. Had they taken turns shooting in a real hunting
situation with a flock of live birds, they would have bagged only one grouse because the others
would have flown away after the first shot (48). Further on down the trail the men saw several
human shapes in the woods and were told by the judges that they were surrounded by 100 Crow
Indians. Had they raised their rifles to shoot, they would have lost points. A real mountain man
would know that the Crows were friendly and that their arrival provided an opportunity to trade.
The judges acted as “Crows,” awarding points for items traded. The team had neglected to bring
along their dead teammate’s gun, which would have added significantly to their point total.

The trail continued, with challenges like setting beaver traps and shooting at targets while
standing in water (this is a major trick for a black powder shooter). Another man “died” when
the team failed to notice an “Indian” waiting in ambush (48). They shot an “elk” and managed to
see and shoot another hidden “Indian” who was set up near the fallen elk (49). Again instructed
to set beaver traps, this time on the far bank of the creek, the two remaining men were halfway
across the water when two more hostile “Indians,” suspended on a wire, slid out over the creek in
an “attack.” Both men shot at the targets, and one of them missed and was declared “dead.” The
remaining man had no pistol, so he would have had to fight the Indian hand-to-hand. The
outcome of the theoretical wrestling match was determined by cutting a deck of cards, and the
last mountain man lost the cut (50). Thus, the team failed to “survive” their little walk in the
woods.

This combat course, which served as a playful test of skills that would have been
essential for historical brigades of trappers, was “dangerous” only by agreed-upon theatrical
convention. The real play, as with the melon shoot and the rescue scenario, was symbolic in
nature. The contests were real in that it mattered who did well and who did not in terms of
winning it, but the situations themselves were blatantly contrived. What is significant here is not
the obviousness of the fakery (criticized by others) but its symbolic content. Contestants were
not shooting neutral paper targets with bull’s-eyes; the targets were symbolic representations of
whiskey glasses, dangerous and/or edible animals, and Indians. The shooters in the rescue
scenario and combat course were not standing in a regulation target range; they were moving
within environmental settings that evoked historical places. The “games,” framed as shooting
contests (physical play), served also as symbolic play: improvised enactment of historical story.
Games like these are tremendously popular at rendezvous, providing as they do not only a
refreshing variety of shooting targets but also a chance to play with history in an imaginative
way. Silly as the Mike Fink melon shoot is, participating in it is a way to connect to a historical
event by expressing it in action. Fake as the combat course is, it does provide accurate feedback
about contestants’ survival skills as compared with those of the historical Rocky Mountain
trappers. Such play, as I noted in the last chapter, is not innocent. It means something, and what
it means for its participants has to do with affirming identity within a social group that knows the
stories that are referenced and tends to interpret these stories similarly as a significant part of a
shared past. I have noted that shared interpretation of events defines a group, and so such
symbolic play affirms the group identity.

Derivative Rendezvous-Based Scenarios

Performances that are based in early American history predominate at rendezvous, but
some are derived from the tradition of rendezvous recreations. That is, the referent is not the
history of the fur trade but the history of latter-day encampments. An entertaining example of
this is the “kangaroo court” I observed at the 2003 Alafia River rendezvous. This event is unique
to Alafia and apparently developed from the real-life jobs of some local members of the
sponsoring group, the Florida Frontiersmen. The court was set up on a simple wooden platform stage in the middle of a field. The judge, played by a real-life judge, presided behind a “bench” draped with a kangaroo skin (the shape of the tail is unmistakable). The attorneys were played by real-life lawyers, and the motley jury members were chosen from among the organizers of the rendezvous. All were conspicuously consuming a liquid substance contained in a period-correct salt-glazed pottery jug that was handed around the stage throughout both of the “trials” that I watched. One of the accused, a trader, was brought in with his hands tied behind his back by a mounted ranger. The plaintiff was suing a trader for faulty goods. The plaintiff had bought a bumper sticker proclaiming “I am not a hippie. I’m just a well-groomed mountain man,” and when he tried to stick it onto his horse’s rump it kept falling off. The entire trial was an elaborate joke around the fact that the plaintiff did not realize that one must peel off the back of a bumper sticker in order to get it to stick. Gags included demonstrations of trying to put the bumper sticker on a horse’s ass (one of the lawyers was persuaded to provide the rump), outrageous attempts to bribe the judge and jury, abrupt and arbitrary rulings by the judge, nonsensical oratory, and ongoing drinking.

The other trial involved a young woman accused of having “no visible means of support” and too many children in and around her camp. Against the judge’s advice, but perhaps in response to the lawyering in past trials, this defendant chose to act as her own counsel. Her defense involved calling the children in question up to the stage with her and leading them in singing several songs to her guitar accompaniment. This served as proof of her means of support and explanation for the children. The plaintiff’s loud objections were overruled, the prosecuting attorney was all but ignored by the judge, and members of the jury were too busy drinking and falling off of their seats to pay much attention to the proceedings. The defendant was cleared on all counts without resort to bribery.

This courtroom silliness attracted quite a crowd of onlookers, all buckskinner since the rendezvous at that point was closed to outside visitors. The theatrical elements are obvious, but the connections to mountain man history are tenuous. Makeshift courts on the frontier may have administered a similarly arbitrary justice, but the kangaroo court does not attempt to reproduce historical courts. Both the history of the nineteenth-century rendezvous and the history of its recreations are represented at rendezvous, and symbols of both can become conflated or connected in seemingly illogical ways. Take, for example, the kangaroo skin on the judge’s bench. As a pelt, it references the fur trade and puts a literal spin on (and provides a visual image for) the expression “kangaroo court,” meaning an informal and probably corrupt judicial forum. The trials themselves provide opportunities for the jury members, judge, lawyers, plaintiffs, and defendants to “play” with the legal system and with their personae. The judge and the attorneys could lampoon their own present-day professions. The Alafia River Rendezvous community has thus created a “tradition” that happens within a celebration of larger historical traditions. The tradition of the kangaroo court differentiates the Alafia community from other groups of buckskinner, while the overall rendezvous places the Alafia group solidly within the national (and international) buckskinning community.

Manipulation of Symbol Systems in Scenarios

These scenario-based performative activities use historical symbols in playfully creative ways. Buckskinner survivalists outside of rendezvous sometimes put themselves in situations that are truly life-threatening, but for the most part, the rendezvous gatherings are not dangerous. Competitions in shooting, cooking, and period costumes may become serious to
those involved, but most activities at rendezvous involve a sense of play, of a make-believe world in which there are no dire consequences. In this playful world, participants can act out possible ways of being in the world without committing to them. They can try on roles and activities and abandon them if they do not satisfy. The atmosphere is much like that in my freshman acting classes, where I encourage students to behave in ways that are different from those defined by daily habit, social expectation, and personal comfort. Such play is fun in and of itself, but it can also lead to considerable personal development. What gets developed during exploratory play is influenced by what kinds of toys are available to play with and by what a person brings to the activity in terms of what he or she wants to get out of it.

The toys in this case are the symbolic images and activities available at rendezvous. I showed in chapter 2 how the rules of authenticity at rendezvous define the symbols used: they determine what kinds of characters can appear, what they can wear and use, and what they can do when on stage. Thus rendezvous differentiate themselves from Renaissance Faires and Star Trek conventions. A comprehensive comparison of such communities would be a fascinating study, one that I may pursue elsewhere but that is not necessary to my argument here. Suffice it to say that people tend to choose a particular fantasy community and stick with it, not move back and forth between, say, Dungeons and Dragons and the Civil War. In other words, it is not just the fantasy aspect that attracts. If this were so, any fantasy would do. It is the underlying themes and their enactment via persona and material culture that attract people to one community or another. Renaissance Faires, for example, emphasize chivalry, courtly manners, and royalty, creating a romantic and visually sumptuous culture without poverty or plague. Tony Horwitz has shown that re-enactors of the Civil War, particularly those on the Confederate side, are still deeply involved with some of the political and social concerns that were precipitants and remain consequences of that war. Star Trek, in turn, valorizes technology and American empire. Rendezvous recall themes of history that attract participants: the frontier itself, the men and women who lived on or near it, and the materials of conquest and establishment of a new country in occupied territory. Its emphasis on the everyday life of ordinary people provides an opportunity for participants to explore history as a personal and collective identity quest; the two are intimately related in the context of rendezvous. The symbols at rendezvous are clustered around a particular time in American history and the symbols associated with that time. Rendezvous encampments themselves symbolize the historical places where fur trappers, traders, and Indians convened for trade, competitions, and entertainment. The persons who attend rendezvous are dressed like the historical persons who gathered for the rendezvous and trade fairs. Thus, there are living symbols of past persons moving in an environment that symbolizes past gatherings. They are engaging in activities that symbolize more or less literally the activities of the past. The woods walks are obviously highly representational in their symbolism, but a blacksmith working at a period forge is acting in a way quite close to that of a historical blacksmith.

These symbols and meanings of rendezvous are created and shared by people from all kinds of backgrounds. Belk and Costa note that buckskinner include “super-patriotic Vietnam veterans, aging neomarxist hippies, soldiers of fortune, pacifists, secular humanists, right-wing zealots, devout Christians, atheists, New Ageists” and others (231). Despite “Doc” Carlson’s claim that “You’ll be hard put to find a wild-eyed liberal at a rendezvous” (14), there are plenty of liberals to be found. My own acquaintances and correspondents include a Catholic priest, a former Buddhist priest who is now a member of the Native American Church, a plumber, a nurse, a magazine editor, and a rocket scientist (retired NASA jet propulsion engineer).
Buckskinners’ political views are as varied as their careers. Some people I talked to were aghast at the prospect of the United States invading Iraq, some were mainly concerned about loved ones in mortal danger, and others saw military action in Afghanistan and Iraq as a continuation of traditions established during the historical times revisited at rendezvous.

So the community that gathers around the shared symbols of rendezvous is diverse; they may share the symbols, but what they make of them may not be at all similar. The variability of interpretations of rendezvous is significant because interpretation of rendezvous so easily blends into interpretation of American history. That is, the historically authentic environment of rendezvous tends to lend a historically authentic aura to all events that occur there, not just those that are well-informed re-enactments of historical events or activities. The bodily experience of a rendezvous, as I have noted here, leads to creation of personal memories that include “memories” of history. For the many buckskinners who are not serious students of history, the resultant vision of American history may be highly idiosyncratic and is quite likely to be lacking in factual grounding.

In the rendezvous environment, collective “memory” is manipulated and sometimes changed. Elements of fantasy and fun blend sometimes imperceptibly into meticulous efforts to duplicate the actions (and thereby the experiences) of persons from history. The rules of rendezvous ensure a certain degree of historical authenticity with regard to “sets” and “props,” but there is considerable leeway for manipulation of these symbolic materials. In short, buckskinners are totally free to make history into whatever they want it to be. The images must be consistent with the rules, but the “stories” told, even the woods walks that try to be historically authentic, are all improvised. The larger, national implications of such improvisations are the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that the rendezvous environment serves as a kind of workshop for affirming and modifying personal and group identity. Through embodiment of historical persona, individual buckskinners explore history-based experiences and sometimes develop a strong sense of identification with the persona. These experiences occur within a group of people who share a system of symbolic images, stories, and activities that define the group itself and the individuals within it. These symbols are manipulated in scenarios that recall but do not attempt to reproduce past events. Rendezvous link buckskinners with a collective past that is “reproduced” in miniature at the encampments and provides a milieu in which individuals can connect with each other and that collective past. Buckskinners come away from rendezvous with a strong sense of their personal and collective history. A buckskinner in the Race, Gender, and Performance class described at the beginning of this chapter would thus have an “ethnic” identity, a place in a community with a shared past.

1 I taught this class before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and I have often wondered how the events of that day, and the subsequent wars, have changed perceptions of being American. Nothing unifies quite like a shared trauma – it becomes a “history” that defines a group as those who were attacked.
2 Whether there can be an essential self without an identity is certainly a question worth pondering, but far beyond this study. My personal stance (always just a working hypothesis) on this is that an essential self, which I would define as a soul or spiritual entity, probably exists without identity only when it is not incarnated into a physical being. One need not agree with me on this as far as my argument in this dissertation is concerned.
3 One of the criticisms of expressive therapy in general and psychodrama in particular is that they risk re-traumatizing a client or even adding additional trauma. This danger is real, and much of the training for expressive therapists involves ensuring that such exacerbation of the problem does not occur.
There are those who will argue that there is, in fact, no objective reality at all. That is a subject for philosophers. I am assuming that there is an objective reality for the purposes of this dissertation.

The ancient Egyptians simply made the more important figures larger than the others. Color can be used to draw the eye, as can placement of an image in the foreground of a perspective drawing or painting. A photographer, particularly one using digital imagery, can simply erase one part of an image or otherwise manipulate its components.

I have not attended a rendezvous in the northeastern part of the United States. Rendezvous tend to reflect interest in regional history, and it may be that encampments in that area include personae from among the early English and French colonists and the indigenous Indian tribes, many of which had all but disappeared by the early 1800s.

There are, of course, no locked doors on the tents at rendezvous. People leave valuable guns and other expensive items in their camps, knowing that they will not be stolen. Respect for others’ property pervades rendezvous.

“Kangaroo court” is used today mostly to describe “courts” within the penal system whereby prisoners mete out a form of justice to each other. Despite the reference to an Australian animal, the expression is uniquely American and is associated with the wild west in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

Primitive encampments are, however, vulnerable to weather. At the 2004 Alafia River Rendezvous, downdrafts embedded within a storm front that moved through camp early one morning downed nine tents and sent one trader home early with soaked goods and a ruined tent. Fortunately, no one was hurt.

There were some rather hilarious beggars at the Maine Renaissance Faire that I attended in 2003, and the rainy weather made for some glorious mud for them to grovel in, but the vast majority of those in period dress were well above the peasant class. I suspect that on a good day those beggars may have made as much money as some of the vendors of period wares. It was also clear that these well-fed beggars were clowns; other re-enactors and visitors laughed at them, and the beggars looked like they were having fun. They did not look like they were attempting to truly experience the world-perspective of an impoverished person of the Renaissance era. The scenery at this Faire was obviously fake, much of it one-sided like a movie set, and most of the acting was outrageously over the top, but that tongue-in-cheek style of being in the past seemed to be part of the fun of the event for both enactors and visitors from the twenty-first century. The spirit of play is alive and well at Renfaires.
CHAPTER 4:  
MEMORY IN SOCIETY: HISTORICAL MYTH AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

A society is what it remembers.  
-- Albert Wendt (qtd. in Friedman 854)

I argued in the last chapter that personal identity is framed by group identity and that both are generated by creating and sharing memories. I also noted that the group in question here is defining itself within an environment loaded with symbols associated with American history. So we have a set of nested systems of identity formation: the individual rendezvouser is nested within a small social group like a rendezvous or a buckskinning club. These social groups in turn are nested within the still larger, national system of the United States. Construction of identity involves all of the levels interacting with each other.

An individual identity includes the place of that person in social systems large and small. These social systems construct individuals as they develop from infancy by inculcating them into the system’s ideology. However, I also think that individuals and small groups can have some influence on constructing the larger group (and its ideology), in this case the United States as a nation. If this were not so, nothing would change throughout history; cultures would remain static, boundaries would not shift, and there would be no rebellion or war. One way that individuals change systems is by changing the way we think about the system – that is, by changing the iconic and narrative elements that the system comprises. Changing the way we think about the systems in which we live is not as easy as it might seem, because these systems construct the way we think. They do so by defining the images and narratives that make up national memory and codifying them into a national mythos. I will show in this chapter that, as improvisational play with these images and narratives, the activities at rendezvous have the potential to change them. Changing the images and narratives, in turn, changes the way we think about history. I will argue in chapter 5 that changing the way we think about history has the same effect as changing history itself.

I will begin with a brief description of how Americans learn about the history of the United States. I move from there to a discussion of historiography and how historical writing, even when the writer tries to be objective, imbues past events with meanings for the present by expressing history in narrative form. These narratives, along with historical information from other sources, have become what I will call a national mythology that defines American-ness. Then I show how buckskinners, most of whom work outside of the scholarly discipline of history, learn about our national past by impersonating “characters” from these national myths. This form of expression, as I noted in the last chapter, allows for considerable slippage of both received fact-based historical narratives and the myths that have developed from them.
How Americans Learn About Their History

Our thinking about American history is guided significantly by information accumulated over the years from sources including our families, schools, movies, newspapers, television, and books. Many children play out these stories in fantasy games with each other. (In fact, quite a few people have mentioned to me or written in journal articles that their interest in buckskinning dates back to Davy Crockett movies and television shows they watched as children and imitated in their play.) We receive historical “information” via stories, images, and embodied play, sometimes in contexts that seem far removed from history. Commercial products from automobiles to oatmeal feature names (Plymouth, Pontiac) and images (a Colonial-era Quaker) based in history. More overt representations of history, in movies like *The Patriot* or network television and History Channel shows, color our perceptions of American history.

By the time most teenagers get to an American History course in high school, they are already familiar with a wealth of historical images and stories about that history. The information they get from high school American History texts, as historian James Loewen has so cogently argued in *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, has been filtered, diluted, and otherwise modified to the point of meaninglessness at best and outright misrepresentation at worst. All of these bits and pieces of historical information and misinformation become part of what I will call the mythos of American history – that is, the set of stories and images that Americans carry around with them as a part of their identity as Americans. The stories and images have become a national “memory” that shapes how we collectively think about our past. What I want to focus on in this chapter is this idea of historical myth. I argue that such mythology works much like the creation of meaning and memory discussed in the last chapter.

Historicity

The expression “historical myth” seems oxymoronic, juxtaposing as it does concepts that in the Western tradition seem to be the opposites of fact and fiction. My contention here is that the two are always mixed in some combination in the stories and images that make up the memory of the past. In chapter 3 I discussed how memory and meaning are constructed by individuals and small groups; here, I extend my idea to include the shaping of memory (history) on a national level. Since in making this contention I am entering into the theoretical concerns of historians, it is worthwhile to engage in a brief exploration of the history of history and historicity.

The writing of history, as we in the Western world know it, probably began with the Athenian Thucydides’s *History of the Peloponnesian War*, written toward the end of the fifth century BCE. Thucydides’s history was a departure from the epic poetic stories of Homer and the tragic playwrights, who blended human and divine events into a mythic vision of the past. Unlike Homer, but like many historians to come after him, Thucydides was concerned with the empirical accuracy of his information. He clearly differentiated between events as they happened and the stories told about them. Thucydides noted in his introduction that he wrote only of events that he had seen himself or for which he had reliable eyewitness accounts (48). He observed that eyewitnesses often contradicted each other, through political bias or imperfect memory, and he made an effort to avoid the “romantic element” in writing that would favor one side of a conflict over the other (48). His concern for this romantic element is well founded; I will show in the next chapter how the desire to feel good about oneself personally and about one’s smaller and larger communities affects how historical “memory” is shaped.
It is remarkable that from the very beginning Thucydides noted issues that have been integral to historical writing ever since. During the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance, to be sure, historical writing in Europe veered sharply away from any pretense of impartiality in its effort to construe all human events as part of a divine (specifically Christian) plan. But since the Enlightenment most Western academic historians have made an effort, as Thucydides did, to document facts and present their work as scientific writing based on empirical evidence. Early modern historians were operating under the assumption that history could be discovered, or uncovered, much like diverse species of plants or the mechanical workings of stars and planets. The historical truth was out there somewhere, waiting to be found and objectively (scientifically) interpreted. With the work of Leopold von Ranke, writing in the nineteenth century, came an increasing awareness that persons living in other times looked at the world quite differently from the way persons living in the then-present time did. What came to be called historicism involved effort on the part of historians to see the past as persons living in the past saw it, that is, without the biases inherent in the historians’ personal world views.

Since Ranke, one of the central debates among historians has been to what extent it is really possible to set aside one’s personal world view and embrace the past from the perspective of historical persons. That is, is it possible to know about the past? At the extremes of the debate are those who conceive of all history writing as pure fiction and those who think in terms of history writing as objective presentation of verifiable facts. Most historians probably fall somewhere between these two extremes, acknowledging that the writing of history always imposes some meaning on historical events. The question then becomes, how much of what we think we know about history is “fact,” and how much of it is “fiction”? A corollary of this question is whether differentiating between the two matters. I personally think that it does matter, but that it is not easy to make such a differentiation.

History is generally written in narrative form (in comparison to chronicles and annals, which are simply lists of transactions and events), and much of the fiction/nonfiction debate among history writers centers around how narration shapes the meaning of what it narrates. The narrative form makes a certain logical sense as a way to describe history, since historical events take place over time and narrative can simply follow the time sequence as it relates the event. However, narrative is not innocent; as a construction of experience, it shapes meaning. First of all, a historian must select from among artifacts and other evidence and choose what to include and what to exclude in the narrative. (Otherwise, the narrative will take as long to tell as the event initially took to happen.) Then the historian presents this information in a sequence. The selection of the sequence is often chronological in historical writing, but it is usually necessary to manipulate time somewhat by, for example, describing concurrent events in sequence.

The choices of data and sequence by themselves often imply cause and effect, but historians are sometimes quite overt in specifying such causative factors. (After all, curiosity about why things happened as they did is often one of the motivations for studying history in the first place.) Cause and effect may be amplified into a sense of inevitability of sequences of events; this inevitability can become the frame of the whole narrative, but it is also implied in the series of events leading to an outcome. Different events can be chosen to “cause” the same outcome, according to the interests and ideology of the writer. For example, a historian might frame the U.S. Civil War as the inevitable outcome of a moral and ideological debate over slavery, a political upheaval in which the autonomy of states was ultimately overruled by federal power, or a hostile economic takeover of the natural resources of the south by the industrialists.
of the north. Finally, there may be within a historical narrative an overt or covert metaphysical or physical metanarrative, or teleological framework, that claims some kind of universality. A well-known example of a teleological framework in American history is the concept of “manifest destiny” with regard to Euro-American westering. I found the following tidbit in a book on historic rifles, *Thoughts on the Kentucky Rifle in Its Golden Age*, by Joe Kindig: “When God wishes to make any change on the earth, he first develops the men to do the job and the tools for them to work with” (1). The idea is that the men are the Euro-American invaders and the tools are the guns, specifically Kentucky rifles. The conquest of Native peoples, then, is part of the Christian god’s plan. Kindig goes on: “God must have thought it was time for the American continent to be opened up, to become a great nation, to play a very important part in what is called the civilized world” (1). Admittedly, Kindig wrote his book in 1960, a time when such claims to manifest destiny were not unusual. I also hasten to add that rendezvouers do not as a group subscribe to theories of manifest destiny. The improvisational selection of images and narratives at rendezvous allows for a wide variety of possible cause-and-effect interpretations, with manifest destiny as one possibility. I return to this idea in chapter 5.

Michel Foucault’s theories of genealogy and discourse challenged all such metanarratives and their conceptions of history as teleological, as a series of stages to get to where we are in the present. Foucault also called into question to what extent historians are aware of how they shape their meanings: the process itself (narrativization) and their culture-specific (and historical era-specific) assumptions. As Michel de Certeau puts it, historical writing “disguises the praxis that organizes it” (40). We do not see how history shapes itself, because it is presented as objective collection of data. History as a science pretends neutrality – claims to uncover a pre-existing truth – but has hidden political messages that are built into the narrative. Storytelling pretends to recount the real but actually manufactures it, according to de Certeau (43). I suggest that rendezvous similarly pretends to re-live the real past but, in fact, creates it. Insofar as history connects past and present, creates memory, and asserts common values and symbols for a group, it is certainly ideologically persuasive if not coercive. Historical discourse then becomes “the one possible myth of a scientific society that rejects myths” (51). It acts like religious myth by ordering the universe and explaining human events. Beliefs about the past quite literally create an orderly system within which a meaningful life in the present becomes possible.

Hayden White claims that simply putting events into a narrative turns fact into myth (ix). For White, real events do not happen as stories, but mythic events do (4). He notes that cultural stability depends on such myths, on a common belief that “social reality itself can be both lived and realistically comprehended as a story” (x), and even posits a universal need to put things into stories (4). Such stories provide an expression (in Bruner’s sense) of reality that helps us make sense of the world and tells us how to act in it. Myths themselves are not the problem for White. According to him, problems begin when historians deny or ignore the mythic aspects of what they do and claim to “find” a story that is already present in historical events (21). Found stories tend to be grounded in sequences of events related by cause and effect; the story becomes an explanation of how one event caused another. However, explaining or understanding how one event precipitated another is not the same as grasping why (50). In other words, establishment of a cause-effect relationship is not the same as proving teleology. Teleology, then, is always something we invent. Such inventiveness may seem obvious to some readers in a case like Joe Kindig and his Kentucky rifles, but to those who agree with his assertions the invention may be hidden.
Teleology is often implied by narration, but it can also be implied visually. Consider the image of a family tree for a person living today. The person, and maybe his or her siblings, is at the “bottom” of the tree, and all of the branches connect down to the person’s immediate family. The image of the tree “says” visually that all of these ancestors culminate in the present family. The only names shown in the image are those whose bloodlines connect directly to the person(s) at the bottom of the tree. For that person, the implication is that all of the indicated marriages and births and deaths have resulted in his or her own conception and birth. That is, all of them led “inevitably” or purposely to that living person. From the perspective of history as it was lived, however, the tree representation is upside down. A more factual representation might put a single ancestor at the top, with the many upside-down “branches” showing just how many descendants have been born. To claim that any one descendant is the “purpose” of the lives and deaths of ancestors is to claim teleology.

The distinction between causation and inevitability is central to the critique of metanarratives that began with Foucault: understanding how one event led to another is not the same as constructing a framework within which such events show a pattern of meaningful development. Within American history, for example, the events (expansion of farmlands, hunting and trapping, intentional and unintentional spread of European disease, treaty negotiation, wars) that eventually led to the extermination of whole tribes of Natives and major damage to most others are usually connected by historians – both Indian and non-Indian – into a story that is unflattering to one “side” or the other. Since we all know the outcome, it is easy to go back and see how separate events are connected into a logical story, and our interpretation of these events is strongly colored by our culture of origin, the stories we have heard and read (and seen on screens large and small), our religious or spiritual outlook, political views, and so forth. Foucault would tell us that there is no story at all. But that does not mean that the events did not happen, that some events did not cause or lead up to others, or (most significantly) that the outcomes of these events do not directly affect persons living today. As Keith Windschuttle puts it, “the past is not merely an invention of the present but is something that happened quite independently of those of us who have inherited its consequences” (80). History may, in fact, be just one form of literature, but that does not mean that all literature is valid as history (251). Similarly, Haskell concedes that history is “made” (that is, constructed), but “not out of whole cloth” (141). Historians do not invent evidence. They evaluate and interpret it, but they use evidence that others can find and evaluate differently, as they wish.

Headlam Wells et al. cite Robert Berkhofer as noting that facts in themselves are insufficient as the basis for a story; one can create two (or more) entirely different stories based on the same historical facts (18). The question for historians then becomes how to evaluate the stories. Are they all equally valid? Does classifying history as literature, as fiction, mean abandoning all efforts to evaluate historical evidence objectively? Is historicism, in Ranke’s sense of an effort to understand past events and values on their own terms, a total impossibility? Will history always tell us more about the present than about the past, as Benedetto Croce and others have claimed (Headlam Wells et al. 3)?

Although I argue in the next chapter that latter-day rendezvous tell us more about the present than about the past, I tend to agree with historians who defend their discipline as both a possibility and a necessity. Headlam Wells et al., for example, note that the best way to approach historical writing is to attempt impartial empiricism while being willing to be proved wrong (6). It is possible, according to Headlam Wells et al., to say that some narratives fit the facts more or less loosely without giving up the idea that all interpretations are arbitrary (20).
Thomas Haskell defines objectivity as a “worthy goal” that does not require political indifference or neutrality (130). There is a difference between “politically committed scholarship” and “propaganda dressed up as history” (Haskell 139). Haskell proposes an “ascetic” approach, defining asceticism as a self-discipline that enables a person to … abandon wishful thinking, assimilate bad news, discard pleasing interpretations that cannot pass elementary tests of evidence and logic, and … suspend or brackets one’s own perceptions long enough to enter sympathetically into the alien and possibly repugnant perspectives of rival thinkers. (132)

He is suggesting that historians need to be willing to look at information openly, without immediately discounting data that do not fit into precious preconceptions. Such openness often involves putting effort into understanding points of view that may be difficult to tolerate. Haskell considers such asceticism to be essential to historical practice, noting that it is dangerous to assume that all viewpoints are “indistinguishably contaminated by selfishness or group interest” (Haskell’s emphasis) (133). He is acknowledging that there is always a point of view, a personal construction of meaning from a set of data. However, he is saying that a viewpoint reached by way of ascetic evaluation of information is less “contaminated” than are viewpoints that are shaped by discarding data that are unacceptable to an individual or group.

It is worthwhile, Haskell says, to strive for detachment and objectivity as ideals even though absolute achievement of those ideals may be impossible (133). Haskell goes on to point out the dangers of placing commitment to a political cause above the capacity for critical examination of data (146); the risk is that history will become propaganda (151). Political commitment must not get in the way of good scholarship. Keith Windschuttle argues that the scientific method is the best way to approach history because it requires corroboration of data that can be verified by persons other than the historical researcher (225). He challenges historians who claim that the scientific method of inquiry is necessarily a tool of the capitalist imperialist system. Windschuttle notes that not all historians adhering to positivism and scientific methods are driven by the same political ideology (205). It is not the method itself that is ideological. Good scholarship – in this case, the use of verifiable data – can and should be used for “revisionist” history that shows other worldviews. Native American historians Vine Deloria, Jr. (Lakota), and Ward Churchill (Creek/Cherokee), for example, follow scientific historical methodology in their incisive work.4

I agree with Haskell and Windschuttle’s distinction between “facts,” events that happened, and the stories told about them. (This distinction also mirrors Edward Bruner’s differentiation between experience [objective reality] and expression of experience [personal and collective constructions of its meaning].) I also hold, with them, that some assemblages of facts are more valid than others, and that it is preferable to attempt to approach study of such facts with as much ascetic objectivity as possible. This may mean being open to information that contradicts a working hypothesis and being willing to modify that hypothesis in the face of such contradictions. Evidence that is corroborated by other evidence and can be verified by other researchers is superior to evidence that is singular or non-verifiable.5 I also agree that narratives told about such evidence (and images made from that evidence) always hold overt and covert messages about meaning that are constructed by the narrator.
Making Sense of History

However, there is another step in the meaning-making process that is not usually considered by historians. What becomes of the narrative, and accompanying historical images, in the mind of a person reading history? Such a person may or may not be aware of historians’ concerns about fictionalization of history. My contention is that the reader (and, by extension, the re-enactor at rendezvous) is also a part of the meaning-making system. A reader takes the “story” of a historical narrative and selects information and sequences of causation that superimpose another layer of meaning on that shaped by the writer. The reader’s meanings are formed based on connection to previous information about the subject matter and on personal and/or ethnic biases. As I noted above, information about American history comes from a variety of sources that are unlikely to include scholarly historical texts. The connections between such popular historical information and any new information encountered are made via metaphor; that is, we take in the new information and compare it with the information that we already have in order to determine what it means. So metaphorical thinking strongly influences how we learn new things. Even a child in Piaget’s pre-operational stage of cognitive development (not yet able to think in abstract terms) will use metaphor as a way to explain the unknown in terms of the known. Such a child may see a camel for the first time and call it a horse. Metaphorical thinking is useful, and poetic, but it can also be misleading because it conflates dissimilar things by foregrounding their similarity. A camel is not the same as a horse. Calling Hanukkah “the Jewish Christmas” may seem to explain it to Christians, but in fact the two holidays (although they occur at about the same time of year and both involve gifts, candles, and songs) are very different in meaning for their respective cultures. Such use of metaphor across cultural boundaries can give the impression of real communication when, in fact, there is much that is misunderstood. Similar misunderstandings can arise with the use of metaphor across historical eras.

Many metaphors carry stories within them, as a kind of literary shorthand. I suggest that metaphors are, in fact, very short stories. The plot of a metaphor is thin, yes, but metaphor shapes meaning by its very application. “The Frontier” is commonly applied metaphorically to a variety of American situations. For example, in the Star Trek TV series and movies, outer space is defined as the “final frontier.” Such a metaphor invokes the frontier in American history, with its attendant characters (courageous frontiersmen, [mostly evil] alien strangers), situations (cross-cultural contact, unknown physical dangers of a hostile environment), plots (the Federation [American in ideology, multinational and multicultural but captained by a white male American] will win), and meanings (American values will dominate because they are the best). As very short stories, metaphorical terms like the frontier attain a kind of mythic status alongside longer stories that dominate American national consciousness. The longer stories add sequence – and implied teleology – to the simpler iconic meanings of a metaphor. Such stories come from books, comics, television, movies, and education at home and in schools. They impose their meaning not only by what they say, but by what do not say. Historical stories may be structured in such a way, and dominated by logic that prevents alternative explanations from expression (Bodnar 19-20). Collectively they become what Richard Slotkin has called historical myths.

Historical Myths

Slotkin defines historical mythology as “a complex of narratives that dramatizes the world vision and historical sense of a people or culture, reducing centuries of experience into a constellation of compelling metaphors” (Regeneration 6). He adds to this definition in Fatal
Environment: “Myths are stories, drawn from history, that have acquired through usage over many generations a symbolizing function that is central to the cultural functioning of the society that produces them” (16). Such myths explain past events, establish roles for citizens to play within their culture, and provide what historian Patricia Limerick has called “cultural glue” (94). Nationalism as a sentiment that bonds people to one another is closely associated with such myths. In fact, says Slotkin, national culture itself is the “myth medium of the victorious party in an extended historical struggle” (Fatal 30). Slotkin describes mythmaking as rooted in the human capacity for making metaphors and claims that history is itself a metaphor between the past and the present; when we write or read history, we treat memory as if it were reality (22-3). Mythmaking thus transforms “secular history” into “sacred legend” (19). Such transformations become invisible to the culture that lives them; our metaphors and myths define our way of thinking so much that we do not see them at work. In this way, they function like religious myths in defining the nature of reality, the place of human beings within that reality, and how we are supposed to behave. Slotkin considers them sacred because they literally define reality. Challenges to these myths can become deeply threatening to a person’s sense of self and the meaning of her or his life.

Cultural/historical myths are not just abstract intellectual or philosophical musings on who we are and where we are going – they work actively within a culture. Take for example the cowboys-and-Indians myth, invoked by U.S. President George W. Bush in late 2001 when he sent out to the world the message that Osama Bin Laden was “Wanted: Dead or Alive.” Bush’s message recalls an old west wanted poster. Because the cowboys-and-Indians myth and the wanted poster are known to most Americans, and to many other world citizens, it serves to shape the situation post-September 11, 2001, explain the characters, and define what must be done next. The attacks of 9-11 are thus metaphorically linked to the violence of outlaws in the American west in the late nineteenth century. Its perpetrators are the outlaws, those who died in the attacks are innocent law-abiding victims, and the firefighters and policemen are the sheriffs and good citizens of a peaceable community. Therefore, it is Bush’s job as the sheriff to gather a posse and go out and find the outlaws’ hideaway and root them out and bring them to justice. There are only so many roles in this story: outlaw, victim, or avenger. No other options. Such invocation of myth served Bush well in gathering support for his subsequent invasion of Afghanistan and later Iraq, but the myth in this case prevented him and his policy makers from considering other possible framings of the situation and other possible responses. The myth is so powerful that it defines not only what has happened but the possible ways to respond. Negotiation or dialogue with Al Quaida would be unthinkable. Within the American national mythos, such Muslim terrorists are “by definition” evil, as George W. Bush has claimed. Treating the attacks as a crime, rather than an act of war, and involving the international community in bringing criminals to justice would be outside of the “known” story. Because of the known story, it is also difficult to step far enough outside the dominant American mythos to look at the attacks within the religious context of the men who willingly gave their lives and to communicate constructively with the Islamic fundamentalist community and its leaders as people who have an internally coherent point of view. These and other responses were not considered partly because of national myths that seem to tell us what to do when attacked.

Historical Myths at Rendezvous

I would say that the mythic categories that are most active at rendezvous would be those surrounding the frontier and the people who lived and moved back and forth across it. The
rendezvous setting itself is a kind of “frontier,” a place of encounter and material and cultural trade among persons from many cultures, European and Indian. The encounters that happen at latter-day rendezvous are loosely based on historical models but go beyond them to become a kind of mythical encounter with “history” and with the assortment of cultures that have contributed to present-day American culture. I would like to go into some detail here about how the frontier mythologies are explored via assumption of persona at rendezvous. I have already argued in chapter 3 that choice of clothing – a requirement for participating at rendezvous – is necessarily choice of persona. It is also a choice, made consciously or unconsciously, of the mythic symbol system that surrounds the persona type. For the purpose of the following analysis, I will discuss five categories of personae: Scots, eastern city dwellers, eastern longhunter frontiersmen, mountain man trapper frontiersmen, and Indians.

Scots Personae and Myths

I was cruising the trade tents at the 2002 Fort Bridger rendezvous when I was surprised to hear the sound of bagpipes. A drum-and-pipe corps, in full Scottish costume including kilts, tams, and spats, marched its way along the path through the tents on its way to a performance in the gathering area near the gazebo. The juxtaposition of kilts and buckskins was startling to me. What did they have to do with mountain men? Then I noticed the furry sporrans and the knives tucked into argyle garters and thought that perhaps the two traditions are not as unlike as they seemed at first. Although William Drummond Stewart, the first “tourist” to attend the historical rendezvous in 1833, was a Scot, there is no mention in primary sources of bagpipes at rendezvous. I was to learn later that inclusion of Celtic traditions at rendezvous is part of the ongoing “evolution” of some rendezvous re-enactments to include more eastern (east of the Mississippi River) traditions. For example, the 2003 Alafia River and Southeastern Rendezvous featured traditional Scottish highland games. Scots have always managed to have a good time in simple ways with inexpensive equipment: throwing logs and rocks, running with cups of water perched on swords, and pulling on either end of a rope in a tug of war. Adult participants in these events at rendezvous competed furiously for bragging rights and perhaps a small prize donated by one of the traders. The games took place amid much laughter, historically inauthentic comments about men in skirts, and loud speculation among observers as to whether the men were “regimental” under their kilts (that is, whether they went without underwear).

The presence of kilts and pipes at rendezvous begs the question of what a European ethnic group is doing at an event that celebrates early United States culture. There are no similar representations of other early European traditions. One can find European influences in the culturally French personae like voyageurs or coureurs de bois, but these are characters who were present at the historical rendezvous or otherwise part of early Euro-American history. Similarly, some rendezvoueurs adopt personae who show their Dutch culture by wearing wooden shoes or linen caps of a Dutch design, but these elements were also present on this continent in 1840. So why the tribal Scots? For one thing, the celebration of Scottish-ness at rendezvous reflects the ancestry of many of the participants. Scots as a group are proud of their history, which does include emigration to the “new world” among the very earliest English settlers and explorers. (Most Irish, German, and other European emigrants came after 1840. The Spanish, of course, were here long before the English began settling, and the French had established colonies before the time of the historical rendezvous.) Scots are also proud of their colorful traditional clothing, brash bagpipes, and red lion flags. Scottish culture is a clearly definable traditional ethnic identity that is different from Englishness. The kilts and sporrans have an exotic visual appeal,
and many Scots families make a point of carrying on tradition by participating in regional and national highland festivals or simply wearing kilts and gillies (traditional laced shoes) to formal events like weddings. Or to rendezvous.

Some of the historical myths that are activated by enactment of Scottish tradition are uniquely Scottish, but many have become part of the Euro-American tradition, as well. Specifically Scottish elements that are significant to rendezvous involve claims to ancient tribal tradition and to rugged individualism. Scots are famous for being—well, clannish.

Identification with one’s clan seems, on the surface at least, much like identification with an American Indian tribe. My take on the Scots personae at rendezvous is that embodiment of traditional Scottish clan identity is a response to the American Indian tribal identities represented at the historical rendezvous and at their latter-day representations. Ancient Scottish clans, as social systems, are equated with Native tribal systems before contact. Playing Scot at rendezvous invokes the mythologies that surround specific and general clan traditions, enabling such persons to assert an ethnicity that has clear ancient Celtic roots as well as real connections to Euro-American history.

Some elements of traditional Scottish culture, for example, thrift, resourcefulness, independence, and willingness to fight for a cause perceived as just, have become a significant part of American myths surrounding the rugged individualist. They invoke, like the longhunter and mountain man personae discussed below, mythic American heroes characterized by fierce independence and self-reliance. The representation of Scottish personae at rendezvous is a way to engage in the mythologies that surround the icon of the rugged individualist. It is just such persons who are valorized for risking all to come to the “new world” and to make a life for themselves in it. Their mythical “descendents” range from astronauts to scientific researchers of all disciplines to artists who are driven by the need for self-expression.

**Eastern City Dweller Personae and Myths**

The Scottish presence at rendezvous was the first surprise during my research, but I was also surprised to find personae based on eastern city dwellers and representations of their material culture. A tent at the 2002 Fort Bridger Rendezvous featured hand-blown glassware and hand-thrown, salt-glazed pottery that were reproductions of early Colonial pieces made in Jamestown, Virginia. Also at Fort Bridger were craftsmen, dressed as mountain men, making wooden tables and chairs suitable for use at rendezvous. I have already mentioned the journeyman “doctor” at Fort Bridger; his clothing, hand-stitched by his goodwife, was European in style. The Alafia River Rendezvous included tents with tailors, coppersmiths, silversmiths, coopers, gunmakers, and bowyers. Most of the men in these tents (the craftsmen) were dressed not in mountain man garb but in Colonial-era weskits, knee breeches, and tricorn hats. Most of the female traders, particularly those in the tents that sold fabrics, patterns, and sewing accessories, modeled period-authentic European-style clothing. These city-based “characters” and their early Colonial neo-artifacts stretch the idea of historical authenticity with regard to recreation of nineteenth-century rendezvous. The traders at the historical rendezvous, who lived in St. Louis, brought trade items that were made in the eastern cities and in Europe, but for the most part the craftsmen themselves were not present. Among the historical mountain men there were those who specialized in skills like blacksmithing, but craftpersons such as gun makers, metalsmiths working in copper, tin, or silver, furniture makers, and weavers and tailors worked in or near the settled areas where most of their customers lived.
The presence of so many out-of-place personae at a Rocky Mountain fur trade rendezvous is acceptable, according to the rules of rendezvous, because they represent persons, accoutrements, and technologies that were available before the cut-off date of 1840. The fact that they are there reflects the interests of twenty-first century persons whose involvement in history is shaped by skills, blood ancestry, and geographical location. A twenty-first-century silversmith might become interested in reproducing the trade silver used throughout early contact with Native peoples. A buckskinner might find among his or her ancestors a “character” who serves as the basis for research on a persona. Or the history of the geographical area inhabited by a rendezvouser might likewise lead to an impersonation appropriate to that place. Another factor in choice of eastern personae is that they offer a wider variety of choices, particularly for women. The women at the historical rendezvous were all Indians, with the exception of the women who passed through with their missionary husbands. Eastern choices would include, in addition to local Indians, wives of wealthy landowners, homesteaders, merchants, or military men and also craftspersons (weavers, knitters, tailors, basket makers, metalsmiths) with their own skills working with or without partner/husbands.

The most significant myths that surround the eastern city personae are concerned with “civilizing” the wilderness and with self-sufficiency. The creation of buildings, furnishings, tools, and clothing in European traditions in the context of the “unsettled” “new” world, is a big part of the Euro-American mythos. The Euro-Americans not only conquered the resident peoples of this continent; they changed the landscape with buildings, farms, roads, and other technological phenomena. Pride in such accomplishments is part of the great American myth of starting with “nothing” and making something of it. There is similar pride in creating what is needed for daily life in such a world: dishes, furniture, clothing, cookware, guns, and so forth.

During the early years of European settlement, colonists were dependent on England for many basic materials, and part of declaring and winning independence from England was manufacturing material goods that had heretofore been imported from the mother country. Rendezvousers who make tin washtubs, wooden casks for water storage, or engraved gunpowder horns are duplicating activities of historical persons. In doing so, they are not just “preserving” a tradition as a quaint historical activity; they are extending its practice in the present day. They are also teaching it to the next generation. For example, the 2004 Alafia River Rendezvous offered a special workshop, limited to only a few persons, on how to brain tan leather. The fact that such leather is valued highly at rendezvous (deerskins sell for over $100 each, and an outfit made entirely of brain-tanned buckskin, as authentic to the highest degree, commands a very high price) ensures that the brain tanning tradition will be passed on to younger buckskinners. Buckskin itself, as one of the early trade currencies in America, is a symbol of self-sufficiency. In the old days, one literally made money by tanning skins. Therefore, I argue, brain tanning a deer hide is a way of entering into and extending the mythology that surrounds American self-sufficiency.

Longhunter Personae and Myths

In American historical mythology, self-sufficiency (and rugged individualism) is best personified by the icon of the frontiersman. I should perhaps refer to the plural “frontiersmen,” because the frontier types were many, along a continuum with the Daniel Boones at one end and the James Beckwourths at the other. All lived on the border, at the meeting between European and Indian cultures and between settled farmlands and natural lands (forested or otherwise). However, some, like Daniel Boone, remained essentially European in outlook and values and
were conscious of spreading European culture and settlement into new lands. Others, like James Beckwourth (see chapter 2), entered fully into a Native American community. Beckwourth did return to the European world to dictate his stories to a biographer, but there were others who simply disappeared from Euro-American view into Native cultures. The mountain man trappers were of course individuals, but as a group they tended to fall on the Native American side of the frontiersman continuum. The longhunters\textsuperscript{12} of the east tended to remain more culturally European.\textsuperscript{13} At latter-day rendezvous, both mountain men and longhunters (and many types in between) are represented.

The term “longhunter” is a reference to the practice of going into the woodlands for a long time, sometimes several months, hunting animals like deer or bear in order to sell their skins. Longhunters differed from trappers in their method of killing: they used guns rather than traps. During the time before Euro-Americans explored the Upper Missouri River or west of the Mississippi River, both longhunters and trappers worked the wooded lands along the western edge of the advancing frontier. They would travel widely, caching the animal skins at various points and then collecting them all before heading back to “civilization” to sell them. The world of the longhunter is the world of the historical (and later fictionalized) Daniel Boone and novelist James Fennimore Cooper’s “Deerslayer,” Natty Bumppo.\textsuperscript{14} These mythic heroes were at home in the wilderness, with the skills of Indians but the values of Englishmen: they were thus uniquely American. The fact that the historical longhunters decimated the populations of the fur-bearing animals they hunted, and that they hunted for profit, gets lost in the mythology of their skills and independence. Also lost is the fact that they did not use most of the meat or other parts of these animals – an extraordinarily wasteful practice that I think is the root of similar carelessness with environmental resources in America today.

Longhunter personae at latter-day rendezvous are distinguished by their clothing and equipment: fringed hunting frocks made of linen or buckram, eastern-style moccasins, leggings of fabric or leather, flintlock rifles, and hunting accessories that usually mix European and Indian styles. Longhunters are more “Indian” than city dwellers in their dress, as evidenced by the moccasins and leggings, but their hunting frocks and fabric shirts are tailored with European details like set-in fitted sleeves and buttons. The mix of traditions in clothing reflects the cultural mix in attitudes and skills. As a blend of European and some Indian cultures, longhunters are symbols of “marriage” between the two. As destroyers of the environment and enemies of some Indian cultures, longhunters also symbolize the more destructive aspects of Euro-American tradition. Buckskinner who embody longhunters at rendezvous enter into the mythologies that surround them, and their daily practices reinforce the parts of the mythology that are in the foreground and obscure or even contradict other parts. Specifically, the marriage of culture is celebrated, the past destruction of the environment is changed into commitment to environmental conservation, and the violence parts are carefully controlled in competitive shoots and other skills contests. The selection of mythic details and the foregrounding of some aspects over others in effect changes the myth itself. The real effects of environmental and human destruction can be masked, even erased, by the “enactment” of a “history” that ignores or minimizes them.

**Mountain Man Personae and Myths**

Like the longhunters, the historical mountain men survived in the wilderness by using European technologies along with more Indian survival skills. The trappers used guns and steel knives for hunting, iron traps for beaver, and flint and steel to start fires. Their clothing tended to be more Indian than that of the longhunters because much of it was made by Indian wives and
because the trappers were so removed from sources of European clothing and fabrics. (They could only buy these at rendezvous.) Buckskinners who use Rocky Mountain fur trappers as their models sometimes dress almost entirely in fur and leather, with perhaps some bright fabric trim, linen breeches under leather leggings, or a cotton or linen shirt in warmer weather. They may carry possibles bags, gun cases, quivers, knife sheaths or other accessories made of leather and trimmed with fur or beads in an Indian manner.

The balance of European-ness and Indian-ness in the persona of a mountain man, as compared with that of a longhunter, is thus weighted more on the Indian side. In chapter 1, I described the difference between the eastern fur trade, centered around trading posts to which hunters and trappers traveled, and the Rocky Mountain fur trade, in which the trading posts traveled to the trappers. The eastern way of doing business kept its hunters and trappers in closer contact with European lifeways. Longhunters lived in the woods (inhabited also by Indians) for extended periods, but many, like Daniel Boone, had homes and European families in European-style settlements. The Rocky Mountain trappers lived full time among Indians and often intermarried with them. Both longhunters and mountain men also fought with and killed Indians; I noted in chapter 1 just how casual such killings could be.

The mythologies evoked by the mountain man personae include those surrounding the rugged individualist and the “marriage” of Indian and European cultures. Their individualist qualities and self-sufficiency are obvious. And for the historical mountain men, the mythic marriage between cultures was a literal reality. One mountain man, in fact, was Baptiste Charbonneau (the mixed-race son of the Frenchman Toussaint Charbonneau and the Shoshone Sacagawea), who as an infant traveled with the Lewis and Clark expedition. Many persons who live today in what was Rocky Mountain fur trapping country owe their mixed ancestry to such marriages. Some, like the Deloria family of novelists and historians, now identify with their Indian (for the Delorias, Lakota) culture. Some, like members of the Métis tribe, embrace the French, Scottish, Sioux, and Ojibwa aspects of their unique culture, which is neither Indian nor European (Métis Arts & Culture). And some identify more with the Euro-American culture. The blending of bloodlines complicates distinctions between Indians and Euro-Americans, and adopting a mountain man or Indian persona can provide a way for a mixed-race buckskinner to explore both heritages.

**Indian Personae and Myths**

Adoption of an Indian persona at rendezvous comes with a special set of political and mythological complications, because in this situation one political and cultural system is appropriating another. Symbolic images and activities about Indian-ness are prominent at most rendezvous, but it is significant that Indians who are connected with their tribal traditions are all but absent except as paid performers or teachers of material culture. Most of the “Indians” at rendezvous are impersonated by persons with various degrees of Indian ancestry (and some with none). To return to my argument about Other-ness in the last chapter, there is a significant difference between embodying a historical person from one’s own source culture and embodying a person from a different culture. Adopting an Indian persona at rendezvous is highly charged with personal, social, and political implications, and I discuss these in chapter 5. What gets explored at rendezvous, in terms of this “charge,” is the myth system surrounding Indian-ness from the Euro-American point of view. Although enactment of an Indian persona may lead to some insight into the point of view of persons from the tribe in question, any claims to ownership of Indian experience are erroneous.
The fact that non-Indians do dress as Indians at rendezvous has a great deal of significance for the buckskinning community and its perceptions about history. The fascination with things Indian—that is, the material culture and re-creation of “traditional” lifeways—reflects fascination with the mythology surrounding Native peoples and their relationships to Euro-Americans. Indians are the subjects of that mythology, but the mythology itself is, in my opinion, Euro-American; it is just this myth system that has been referred to as the “white man’s Indian.” At different points in post-contact history, Indians have come to symbolize the lost tribes of Israel, Natural Man, spawn of the Devil, “primitive” equivalents to the European Stone Age past, environmentalists, the environment itself, spiritual experts, and so forth.

These mythologies and claims to Indian-ness are linked in complex ways to American national identity. Indian-ness is at the root of what differentiates Americans from their European ancestors. As Lakota cultural critic Philip Deloria has claimed, Euro-Americans historically have used Indian symbols (including what he calls “playing Indian”) in their effort to define themselves as neither English nor Native but something uniquely American. It is significant that the time period revisited at rendezvous comprises the late Colonial and early National years, when the young United States was defining itself as a nation. It is equally significant that the rendezvous environment is centered around longhunter and mountain men frontiersmen, who were symbolically and literally European and Indian cultural hybrids. These mythic frontiersmen then become symbolic of Euro-American national identity. And the literal frontiers in which they lived become symbolic of a mythical place where cultures meet and change each other. The mythic frontier, like the historical frontier, is a site of encounter, of marriage and war and everything in between (including material trade). Latter-day rendezvous, as fantasy sites encouraging creative symbolic play, are theatres in which the mythic frontier is active.

**Frontier Myths and American National Identity**

According to Richard Slotkin, there are two coexisting and mutually contradictory groups of historical myths about the American frontier: the sacred marriage myths and the regeneration through violence myths. In the sacred marriage myths, the Euro-American hero enters into union with and assimilation into the new world. Symbols of sacred marriage myths include literal cross-cultural marriages between Euro-Americans and Native peoples, the fur trade culture in which the two (or more) traditions are blended, and the frontiersman who is at home in the wilderness. The regeneration through violence myths, according to Slotkin, involve hunters and the exploitation and destruction of the wilderness, including its human inhabitants. The heroes of these violence myths are constantly battling with the “new world” and seeking to overcome it by destroying it. The violence may be quick and bloody, as in war or hunting, or it may be slow and insidious, apparent in the gradual transformation of woodlands into farms, cities, and highways.

Slotkin’s books and others, including some written from Native American perspectives, seem to agree that there is an ongoing dialogue in American culture between these two approaches to the entry of Europeans into this continent. The two approaches have always existed side by side, and Americans have developed a mythic habit of acting on one approach while idealizing the other. As Patricia Nelson Limerick puts it in her study of the frontier in American popular culture, the idea of the frontier allows for the framing of “innocence and exceptionalism” that is so characteristic of the Euro-American self-image (75). Framing history in the sacred marriage metaphor, while in fact living the regeneration through violence metaphor, enables this exceptionalist self-image. We do damage while claiming to love what we destroy,
and thus we get to have our imperialist cake and eat it, too. Limerick comments that “As a mental artifact, the frontier has demonstrated astonishing stickiness and persistence” in American culture (94). What makes the mental artifact so sticky is the inherent conflict between the marriage and violence metaphors. Unresolved conflicts, whether personal or collective, have a way of resurfacing until they are resolved.

I would not claim that buckskinners at rendezvous are consciously trying to resolve the inherent conflict that has been part of American identity from the beginnings of contact between Europeans and Native tribes. However, I do think that it is significant that the era in history that is revisited at rendezvous is a time when American national identity (distinct from English identity) was just being formed. The sacred marriage myths are invoked at rendezvous as buckskinners embody Indian and mountain man personae and practice the survivalist skills that are necessary to live in the wilderness as one of its denizens. The regeneration through violence myths are likewise invoked, through the use of guns and scenarios like the woods walks that include Indian attacks.

The “play” at rendezvous is play with historical myth – with perceptions of history. And the improvisational milieu fosters full-body, five-sense experiences that leave a strong impression of “knowing” history. Therefore, the interpretations that bucksinmers make from their activities have a great deal of power. In what I see as a positive outcome, buckskinning can provide a sense of connection with history as a complex network of events lived by complex human beings who had to deal with physical, mental, and spiritual hardships. Without exception, the most committed of the amateur historians that I have spoken with described themselves humbly as students who are constantly learning more about history. These persons maintained open minds and seemed willing to take in perhaps distasteful or unflattering information about the past. For many of them, history was a kind of cultural source, a place of belonging for them and a place to which they owed their part in looking honestly at it and teaching others about it. For these do-it-yourself historians, categories of good guys and bad guys, and of their contradictory narratives and images, evolve into more complex interrelationships. The resulting myths, historical stories, thus come to have multiple plots in a Roshamon-like tale with different viewpoints that recall the same factual event in different ways. Acknowledgement of these viewpoints creates myths that are less rigid than the traditional Euro-American stories and that offer more diverse options for roles to play.

In what I see as a negative or static outcome from buckskinning, participants come away from the improvisational play with the same myths they came in with. The one-dimensional mythic characters in American history are affirmed, even rigidified, and the buckskinner is affirmed in a previously held sense of identity as a Euro-American. The extensive use of tertiary historical sources – particularly the acceptance of rendezvous itself as a representation of real history – can foster such stasis. Caught up in Baudrillardian simulations of history, these buckskinners never get beyond the simulations to any referents that might (and would) challenge the simulations.

Most rendezvousers fall somewhere in between these two extremes of open- and closed-mindedness with reference to historical data. There are also those for whom the historical context is irrelevant; as I noted in previous chapters, many come to rendezvous simply to sell their craftwork, accompany a spouse, or camp among friends. Regardless of the seriousness with which participants approach rendezvous, the myths that grow from their experiences have potential to shape their lives outside of rendezvous and their perceptions of personal, national, and global events. Historical myths, as I have shown above, seem invisible to those living within
them but nevertheless work actively to shape perceptions of who we are as a nation and how we should behave in the world community. The appeal of President George W. Bush’s foreign policies to many Americans comes from the fact that we (and here I include persons of many races) are so embedded in our national myths that we literally do not see alternative ways to respond to the many actions and philosophies that we have conflated as “Terrorism.” The fact that Bush has so successfully linked Al Quaida, the Taliban, and Saddam Hussein’s regime (three very different groups) is testament to the fact that they all look like “Indians” to us (paradoxically, even to some of those among us who are Indians\(^\text{17}\)). The fact that he has ignored other points of view in the international community is testament to the strong appeal of the myths surrounding rugged individualism.

**Chapter Conclusion**

The symbol systems surrounding historical stories about Indians, the frontier, and rugged individualism are not innocent toys, nor is the improvisational play with such symbols an innocent activity. Categorizations of rendezvous as superficial enclaves for material consumption ignore the serious personal and political “work” that gets done at rendezvous. On the personal and social levels, rendezvous provides an environment in which identity concerns can be addressed. On a national historical/political level, improvisation at rendezvous engages and can sometimes modify perceptions of history and of personal place in history. All of these activities will influence personal beliefs and thus behavior within one’s own perceived community and toward others. History, then, is up for grabs. In the next chapter I examine more fully how rendezvous has developed a mythos of its own and why this is significant.

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1 As Robin Headlam Wells et al. observed in their review of the history of historicism, the words “historicism” and “historicity” have been used in different (sometimes contradictory) ways by different history writers and literary critics, with confusing results (2). Leopold von Ranke used historicism to refer to trying to get a sense of another historical era’s value systems and patterns of thinking (i.e., E.M.W. Tillyard’s *The Elizabethan World Picture*), whereas Karl Popper used the word to refer to any teleological or predictive approach to writing history (Headlam Wells et al. 2).

2 Another aspect of the debate is the locus of meaning in a narrative text; that is, whether meaning comes from author intent (the Modern argument), the structure of the text itself (the Structuralist argument), or the mind of the reader (the Postmodern/Poststructuralist argument). While this is an interesting issue, it is not as relevant to my topic as the narrative issue is. Some of the concerns of locus of meaning overlap with those of narration, and I do discuss these in my argument. I will say here that I think the Modernists, Structuralists, and Poststructuralists all have a point, but my own view is that author, structure, and reader all contribute to meaning. An integration of these theoretical frameworks makes more sense to me than strict adherence to one line of thought. If authors didn’t intend something, they wouldn’t bother writing; structure shapes both how authors think and how they frame their story, and different readers will glean different things from a manuscript. Roland Barthes notes that imposing a “final signified,” an ultimate meaning, to a text is to “refuse God and his hypostases – reason, science, law” (*Image* 147).

3 The question before this one is how to evaluate facts and evidence – a significant question in itself, but I will leave it for historians.

4 Deloria and Churchill have both written extensively about “American” history from the point of view of the First Nations. Their work can be difficult for a European-American to read, because it challenges many dearly held beliefs and backs up these challenges with hard data. Both are excellent writers, and I recommend their work.

5 I hasten to add that not all evidence is physical. Oral mythologies, for example, can be validated and corroborated. Folkloric research can be complicated by ephemeral primary sources, but admission of such evidence can still be subjected to rigorous scholarly criteria.

6 The developmental theories of Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget have withstood the tests of time and cross-cultural application. Ken Wilber cites evidence that Piaget’s stages of cognition apply to diverse cultural groups (24).

7 European claims to primitiveness are a fascinating subject in themselves. It as if the Renaissance cut us off from our collective primitive past, and it takes some special effort to lay claim to ancient roots. I am reminded of a photo
in volume I of *The Traditional Bowyer’s Bible*. It shows Jenny Comstock, a young woman in tee shirt and jeans, shooting a replica of a prehistoric European bow. The caption notes, hopefully with intentional irony, that “Jenny, by the way, is an actual descendant of Stone Age Europeans” (Allely et al., 99).

8 The ability to work with iron, to repair guns and beaver traps and to make knives, was essential to survival for the mountain men. Lewis and Clark included a blacksmith among their Corps of Discovery.

9 Trade silver dates back to early New England. The European settlers used silver primarily for dishes, flatware, and small tools like sewing accessories, not for jewelry. (They wore gold.) The northeastern Indians, and later their western counterparts, were apparently eager to trade for silver arm bands, rings, neck pieces, and so forth. There are contemporary reports of Indians fairly draped with silver trade jewelry mixed in with Indian adornments.

10 The tanning technique used by Indians and early settlers in America involved using the brains of the animal as part of making usable leather by softening and preserving the hide. Conveniently, a deer has just the right amount of brain tissue to tan its own skin. This traditional tanning method results in leather that is quite different from the leather used for clothing and shoes in the twenty-first century. Brain-tanned leather is rough on both sides, is extremely soft and flexible even when quite thick, and does not become stiff after it has gotten wet.

11 Generally the frontiersperson is conceived as male, and indeed historically it was the men who were the first to enter into “unsettled” territory. Many brought their women and families to help with the actual settlement process, but those on the cultural edge were male. Most mountain men who did marry chose Indian wives and lived in Indian territory or married Euro-American women upon their return to “civilized” life. Some brought their Indian wives back with them. The stories of these women are interesting and significant, and I plan to write about them, and how they are personified at rendezvous, in the future.

12 The term “longhunter” refers to men who made a living by going off on extended (over several months) trips hunting for skins (not just beaver) which they traded upon their return to European-style communities. They lived off the land or by trading with Indians for foodstuffs while they were hunting. These longhunters hunted with longrifles, so called because the barrels of the guns were long.

13 Both groups held tremendous appeal for popular culture, in their own day and ever since. However, the Native-ized trappers have always been regarded as somewhat suspect, like the Indians they lived with. The ones who became popular heroes, like Kit Carson, were better known as Indian fighters than as mountain men. Recent movie and television mountain men, like Jeremiah Johnson and Sully of *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*, are represented as essentially European. I refer readers to Slotkin’s analysis of the frontiersman in American literature and popular culture.

14 I refer my readers to Richard Slotkin’s discussion of Boone and Bumppo in *Regeneration Through Violence*.

15 In addition to the sacred marriage myths and the regeneration through violence myths discussed here, Slotkin differentiates two other basic formats for American historical myths: conversion and exorcism (179). Conversion myths might include some of the early Puritan concepts of the new world as a challenge for the soul in an encounter with satanic wilderness and peoples or later myths (often in literary form) of Euro-Americans who convert to the ways of indigenous tribes. Exorcism myths would include captivity narratives, in which Euro-Americans captured by Indians must not only be physically returned to their communities but deprogrammed in some way to remove the influence of captivity

16 See books by Berkhofer, Bordewich, and Deloria listed in my bibliography, in addition to Slotkin’s extensive three-volume study.

17 Michael Dorris (a Modoc Indian) has noted that children all over the world, including Indians themselves, play variations of “cowboys and Indians” as a game (98-9). Thus, even within some Indian communities there is a concept of “Indian” as savage Other.
CHAPTER 5:
GOD BLESS AMERICA IN BUCKSKINS: MAKING HISTORY

Buckskinning is … God Bless America in raunchy buckskins …
-- Dick “Beau Jacques” House

I began in chapter 1 by creating a narrative linking primary- and secondary-source evidence about the Rocky Mountain fur trade and its milieu for exchange of furs and supplies: the rendezvous. I then showed, in chapter 2, how latter-day rendezvous revisit the historical events via improvised theatrical enactment. In chapter 3, I framed this dramatic activity as identity work via manipulation of memory; the identities discussed in chapter 3 are individual and collective among the social groups of rendezvous and buckskinning clubs. Chapter 4 showed how such memory work is connected to historical myths that define the United States as a nation and its people as Americans. The symbols from the American historical mythos that are most prominent at rendezvous involve character types valorizing rugged individualism and syncretism between Indian and European culture and the frontier space in which these characters lived. At rendezvous, buckskinners creatively appropriate and manipulate these symbols as they establish and/or affirm personal identity within a social milieu that celebrates Euro-American national identity.

In this chapter I address what gets done with all these symbols of personal and national identity. Just what do buckskinners bring away from their experiences at a rendezvous? The answer to this question has a lot to do with what buckskinners bring to a rendezvous: what their primary interest is and the degree to which they seek and integrate information that challenges previously held beliefs. I begin by discussing categories of primary interest, and then I address the integration of new information.

Categories of Rendezvoussers

In an article in Muzzle Blasts magazine, “Father Thomas” (a Catholic priest named Thomas who re-enacts a historical persona with the same name and vocation) notes three categories of people who attend rendezvous: social rendezvoussers (“party people”), those who go mostly to compete in the contests with period firearms (“shooters”), and historians interested in enacting a period persona (“re-enactors” or, less kindly, “button Nazis”) (29). He goes on to compare rendezvous with a large beach at which people can choose just how far they want to venture out into the water. The “beach” is large enough to contain persons who are there for the sun, to cool off with a quick dip, or challenge the waves on a surfboard. The environment at rendezvous allows for many different ways of participating: for the fun of it, for the competitions, and for encountering history. Father Thomas’s categories are useful, and for the following discussion I will subdivide his “re-enactor” category into those focused on persona (I
will call them “impersonators”) and those interested mainly in emulating the lifeway (I will call
them “campers”). These categories have fuzzy edges, in that not everyone fits neatly into one
category or another, but they are useful for the purposes of my argument. Since persons in these
categories have different motivations for rendezvousing, they tend to perceive history and the
historical symbols at rendezvous in very different ways.

Social Rendezvousers

The social rendezvouers are called party people for good reason: they go to rendezvous
to be with friends, play a few games, eat good food, drink alcohol, and – well, party. Persons in
this category range from those who do just enough historical “research” to pass for authentic at a
period encampment to those who make some effort to be historically authentic but who
compromise on authenticity in significant ways. They may camp in the tin tipi area, or their
period tents may hide an array of high-tech gear that makes life in a primitive camp more
comfortable. I would guess that a majority of rendezvousers fit into this category. Rendezvous,
for them, is mostly a way to get away from everyday life and relax with friends. However, they
are choosing to go to rendezvous, as opposed to socializing in other ways or camping in other
milieus, and this choice is significant. They are choosing to live for several days in a historical
environment, surrounded by symbols of the history of a culture to which they feel some
connection. As I have argued in previous chapters, such “play” with history defines personal
identity as a part of a small social group (the rendezvous community) within a larger group of
American nationals.

Such a casual level of play with “history” tends to maintain the status quo with regard to
identity and knowledge of history. That is, the party people at rendezvous, in general, are
affirming and celebrating identity rather than exploring it critically. They may not be
particularly interested in learning more about American history, whether from other
buckskinner or through reading or primary research. This is the group that has been heavily
criticized by other writers discussed in my introduction. The critique is that these buckskinner
are “consuming” the experience of rendezvous as a pseudo-event, a past that never was, a
simulation of history that is accepted as “being” history. Rendezvous, in this light, are all about
surfaces, about Baudrillardian simulations that have long since abandoned any real referents.
There is some validity to this critique, with regard to persons who have unquestioningly accepted
popular historical myths as factual representations of the American past. A person operating
within this mythos would find little to challenge it seriously at a large rendezvous. The
improvisational milieu provides opportunities for learning about history and exploring its
meaning, but does not require such activities. One can go to a rendezvous, dress as a mountain
man or an Indian or a made-up character dressed in sort-of-authentic clothing, and move around
camp without being challenged by dog soldiers. Other campers, for whom meticulous historical
authenticity matters, may notice blatant anachronisms or inaccuracies but are unlikely to
comment on them, unless the person in question is a fellow member of a club or group.

The fact remains, however, that party people are partying at a rendezvous, and not
elsewhere, so they are making an effort to connect with history, to define themselves as
individuals who are part of the American nation. They need make no apology, at a rendezvous,
for conceptualizing that history from a strong Euro-American perspective. Neither need they
have qualms about dressing up like Euro-American mythical versions of frontiersmen or Indians.
The “work” of the play at rendezvous is confirmational, not confrontational. The party people at
rendezvous are simply affirming popular American historical mythology, “owning” it by enacting it.

Party people may remain involved in rendezvous as social gatherings, or they may develop interests that move them into one or more of the other categories of participants. Such development is often related to attitude about the rules of historical authenticity. If people regard such rules as simply the ticket to rendezvous, the entrée into the community, then they remain primarily socializers. A real interest in the history behind these rules, however, can lead them toward material culture, character impression, or a combination of these in imitation of historical lifeways.

Shooters

As I noted in chapter 2, the latter-day rendezvous tradition has developed from its beginnings as competitive shoots with period weapons. For some, the shoots remain the most significant part of rendezvous. Belk and Costa dismiss the shooters as a “somewhat disparaged,” marginalized group (231) and do not include them in their analysis of rendezvous culture, but I think that such dismissal is a mistake. The loud booms and clouds of acrid gunpowder smoke coming from the gun range are a part of the atmosphere of rendezvous, and the shooters contribute a great deal to the rendezvous atmosphere in many other ways. To begin with, these guys (and some women) are passionate about their equipment. They love their guns. They love to shoot them, look at them, polish them, fine tune them, clean them, and show them to other shooters. Most also love to hunt with them when not at rendezvous. Shooters will spend quite a bit of money to purchase a finely made flintlock rifle or pistol, or spend hundreds of hours making their own. Such weapons require specialized tools and accessories, many of which are exquisitely hand crafted and all of which are for sale in the trade tents. Shooting thus supports the economy of rendezvous, as shooters prowl the trade tents looking for flints, powder measures, patches, tools for making lead balls, ball starters, loading blocks, ramrods, cleaning brushes and picks, screw tools for retrieving bullets stuck in the barrel, powder horns, replacement parts for locks, and leather bags and pouches to carry everything in. The fact that such items are on display in the tents adds to the overall historically authentic look of the rendezvous. These very items were also featured prominently among the supplies brought from St. Louis to the nineteenth-century rendezvous.

The rules of historical authenticity are strictly applied to all period weapons, and knowledge of what is appropriate to a specific gun is also essential. A high-quality period rifle “requires” a powder horn and hunting bag(s) to go with it. Once a shooter has such equipment, it does not make sense to wear clothing or live in a camp that does not do it justice. I noted in chapter 2 that the person who won the costume competition in the mountain man category was chosen over his very similarly dressed buddy because he carried a flintlock rifle as part of the costume. An experienced flintlock shooter carries authentic equipment not for the look, but for more practical reasons. The tools and accessories are necessary for maintaining and shooting the weapon. Shooters enjoy the challenges to their skills that competitions at the gun range or in woods walks provide. Most also use the guns for hunting outside of rendezvous. Some buckskinning groups, like the American Mountain men, require that persons seeking the higher ranks of membership make a solo pilgrimage to the wilderness, living off the land (that is, foraging for and hunting food with period equipment, most importantly a flintlock rifle) for three days.
Personally, I find flintlocks loud and smelly, but for dedicated shooters the smoke and the bang are essential to the lived experience of rendezvous. As I noted in chapter 2, shooting a flintlock is a meticulous process that involves measuring out gunpowder, putting the powder and a bullet into the barrel, adding a little powder to the pan, and then making sure the flint and steel of the lock ignite the whole business. The shooter then has to aim the gun and hold it in place through the ignition and discharge process. Doing this again and again, and developing accuracy at hitting targets living and nonliving, can give shooters a feeling of personal accomplishment and a strong sense of identification with historical persons who depended on these guns for their very survival. Shooters develop respect for the hunters who had to kill game under sometimes difficult conditions, rain or shine (or snow), and for those who had only these weapons, and perhaps a knife or two and a tomahawk, in situations of attack by grizzly bears or other human beings. More peaceful processes such as learning to cast lead bullets over an open fire or to make or repair guns or parts of guns similarly evoke historical persons who did these things.

Period guns are important for rendezvous and buckskinning groups not only because they are part of the beginnings of re-enactment and of the general atmosphere of a rendezvous but also because they are potent symbols of American-ness – specifically, Euro-American manliness. The icon of a woodsman and his rifle is a symbol of the European experience in North America. Although historians are drawing increasing attention to the role of diseases like smallpox and influenza in the decimation of indigenous peoples, it is undeniable that firearms were a significant part of the eventual domination of Europeans on this continent. On a more personal scale, flintlock rifles and their percussion successors enabled the frontiersmen to provide food and to kill persons who threatened or appeared to threaten their livelihood. Guns are an integral part of Slotkin’s regeneration through violence mythos, which suggests that Euro-Americans have historically succeeded because they have the best guns and the best skills at using them. The mythos also suggests that Euro-Americans always use their guns for good purposes and have a responsibility to make sure that this is always so. To their credit, the shooters at rendezvous do have a strong sense of responsibility with regard to their flintlocks.

From the perspective of many rendezvous shooters, skill with a flintlock is a kind of assertion of self-sufficiency and rugged individualism. Guns are what make individual power a possibility, and it should come as no surprise that groups like the National Muzzle Loading Rifle Association are closely allied with the National Rifle Association in their efforts to protect the American right to bear arms. A quotation from the Second Amendment to the United States Constitution, "A well regulated Militia being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed," is attached to nearly every page on the NMLRA web site and is featured on the covers of all issues of their magazine, Muzzle Blasts. The NMLRA makes a strong connection between firearms and American independence (from England) and patriotism; their membership cards bear the words “Preserving for tomorrow the pioneer arms craftsmanship and skill which bore freedom and liberty.” For the NMLRA and its members, the gun – specifically, the period-correct flintlock – is a highly significant symbol. The NMLRA is closely associated with the National Rendezvous and Living History Association, which promotes and regulates many of the big national rendezvous.

Shooting a period flintlock is highly symbolic of asserting independence and self-sufficiency. The mythologies surrounding these firearms are those of regeneration through violence and rugged individualism. Implied within these mythologies is the right of historical persons to use their weapons to feed themselves and to claim territory for farming and settlement.
Campers

Shooters connect with history and its myths via shooting; they embody the icon of the frontiersman as hunter and fighter. They may also engage in activities that are representative of the other categories to be discussed here. They may also be campers, and/or they may become interested in re-enactment of persona. For example, the ability to repair a flintlock, or make one from scratch, overlaps with the category that I have called campers. Campers, by my specialized definition, are persons whose main focus is on imitation of the historical lifeway (rather than on the people who lived that lifeway). They may be specialized artisans, generalized do-it-yourselfers, survivalists, or any combination of these. Focus on the materials and the physical lifeway connects with some of the same historical myths that are evoked by shooting (those surrounding the rugged individualist and regeneration through violence) but also with other myths that have to do with “taming” the wilderness by shaping it into settlements (a less overtly violent form of conquest) and with feeling “at home” in the natural world (Slotkin’s sacred marriage mythos).

The artisans and do-it-yourselfers learn their crafts from skilled teachers, from buckskinning books and journals, and from hands-on, trial-and-error experience. Many have told me, or report in still other books and journals, that they experience a high degree of satisfaction in making things by hand. I personally found that hand-sewing and knitting clothing for my husband and myself was tremendously rewarding. I am proud of how we look and of my skill at creating clothing that is made with traditional materials and constructed by traditional methods. I was also aware, when I was doing the actual sewing and knitting, that I was engaging in activities that stretch back to generations of women – my own ancestors – who similarly clothed their families. My mother and grandmothers taught me how to sew and knit, as their mothers and grandmothers had taught them. My acquaintances and correspondents report similar feelings of accomplishment and connection with the past. Many are committed to passing their skills on to future generations. The connection with history via the practice of traditional crafts is immediate and personal.

The practice of Euro-American material culture of all kinds, from sewing to cooking to making wooden furniture to working iron, is literally and symbolically participation in the European version of civilization. All of these practices take raw materials from nature and shape them into objects for use in a lifeway that by definition changes the natural environment and shapes it for human comfort and use. The historical myths invoked in activities like these are myths of conquering a hostile wilderness. Euro-American culture has historically left quite a mark on the countryside, and for this reason Slotkin includes “settlement” (via farms, towns, and cities) as a variant of the regeneration through violence mythology.1

All human activity changes the environment somewhat, but some lifeways are more or less “violent” with regard to the landscape. The lifeways of the historical frontiersmen, longhunters and mountain men, tended to be tough on the local fur-bearing and game animal populations but did not significantly alter the geography. They did not build roads, and, at least while hunting and trapping, they lived in temporary shelters made from locally available natural materials. Relative to the eastern city dwellers, these frontiersmen lived within the natural world, with a relationship to it that was more like Slotkin’s sacred marriage mythos: the frontiersmen became a part of the natural world, living by its laws rather than attempting to change them.

It is this sacred marriage mythology that underlies the experiences of survivalists, who go on camping trips and treks with primitive equipment, feeding themselves (and their horses, if
they have them) off of the land with or without supplemental foods that they pack along with other gear. The physical risks they take are quite serious. They often go to remote and mountainous places from which rescue in an emergency would be extremely difficult. They camp during all seasons and tend to be meticulous about using period tools and technologies. They start their fires with flint and steel, not matches, and they sleep under wool blankets or animal skins. Every stitch of their clothing is authentic, and most have made both the clothing and the accoutrements that they carry. This category of rendezvousers is probably best exemplified by the American Mountain Men. The AMM are primarily primitive survivalists, and many are committed to the study of historical artifacts and the lives of the persons who are their historical models. Journals like *The Tomahawk and Long Rifle* feature descriptions of treks and hunting expeditions and also discuss primary evidence documenting things like the tools, equipment, and indigenous food plants used by the historical mountain men. *The Tomahawk and Long Rifle*, and other similar journals like *On the Trail*, are likely to also contain extensive quotations from historical journals or other primary-source materials.

The AMM website lists the following goals for the organization: “To keep alive the skills of the freest men our great nation ever birthed; to preserve his abilities and emulate his way of life as historically accurately as possible.” The site goes on to note, “We want men who are willing to step back in time, to attempt for a short time, at least, to live life as man was meant to live it, as Free Individuals and true Sons of the Wilderness.” As Sons of the Wilderness, the AMM embody the “marriage” of human beings and their natural environment. The AMM place great value on survival skills for several reasons. First, if a person can live off the land, that person is “free” from many of the constraints of a society of specialists who depend on each other’s skills. If our communication and transportation infrastructures were to fall apart for some reason, an AMM could survive. This valorization of the American “rugged individualist” also has significance for the identity concerns discussed in chapters 3 and 4.

Beginner AMM are called Pilgrims, and in order to achieve full “Bossloper” membership they are expected to learn a specific set of wilderness survival skills, including making clothing and equipment, tanning hides, hunting, lighting a fire under wet conditions with flint and steel, making lead bullets, and trekking and camping with primitive equipment, shelters, and cooking implements. The “AMM Code” outlines the dual goals of brotherhood and self-reliance. Members are expected to respect each other’s privacy and not ask for help unless it is “necessary.” They are also expected to share what they have with others in need. They “take from nature only what [they] need or can actually use,” and are committed to conservation of wilderness and wildlife. And finally, the Code specifies goals of self-improvement in terms of “wilderness abilities” and “knowledge of nature’s law.” Thus, the sense of community – and therefore collective identity – is a significant part of the AMM Code, alongside the emphasis on personal development as an individual.

Within the American Mountain Men group there is an ongoing debate on the relative importance of re-enactment (what I am calling impersonation or embodiment of a persona) versus survivalism, as noted in a series of articles and letters in their official publication, *The Tomahawk & Long Rifle*. Bill Cunningham, the editor, states in the May 2001 issue, “I am not a re-enactor and I do not pretend. True to the roots of the AMM I am a survivalist” (1). The “I do not pretend” refers to the fact that Cunningham does not adopt a period persona or imagine himself to be an actual mountain man as he participates in AMM events, and by “survivalist,” he is quick to tell you that he is referring to primitive survival, not the contemporary high-tech survivalist movement (personal communication). Cunningham includes an article with a
different point of view in the August 2002 issue of his magazine. In it, author Jim Ares asks the question, “Are we survivalists or are we re-enactors” (32). He stresses the AMM requirement for authenticity: that all clothing and accoutrements be hand made, that members do historical research with primary sources, and that they apply what they learn in survival situations. He writes,

It is my contention that as AMM members we are historical re-enactors. . . By using our clothing and gear in activities we put that historical patina on them and ourselves as individuals. In this way we differ from others who create costumes and replicas of accouterments. . . The fact that we have been on the ground on cold nights, trapping in streams, traveling distance with hardships, makes us look the part. (32)

It is in the doing of the lifeway, the use of materials and clothing, that the American Mountain Men claim their individuality. This is not about putting on a costume and pretending. Ares goes on to conclude that “the fact that we are placing ourselves in those like conditions, in historically accurate clothing and accoutrements, allows us on our journey to find that person for whom we speak. . . to find ourselves” (Ares’s italics) (33). For Ares, the kinesthetic process of duplicating mountain man daily activities, whether it emphasizes survivalism or re-enactment, eventually leads to self-discovery. This self-discovery is shaped by a combination of physical action and intellectual awareness of the connection of one’s actions with similar actions performed by persons in the past. He is clearly talking about the kind of identity work that I am saying goes on at rendezvous, and he clearly ties it to the combination of imitative action and thinking about the meaning of that action in historical terms. What Ares is not talking about is conscious embodiment of persona. Although he and other AMM are concerned with duplicating as closely as possible the activities of historical models, they do not embody persona. The patina is going on the men and their gear, not on a recreation of a historical person.

Survivalist buckskinners are seeking to achieve self-sufficiency within the natural world, what Slotkin has called “sacred marriage.” The emphasis is on becoming a part of nature, rather than dominating it. Part of the self-sufficiency is being able to create what is needed for survival from the materials to be found in the natural world. Like the historical mountain men, these latter-day survivalists trade for some European-style supplies (most prominently, guns and metal tools) but make whatever else they need to live in the wilderness. One significant difference between survivalists like the AMM and the historical mountain men is that the AMM are ardent conservationists. The AMM bylaws specifically note that all local and national fish and game laws must be observed, even when members are undergoing the solo three-day wilderness experience that is required for advancement in rank. L. Conley, in an article describing his own “solo,” writes of having a deer in the sights of his rifle: “Here I am, not six feet from my bed, first thing on the second day of my solo, my gun primed and cocked, aimed right at his chest, a dead squirrel to my credit the day before at three times the distance, and deer season is not open” (24). Conley did not shoot, and he did not have much to eat for the remaining two days of his sojourn.

Several of my acquaintances have described the AMM as fanatical in their quest for historical authenticity; they are evidently considered by some to be the button Nazis of the survivalist world. However, the obsession with authenticity leads to an experience, on a trek or at a rendezvous, that is qualitatively different from the experience of a person with a more pragmatic goal of being comfortable at a rendezvous while “passing” as historically authentic.
Close observation of the rules of historical authenticity requires close study of history: its artifacts, its people, and the natural world that they lived in. Serious study of history (that is, seeking out primary-source documentation) by its very nature involves encounter with at least some information that contradicts popular historical myths about that history. The degree to which unpleasant information gets integrated into a person’s perceptions about history depends on factors that I will discuss below.

**Impersonators**

Serious study of primary historical evidence provides the basis not only for shooters and “campers” (the crafters and survivalists) but also for impersonators, the buckskinners whose primary focus is on “creating” a whole human being based on a historical model. One national organization that promotes this kind of embodiment of persona is the American Longrifle Association (ALRA). Their home page begins with the statement that “To some, history is simply a bunch of boring dates and places stuffed into a set of dusty envelopes to be read and soon forgotten. To the members of the American Longrifle Association, history is something to be relived.” For the ALRA, then, the emphasis is on living as closely as possible to the way that historical persons lived; this requires not only imitating the material lifeway but also making an effort to understand the personal experiences of historical models. Full membership in the ALRA requires research about and adoption of a historical persona. Members must choose a specific time period (the ALRA is specifically concerned with the years from 1750 to 1815), geographical location, and nationality of origin. They must then research the time period and select a class or type of historical person on which to base their persona. ALRA members must do rigorous research with primary sources. For each tool used or each article of clothing worn (including undergarments), a member must find two primary sources that describe or show that tool or clothing item. ALRA members (like re-enactors of all groups) enjoy “playing” their personae, although they acknowledge the need to step out of character (or “first person,” as they call it) occasionally for the sake of demonstration.

A newcomer to the ALRA must acquire accoutrements appropriate to his or her persona: a period flintlock gun, historically correct clothing, and eating and sewing equipment. In order to become a full “Patriot” member, members must choose and research a persona, make (or purchase) appropriate clothing (and tools, for craftspersons), and learn to act like the historical model. The member must assemble a bibliography (guidelines for this are provided) to document all clothing and equipment. Once a member reaches Patriot status, he or she can acquire additional personae, each with a set of clothing, accoutrements, and supporting bibliography.

For the most part, the characters portrayed by impersonators are not real persons from history. There are some exceptions to this (“Father Thomas” comes to mind), particularly among re-enactors who are recreating military units in forts or battle encampments, but for most impersonators at rendezvous the character is built from a historical type, rather than a specific human model. David Hubbell has criticized this enactment of type as superficial, making it too easy to claim to “be” a mountain man or other character (64). I tend to agree with him in the case of persons whose research happens in the trade tents at rendezvous; many do, indeed, settle for the look of a persona and go no further (and therefore I would categorize them as party people). However, impersonators range from those who just wear the clothes to those who, like ALRA members, spend a great deal of time examining and evaluating primary historical sources that inform their period impression. The extent to which people learn serious history, in the process of creating a persona, thus varies considerably. Encounter with history, as I have noted
above for the survivalists, will lead to encounter with information outside of the popular American historical myths.

**Encountering History, Making History**

The kind of historical information encountered is determined in part by the character type. I discussed in chapter 4 how embodiment of Celts, eastern American city dwellers, frontiersmen, and Indians evokes the different sets of historical myths that surround each of these character types. The process of researching each of these types will turn up different kinds of historical evidence. The extent to which the myth is connected to factual history will determine the extent to which encounter with factual information challenges it. The conflict between beliefs about history (Slotkin’s historical myths) and evidence that contradicts it is at the core of the rendezvous experience. For party people, the conflict is minimized because they do not look further than the myths. For shooters, campers, and impersonators, whose activities require some study of history, some kind of conflict is inevitable. What happens as a result of this conflict can range from denial of the contradicting evidence to considerable modification of a person’s understanding of the American past. Some factors that influence the outcome of the conflict include the historical evidence itself, the nature of the conflict (particularly how deeply cherished the myth is), and the degree to which an individual is invested in confirming previously held beliefs or is open to changing them. Mediation of this conflict happens through what I have defined as theatrical enactment, which acts as a way to think about things.

**Historical Evidence**

Two significant concerns about historical evidence are whether it is in fact authentic and how to evaluate it (give it meaning). I have already noted that many buckskinners do not care how authentic an artifact or a historical story is. But among those that do care, there some who are as knowledgeable and as meticulous as trained professionals about determining the authenticity of an artifact or written document. Because of the rules of authenticity, there is considerable pressure among buckskinners to “do the research” about their clothing, gear, and personae. Within the “culture” of the rendezvous community, knowledge about history and its evidence is highly valued among the shooters and re-enactors and even, to a certain extent, among the party people. I have already noted the AMM’s contribution to the Museum of the Mountain Man. Buckskinners also serve as history and continuity consultants and actors in movie and television representations of historical events. (In what other situation do extras already have costumes and props that are appropriate to the historical period?) They also invite professional historians like Dr. Fred Gowans to lecture at rendezvous about historical evidence of the movements of nineteenth-century mountain men or set themselves up, like the AMM at Fort Bridger, as informal teachers of history. The knowledge about material historical evidence is considerable among buckskinners who have chosen to study these things.

**Making History at Rendezvous**

Interpretation of the evidence, however, is more variable among members of the buckskinning community. In chapter 3 I noted how a culture’s expression of its experience (its history) shapes the meaning of that experience or history. The process of recalling lived experience as narrative, as visual images, or as enactment imposes meaning on the memory of the experience (history). This means that it is not possible to remember the past – to have a history – without imposing meaning on it. That is, all history is interpreted in some way. In
chapter 4 I discussed the idea of asceticism with regard to such interpretation. Historians, ideally, should make an effort to set aside their preconceptions, and their ideas about what they want to find, and to approach historical evidence with a willingness to take in unpleasant information such as data that are unflattering to the historian’s cultural group or that contradict the historian’s working hypotheses about causes, effects, and meanings.

I would say that there are very few people at rendezvous approach history with an attitude of asceticism. The buckskinning culture places little value on such an approach. The milieu celebrates Euro-American history and makes no apologies about being ethnocentric. Buckskinners are looking for things to be proud of in their history, and therefore they find them. In light of what I have characterized as the identity work that goes on at rendezvous, it is not surprising that the people there seek out information about the past that makes them feel good about themselves. It is quite normal (if I dare use that word) for this to be so. I have already called attention to the fact that the re-enactment part of rendezvous (as opposed to the earlier shooting contests) drew increased interest and participation in the 1960s, a time when many previously marginalized groups were looking to claim identity and to unearth historical information that had traditionally been lost in the grand narrative of (Euro-) American history. In my view, rendezvous and other buckskinning activities are akin to Indian powwows, Afro-Carribean festivals, the activities surrounding National Black History Month, the gay Pride rallies that commemorate the Stonewall riots, women’s neo-pagan circles, and other celebrations of culture.

These groups are all trying to establish and maintain a positive self-image. The stories they tell themselves about themselves, their memories, are therefore likely to be those that are flattering to the group. Social psychologists Roy F. Baumeister and Stephen Hastings have noted that if the realities of a group’s past are not flattering, the group must either revise the story or image or revise its meaning (277). They describe strategies for revising a story or image that include omission of detail or data (280), outright fabrication (281), exaggeration and embellishment (282), manipulating cause-and-effect associations (283), blaming or attributing a motive to an enemy (287), blaming circumstances (290), and contextual framing (simplifying complex events so their meaning can be manipulated) (290). These strategies are often not conscious; they are integral to the process of expression of experience, and they are strongly influenced by previous expressions of experience – by historical myths. They are all active, in one way or another, at rendezvous, but I think that omission of data, fabrication (including embellishment), and contextual framing (including claims to causes and effects) are the most significant.

Selection of data. Expressions of history always involve selection of information; it is impossible to include everything. General categories of omission might include violence against Indians, predatory attitudes of historical mountain men with regard to the environment (i.e., killing beaver – and lots of them – only for their skins), the capitalistic system that drove the fur trade, power relations between men and women, the brutal hardships endured by trappers, and the “big-picture” historical significance of frontiersmen as the first wave of an army of settler-conquerors. Any given buckskinner may choose to consider this information or ignore it. Responses to this kind of information will be significantly colored by associated historical myths that flatter Euro-Americans.

Fabrication. The improvisational atmosphere at rendezvous invites sometimes outrageous fabrication of history. As I have already noted, the rules of historical authenticity may govern who you can be or what you can wear and use, but they do not extend to what you
can do (or what you can think about what you do). Rendezvousers are literally making history. That is, they are making it up. Of course, as I have also noted, all of history is a kind of invention, but academic discipline directs professional historians to aim for a degree of asceticism in their approach. Rendezvousers who seek out primary and good secondary historical evidence, like academic historians, do set aside their ideas about what they expect to find and remain open-minded about possible meanings for the evidence. But there are many buckskinners who, with the implicit “permission” of improvisation at rendezvous, make up their own stories about the past or confirm stories “received” from popular culture or high school history classes.

**Contextual framing.** An important part of the making of history involves simplification. History is wonderfully complex, and the more one knows about the past the more complex – and less easily explainable – it becomes. The amateur historians I have met who consider themselves perpetual students of history are well aware of this complexity, and the history they “make” reflects this: it is always unfinished, and there is always more to learn. They understand that history does not always translate itself into a coherent story. Coherence is always imposed, and it always simplifies. It is very comforting to think of the past as a story and of oneself as a character in the most recent part of that story. Historical myth systems provide frameworks for these stories, a simple way to create coherence and to place oneself within that coherence. It thus helps a person establish a sense of personal identity as a member of a group with a common, coherent, and meaningful past.

**When “Fact” Meets “Myth”**

Problems happen, as I have noted above, when evidence contradicts the nice, flattering stories we like to tell about ourselves. At rendezvous, the conflict that arises is mediated via enactment; in the process of improvising history, buckskinners come to personal and sometimes collective understandings about where data fit (or do not fit) into the historical myth. The grand narratives of history, the tales of westering, the fur trade, and conquest of Native peoples, are challenged at rendezvous by two processes that tend to disrupt them. The first begins with the independent study of historical evidence, which may turn up data that gets skipped over by grand narrative. For example, a buckskinner who wants to portray an Indian must look into documents, drawings and paintings, and actual material artifacts from the culture in question. She or he would have to focus on one tribal tradition, so it would become impossible to lump all Indians into a generic group. Thus, grand narratives that conflate the wide variety of indigenous cultures into “The Indian” are fragmented into smaller stories that have different “plots” and may contradict each other. Research that includes histories written by Native Americans will uncover conflicting accounts of contacts between Indians and Euro-Americans. Similar research involving non-Indian persons likewise will reveal contradictory accounts of single events. Awareness of such an array of interpretations works to prevent easy generalizations and encourage understanding of historical models as complex beings living complex lives, not flat characters in a simple story.

The second disruptive factor is the focus on material culture and the exigencies of daily life at rendezvous. Ironically, such focus probably does come close to the experiences of historical persons in that they would not have had the perspective to know where their lives fit into any grand narrative. They were just trying to make a living, map the western territory, learn about Indians, raise children, repair tools, and prepare dinner. In the process of living at rendezvous, buckskinners likewise foreground immediate concerns over perception of where
what they are doing fits into the stories of history. I would guess that most historical persons had little sense of their eventual place in mythic history. That is, they did not wake up one day and decide that they were going to become a part of the Great American Westering. The story of westering or manifest destiny gets imposed on events after the fact – it becomes part of Slotkin’s myth medium of the victorious party.

The myths of concern at rendezvous, as I have stated, are those about the frontier and the people living in it or moving through it. An exhaustive survey of these myths and how they play out at rendezvous is beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, to show some of the dynamics of what happens at rendezvous when historical evidence meets historical myth, I will discuss here the frontier as a place of cultural syncretism and as a place of opportunity and infinite progress. In general, rendezvous affirm rosy Euro-centric myths about relations between Euro-Americans and Indians on the frontier, but they challenge those myths that valorize unbridled progress.

**Intercultural Exchange at Rendezvous**

Buckskinner dressed as Indians or as frontiersmen whose clothing reflects Indian influences are prominent features of latter-day rendezvous. Plains Indian tipis are, for many, the preferred camp “home,” and some are elaborately furnished with thoroughly researched and carefully made neo-artifacts from Plains Indian traditions. As I mentioned in my introduction, the Alafia River Rendezvous features a Creek Indian camp with appropriate accessories and inhabitants. There are also Indian-style lodges that contain cultural anomalies like European frame beds and anachronisms like kerosene heaters or Styrofoam coolers. Mountain man camps are likely to include Indian blankets, animal skins integrated into furniture, clothing, and decorations, Indian-style bows and arrows, and other Indian things. The myths surrounding Indian-ness are highly significant at rendezvous. The historical mountain men and the Indians with whom they traded, intermarried, fought, and lived influenced each other’s cultures significantly. The anthropological word for this phenomenon is cultural syncretism: the amalgamation of cultures that are significantly different from each other.

Trade is one obvious physical manifestation of cultural syncretism. At the historical rendezvous, European trappers and traders came together and exchanged material goods; these goods became integrated into the communities of their new owners. Similarly, intermarriage necessarily involved some intercultural negotiation between spouses; the historical mountain men usually lived among their wives’ people. The children of such marriages, in turn, had to find their way through the mélange of their parents’ cultures. Encounter also brought exchange of cultural performances. The eyewitness reports of nineteenth-century rendezvous describe both Indians and Euro-Americans singing, dancing, and displaying skills like horsemanship. On a more ominous note, meetings of European and Indian cultures involved exchange of deadly (for the Indians) diseases. Also exchanged, during treaty negotiations and other convocations, were ideas: ideas about government, about compromise, and about human rights.2

Cultural syncretism is rather a sore point in American history, a sore point that is surrounded and obscured by historical myths about Indians – specifically, Euro-American myths about Indians.3 I find it interesting that such syncretism, from the Euro point of view, has taken the form of enactment almost from the beginning. That is, Europeans have “played Indian” in all kinds of ways: from the Boston Tea Party to Boy and Girl Scouts to New Age sweat lodges. The politics of non-Indians playing Indian are complex, and I cannot do them full justice in this dissertation, but I want to discuss two main points: who gets to control symbols of Indian-ness,
and the implications of fixing these symbols in the past. Both of these issues tend to mask their own myth-making processes and thus prevent any real clash between myths and historical evidence that contradicts them.

**Control of Indian Symbols.** The struggle for control over imagery and stories surrounding the Native peoples of what are now called the Americas began at first contact – the moment that Columbus and his crew met the people on the shores of their first landfall. Europeans have been “explaining” these misnamed “Indians” ever since. No doubt the Natives were doing some explaining themselves, interpreting the appearance of these alien peoples, but we have no record today of their first impressions from their own point of view. The Europeans’ habit of writing, and the fact that the Europeans eventually came to physically dominate the “new” territory and its peoples, has led to the dominance of the European perspectives on Indians. These perspectives have been incorporated into the national culture and have historically resisted efforts by Indians themselves to challenge them. Although Native activists have made some progress with regard to issues like convincing some universities to abandon Indian sports mascots, and although Indian writers, artists, and academics have put forth their own symbol systems, for the most part the symbols of Indian-ness worldwide are made and manipulated by non-Indians.

The Indian personae and material culture at rendezvous can be construed as yet another way in which the victorious party is controlling the images of the conquered. I have already noted that the inanimate “Indians” in the woods walks have no voice at all – they cannot contribute to the story-experience of the scenarios in which they appear. Indian voices can be silenced in much more subtle ways by appropriation of material culture and by embodiment of persona. For example, artisans who reproduce historical Indian-made artifacts refer back to the originals for documentation of authenticity, but they often re-create the form without the meaning-system behind it. A knife sheath made in the 1700s by an Indian may have a beaded pattern that had significance for its owner – a significance that likely had personal and spiritual components. A reproduction of that sheath might be acquired by a buyer who is attracted to the motif for reasons that have nothing to do with the meaning-system of the historical creator of the original. The owner of the neo-artifact may simply like the colors and pattern, or he may imbue the sheath with profound symbolic significance for himself, but the end result is that the Indian’s symbology is effectively erased. A small erasure, perhaps, but one multiplied manyfold in the camp household of an Indian persona at rendezvous. The clothing, the lodge itself, the furnishings, and the tools all “lose” their Indian mythos and are appropriated into the Euro-American myth system represented at rendezvous. Since the same kinds of enactment are occurring all over rendezvous for non-Indian personae, the particular dynamics of such appropriation of Indian-ness are rendered invisible.

When it comes to embodying Indian persona and living the historical lifeway of an Indian, the erasure becomes even more significant. Even in cases where the impersonator has done significant research about an Indian culture, to the point of spending time among living persons from that culture, a non-Indian person impersonating an Indian is essentially erasing a “real” Indian and replacing him or her with the non-Indian’s notion of what an Indian (and one from another century, at that) is (or was). Native scholars and activists in recent years have become very vocal about just what such displacement of real Indians by “the white man’s Indian” does. Ward Churchill (Creek/Cherokee) has gone so far as to claim that these displacements qualify as crimes against humanity on a par with those perpetrated by the Nazis during World War II. Appropriating someone’s culture is, in effect, stealing her or his identity.
Fixing Indians in the Past. At rendezvous, one insidious aspect of impersonation of Indians is that it reaffirms longstanding perceptions (on the part of non-Indians) that “real” Indians exist only in the past. That is, “traditional” Indian cultures are by definition pre-contact cultures, and any changes since contact are due to some kind of “contamination” by cultural exchanges with Europeans. Cultural syncretism is thus framed as a double standard: for Europeans, appropriation of Indian-ness is part of being an American, but for Indians, appropriation of European-ness is contamination. The focus at rendezvous on pre-1840 history places all personae before that time. The “Scots,” “longhunters,” “city dwellers,” and “mountain men” all get to go back to the twenty-first century when rendezvous is over, but the “Indians” seem to get stuck in the past.

The historical myths surrounding Indians are clearly complex. The particular complication at rendezvous involves not only the issue of fixation in the past but the belief that meticulous duplication of an Indian material culture and lifeway, learning the appropriate Indian language, and spending time with elders of the tribe in question can lead to “real” experience of Indian-ness. From Native American perspectives, it is just this claim that it is possible for non-Indians to embody Indian-ness that is the problem. This claim, framed by Churchill as cultural genocide, is one of the most persistent myths about Indians, and it is one that is not seriously challenged at rendezvous because no one sees it. It is truly difficult for someone who is impersonating an Indian to claim any kind of aesthetic stance. Cultural “ownership” of Indian-ness is too closely tied to American identity to be without all kinds of personal and mythological baggage. I am convinced that very little of this baggage gets “unpacked” in the course of a rendezvous.

Such cultural ownership becomes further complicated at rendezvous by the presence of persons who have valid claims to some Indian blood ancestry. It is not a simple thing to say, exactly, who is an Indian and who is not. To what extent does blood quantum make a person an Indian? Does being “really” Indian require some inculcation into “traditional” culture? Or into the many present-day cultures that have derived from pre-contact cultures that have syncretized European influences? Even asserting that it is Indians who should make these distinctions turns the issue back on itself: who are the Indians who are deciding what an Indian is? Full exploration of this issue is beyond the scope of this dissertation, and I refer readers to books, websites, and journals generated by the vibrant pan-Indian community. Suffice it to say here that the “right” to play Indian, at rendezvous or elsewhere, is the subject of some hot debate – a debate that, along with its heat, is ignored at rendezvous. Because of the erasure of the debate, many Euro-American myths about Indians are not challenged at rendezvous.

“Progress” Myths at Rendezvous

In contrast to the fate of myths about Indians, some of the myths surrounding the frontier as a place of infinite expansion and opportunity are seriously challenged at rendezvous. The idea of a frontier has been a part of the mythos of American identity from the beginnings. The settlers of Plimoth colony saw settlement on this continent as both an economic opportunity (they sent lumber and salted codfish back to England) and a place to try out their ideas about spiritual community and egalitarian government. The steady westward push of the frontier itself is the stuff of historical legends that make heroes out of Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, and Kit Carson. The mythology surrounding this ever-moving frontier, and its leaders, is part and parcel of American ideals of entrepreneurship, scientific discovery, and cultural and political empire. Advances in all kinds of technologies, and the space exploration made possible by these
advances, are framed in American minds as pushing metaphorical “frontiers” of human possibilities. Multinational corporations are similarly extensions of traditions like the Rocky Mountain fur trade companies. The American invasion of Iraq in 2003 makes sense in terms of our historical myths: we have the moral right – even imperative – to hunt down Saddam Hussein because we have always done such things. The Lewis and Clark journals, for example, refer to “making” chiefs out of Indians, bestowing “rank” in the size of the peace medal given as a gift (big medals, of course, for big chiefs, and smaller medals for lesser ones).

If there is one thing held in common by rendezvousers – party people, shooters, campers, and re-enactors – it is a sense that there is something wrong about America’s headlong rush to progress. The popular myth, supported by movies, television shows, and even high school American history texts, is that life in America, and America itself, is getting better all the time (Loewen 200-213). Rendezvous, by their very existence and the way they honor the past, challenge this myth. There is a general awareness that the frontier is something precious in itself, not just as a symbol of the cutting edge of progress. This awareness is manifested, for example, in the conservationism among the American Mountain Men. It is as if “going back in time” gives buckskinners a chance to look again at what was done in the past (for example, mass slaughter of beaver for the sake of stylish hats) and make some effort toward making sure history does not repeat itself in today’s world. Encounter with wilderness need not always inspire fantasies of acquiring wealth by exploiting its resources, as it did in the Rocky Mountain fur trade era.

Another significant way in which the myth of infinite progress is challenged at rendezvous is through a return to production (as opposed to consumption) as a locus of meaning and source of satisfaction in life. There is plenty of consumption going on at rendezvous, as people buy and sell all manner of material goods in the trade tents, and I think that Belk and Costa are correct in noting that what one owns within the rendezvous value system (period authentic camping gear, clothes, and accoutrements) brings with it a certain status. However, the buckskinning community also places high value on being able to make something – be it a bow, a possibles bag, or a shirt – by hand. The artisans with trade tents find at rendezvous customers who appreciate and pay for high-quality work. But there are others whose talents or interests lie elsewhere who enjoy working with their hands on gear for rendezvous. Joey Hall, a kilt-clad Celt whose music, booming voice, and expansively friendly personality contribute a lot to the atmosphere of rendezvous in the southeast during the winter months, was sitting in his trade tent one day working on a project in leather. He told my husband and me that although he has been trading and singing at rendezvous for many years he had only recently started doing leatherwork. He was completely absorbed in his project and said that he thoroughly enjoyed doing it. Hall is not alone in his discovery that creating something by hand can be tremendously satisfying.

Making things by hand is rather an endangered art in twenty-first-century America, one that is not held in particularly high regard in our culture. Rendezvous, as an environment that promotes traditional craftsmanship, not only valorizes such work but makes a point of passing it on to future generations. Placing value on skills of the past is a challenge to popular quests for innovation and novelty. Rendezvous usually offer some opportunities for interested persons to learn how to do everything from weaving a shawl out of wool to brain tanning a deerskin. Consummate skill is not required – the creation and use of something one has made oneself is the point. If the object shows skill in construction or beauty of design, so much the better.

As a place of infinite possibilities, the frontier has considerable force in the American imagination. The rules on the historical frontier were few, and it was a place where poor
immigrants or persons of color, who might struggle in the urban centers back east, could take their lives into their own hands and try to make a place for themselves in the world. This glowing icon of the frontier is behind the present-day American myth that if any person works hard enough she or he can succeed materially and find happiness. It is also behind the present-day myth that one need not take note of the long-term consequences (moral and environmental) of mistreatment of human beings or the natural world in a quest for such success. The myth of the frontier (and America itself) as a place of opportunity is alive and well at rendezvous. However, buckskinners do bring some present-day perspectives into their views on Native Americans and the environment. As a group, rendezvousers are aware that the American west was not empty of people before Euro-American trappers and settlers got there, and that the landscape and the environment of the continent have been drastically changed – not always for the better – by such trapping and settling. Many buckskinners are intent on learning the lessons of our past history and making sure that future generations do not forget them.

**Enacting History at Rendezvous**

Rendezvous can both affirm and challenge historical myths as historical evidence comes into contact with historical myth. The process of enactment of Indian-ness, as I have shown, tends to integrate new evidence into previously held beliefs about Indians. In contrast, evidence unearthed by buckskinning activities tends to challenge some of the myths about the frontier as a site of infinite opportunity. Whatever the conclusions drawn from conflicts between received myths and historical evidence, buckskinning tends to lead to strongly held beliefs about the past. Embodiment of persona melds personal memory with historical story, establishing at the same time meanings about one’s place in a culture and the history of that culture. Immersion in enactment, as I have noted in previous chapters, can lead to a sense of ownership of character and of that character’s “historical” experience. The whole rendezvous culture supports the validity of such experience. The overall “myth” of rendezvous itself is that participating in rendezvous is “really” experiencing history. However, what is actually happening is that historical people are being erased and replaced by buckskinners’ conceptions of them.

Theatrical enactment, as I have said, is a unique way of thinking about things, and what people are thinking about, at rendezvous, is the frontier and its rugged individualists of Indian and European descent. Such embodied thinking may be as simple as preparing breakfast over an open fire, sewing leather leggings, or shooting a flintlock. At rendezvous, it by definition involves dressing and acting like a historical person. Re-enactors can thus try on roles from history and manipulate them via play with the material artifacts, cultural symbols, appropriate to the role. The greater theatre of a rendezvous encampment facilitates and contains such symbolic play in a supportive environment. Buckskinners are free to select what symbols they use and the way they manipulate them – and the myths behind them. Improvising history in this way gives buckskinners a strong subjective sense of being in history (Tony Horwitz’s period rush), a sense that enables them to either rigidify an existing story or change it so that it is more or less informed by historical data. What we have here is free play with history. It can be positive, in that it provides buckskinners with a sense of personal and cultural identity. However, it can also foster wildly fantastical beliefs about the American past as some buckskinners derive beliefs from tertiary historical sources that include the encampments themselves. Such unbridled historical improvisation can reinforce or challenge traditional historical myths. Perceptions of the past tend to romanticize the frontier life and minimize the political implications of European expansion. However, rendezvous can be – and sometimes is – a site for complication of easy
historical myths. Full enactment of an Indian persona may lead to insight into Indian perceptions of history. A long wilderness trek, riding out a violent storm in a primitive tent, or lighting a fire with flint and steel in the rain can lead to appreciation of the daily hardships endured by blood or cultural ancestors, to perception of them as complex people living their lives as best they could. History then becomes not a metanarrative but a collection of lives lived daily without a strong sense of story.

Chapter Conclusion

I noted in chapter 2 that the rules of historical authenticity define rendezvous as performative events in a special time and place. Within the theatrical environment shaped by the rules of historical authenticity, buckskinners have a great deal of choice as to what they want to do. Social rendezvousers may simply want an interesting change of pace from their daily lives, so they dress up as characters who are perhaps more exciting than their workaday selves. The historical environment shapes their experience, but they may look no further than rendezvous itself for their knowledge of history. Attending rendezvous then becomes a way to confirm personal identity as an American. For shooters, impersonators, and campers, participation in rendezvous requires research beyond popular history and rendezvous. Serious involvement in such research will bring to light historical evidence that in many cases contradicts feel-good myths about American history. These amateur historians then must find a way to integrate the contradictions. They may choose to not notice them and stick to dearly held myths, or they may modify their personal versions of national myths to accommodate perhaps unflattering evidence.

1 Europeans, of course, are not the only ones to build large communities. Many of the Native peoples lived in communities that similarly changed the natural landscape. The early Puritan settlers in Massachusetts appropriated previously cultivated fields that had been abandoned by tribes decimated by smallpox. The Pueblo tribes of the southeastern United States altered the cliffs they lived in. And the empires in Central and South America involved extensive architectural manipulation of the landscape.

2 Some Native historians claim that Colonial revolutionaries and the proverbial framers of the U.S. Constitution derived many of their ideas about democracy from Indian governments such as the Iroquois Confederacy. More concrete information on this is beyond my ken, and I refer my readers to Native discussion on such issues.

3 Cultural syncretism between African Americans and Euro-Americans is another, very important historical sore point, but one that is not pertinent to my study. African-European intercultural dynamics come with their own historical myths. One significant difference between these sets of myths that does relate to my subject is the appropriation of persona. Blackface minstrelsy, for example, is understood to be gross misrepresentation of blackness, and I have yet to see a white re-enactor impersonating an African American from history.

4 I refer readers to the books by Philip Deloria, Robert Berkhofer, and Fergus Bordewich on the history of European perceptions of Indians. Calvin Martin’s collection of essays is also an important source.

5 Michael Dorris notes that the “recognition factor” for American Indians worldwide “outranks … that of Santa Claus, Mickey Mouse, and Coca Cola combined” (99).
CONCLUSION

To be American is to be unfinished.
--- Philip Deloria (191)

A question that emerges at the beginning and at the end of an endeavor like this dissertation is, why do it? Why is this study important? Or, as more than one person has asked me, why am I bothering to write a long paper about white guys with guns? Hasn’t their history – their mythos, as the victorious party – been written already? Aren’t women, persons of many colors, homosexuals, and other marginalized groups trying to complicate the mythos by adding or foregrounding their own myths? Why bring up the dominant mythology (and its accompanying ideology) just when some other points of view are showing its gaping omissions and outright lies?

On an immediate, personal level, my answer to the “why bother?” question is that I am married to a white guy with guns. It makes sense to me to try to understand him, myself, our relationship, and why we stand where we do in American society today. All persons living in America have inherited the consequences of our collective past, and the inheritance that Greg and I have been handed down has been pretty good compared with what I see in the way of inheritance for many people living around us. It would be nice to think that this is so because in some way we deserve it, but that explanation does not satisfy me, implying as it does that the less fortunate also deserve what they are born into in life. Greg has been an important part of both the research process and my conclusions. The fact that he, as someone who would not be caught dead on a theatre stage, was eager to dress up and do rendezvous helped me to see some of the differences between stage acting and rendezvous, as well as the similarities. As research partner, Greg was able to help me connect with and understand the “shooter” group; his knowledge about historic firearms sustained many conversations and opened doors to questions about other aspects of buckskinning.

Another personal reason for pursuing this project, this one more scholarly, has been to explore a long-term interest in performance and identity, particularly with regard to manipulation of memory of experience. My experiences as a psychodramatist and play therapist have shown me that it is truly possible to change memory and thus to change a person’s sense of self. My immediate reaction at my very first rendezvous was to see the environment as a milieu in which adults could playfully explore national, American “memory” or history. It seemed to me that rendezvous was a more expansive version of a play therapy session in which a client enters a fantasy world, works out some problems, and returns to daily life with a sense of mastery of the problems. The “problem” at rendezvous is not really a problem like a neurosis or adjustment disorder, but it is an existential question about identity and the place of human beings in the cosmic order of things. At rendezvous, buckskinners enter an imagined environment defined by
rules of historical authenticity, explore personal and collective identity, and return to daily life with a stronger sense of roots in history and American culture.

A third reason for pursuing this project, related to both the “why bother” issue and the scholarly concerns with memory and history, has been to explore how national myths and history inform present-day American politics, domestic and foreign. It should come as no surprise to my readers that I regard the current U.S. foreign policy in Iraq with considerable dismay. I am likewise deeply concerned about the potential of anti-terrorist policies to severely limit the civil rights of all Americans. It seemed to me that exposing the workings of some of our national historical myths might shed some light on how they are limiting the possible ways we as a culture tend to look at things. It is not easy to see such myths because of their very nature as patterns of thinking. Even many groups outside of the “dominant ideology” think in terms of our myths, or variations of them with a change in power dynamics. Sociopolitical thinkers like Karl Marx, and later Michel Foucault, have shown how ideologies perpetuate themselves, and Bertolt Brecht and others after him have applied their theories to the theatrical arts. My project has been to expose the workings of rendezvous as a performance form that hides its performativity by seeming to re-enact history while actually inventing or modifying it.

The dynamics of re-enactment and modification of history work not only for this rather obscure group of rendezvoussers. Persons from all kinds of groups similarly modify their histories when they convene to celebrate their past. The very process of performing the past – whether it happens via shooting a gun, dancing a dance, or making music – in a shared environment can change that past. Such performances evoke and modify shared myths about the past. In some cases they can correct negative images or uncover hidden stories from that past, but they are always invented mythologies. The de-mythologizing project of this dissertation could also be applied to mythologies of cultures other than that of these white guys with guns.

In chapter 1, I told some of the stories that emerged from the Rocky Mountain fur trade era of American history. Taking most of my evidence from primary and historically grounded secondary sources, I framed my collection of stories as a shift from previous ways of trapping and trading furs to a system which fostered a new way of life for the trappers. They were further removed than their predecessors had been from their Euro-American culture, and thus they tended to embrace local (that is, Indian) lifeways more than trappers further east had done. The mountain man cultural syncretism was a result of the circumstances of the fur trade and, for many, a choice in lifeway as they continued to live among the Native peoples even after the fur trade declined.

The trappers and Indians from the Rocky Mountain fur trade era are the models for the personae that appear at latter-day rendezvous recreations. The recreations, themselves, are modeled (sometimes very loosely) after the convocations that occurred between 1825 and 1840 in the area that is now Wyoming, Utah, and Idaho. I showed in chapter 2 how today’s rendezvous began as competitive shooting events with flintlock guns and eventually came to include mountain man skills events, camping, trading, musical performances, informal and formal history lessons, demonstrations and workshops by skilled artisans, games, and social gatherings large and small. I argued that the trend from shooting to encampment in a total environment was a shift toward theatrical performance, with historically correct sets, props, and characters. I further characterized the performance forms as playful improvisations.

In chapter 3 I went on to show the identity work that underlies historical play at rendezvous. I argued that participation at rendezvous is an affirmation and/or examination of personal identity in the context of the buckskinning group. In chapter 4 I framed the personal
and social activities as part of a larger system of national historical myths and their mythic symbols. Rendezvous is a place where people can impersonate symbolic characters and play with symbolic props in a symbolic setting. When they do this, I argued in chapter 5, they are playing with history, with collective memory of past events. And when they play with history at rendezvous they are calling up the possibility of inventing history or modifying previously held notions of what has happened in the Euro-American national past. The inventions and modifications range from affirmation of popular myths to fabrication of grossly fanciful myths to more sober modification of the myths after serious examination of evidence that contradicts them. The environment of large rendezvous manages to contain all of these versions of “history” within its encampment. Like Father Thomas said, rendezvous is like a beachfront where people can stay on the sand (comfortable with the received mythos), play in the shallow water (explore that mythos in a superficial way), or plunge into the deep water (take a long, honest look at the myths).

The activities at rendezvous are important because they engage mythologies that inform the way all Americans think; they do so because they are the mythologies of our beginnings as a nation. They are our origin myths, and we need to know what they are and how they work so that we can look at them and decide what about them is worth keeping and what must be abandoned. I personally think that there is much about our national past that is of value, but I also think that it is important to look critically at how the past shapes the way we think today: who we think we are as individuals, what our role is as citizens of the United States, and what the responsibilities of the United States are with respect to the world community.

One of the questions I asked my buckskinning acquaintances and correspondents was, do you have any messages from rendezvous to young people in the twenty-first century? Mark “Bad Heart” Claypool’s response was, “If you don’t know your history you can’t plan your future.” I am old enough and conservative enough to agree with him that knowing about the past has value in itself. I believe that a certain amount of cultural literacy, including history, is an important starting point for being a person within a social and political community. My Race, Gender, and Performance students who had trouble defining themselves in terms of ethnicity did not have a strong sense of coming from a history. It seems strange, given these students’ experiences, that it is difficult to convince them that history is interesting and important. One of my biggest challenges in teaching a theatre history class is to convince my students that such history is worth knowing about. James Loewen thinks that lack of interest in history results from the way it is taught in high schools, as dry facts, names, and dates to be memorized. That certainly was my experience of history as a teenager.

What rendezvous does is make history come alive and make people feel responsible for knowing about it and learning from it so as to celebrate its successes and avoid repeating its mistakes. The quest for historical authenticity can lead to information that puts flesh and blood on the bones of history. The persons who used these guns, wore these clothes, and lived in these tipis become very much alive in the imaginations of buckskinners as they do historical research. Then, at rendezvous, the embodiment of historical persona adds to the awareness that history is made up of events lived by real persons who had their own daily concerns and perhaps their own questions about being American. For rendezvousers, history is something to be lived, to be “thought about” by enactment. A history that is truly alive becomes Jay Anderson’s dialog with the present, informing our sense of who we are and helping us make decisions on how to set goals and how to respond to events in our lives.
The value of the experience of a rendezvous is clear for participants, but what do rendezvousers have to offer the general American citizenry? In my opinion, buckskinners can act as teachers of living history, as conservators of material culture and traditional craftsmanship, and as a thoughtful voice in the multicultural “conversation” of American social and political life.

Buckskinners who are knowledgeable historians teach in many ways. Some are already teachers by profession outside of rendezvous. I have described teaching within rendezvous itself, with its demonstrations of everything from primitive cooking methods to doctoring. Some buckskinners teach by consulting for and acting in movies and television shows about history. Some participate in local re-enactment events, and many go into schools to teach young children or invite local children to come and see rendezvous. These teachers can reach students who may be impervious to lists of facts and dates. The students may come to see that history is not “finished,” as it seems to be in the stories told in high school history texts, but an ongoing collection of personal experiences that come down to us via stories and images.

The fine craftsmen at rendezvous, many of whom could not make a living at their craft without the support of the rendezvous community, serve as teachers and preservers of crafts and skills traditions. They teach each other in and out of rendezvous, and they are a resource for anyone with enough interest and patience to learn crafts that were essential to survival in the past: blacksmithing, leather tanning, spinning and weaving, and so forth. In a culture of consumers, such work is usually regarded as quaint or inefficient, but the practice of material production can be a good antidote for greedy consumption. It is, as I have noted, very satisfying to make something. It is also a learning experience to become aware first hand of how much time and effort went into every single tool, piece of furniture, or article of clothing that historical persons used or wore. Knowledge of traditional techniques is a significant part of knowledge about the past. It is also interesting to young people. The way people lived – the shape of their homes, what they ate, how they dressed, what they worried about – is something real that young people can respond to. Thinking about the past by trying to imitate it has tremendous appeal to the young, and to the many buckskinners who have spent a lifetime doing it.

As a cultural subgroup, rendezvousers can represent the voice of the Euro-American past (and its values), a reminder of both past mistakes and past successes. Buckskinners, even those who approach historical evidence with the asceticism promoted by Thomas Haskell, define themselves simply by virtue of being buckskinners, at rendezvous, as embodying Euro-American perspectives of American history. That is, they identify with the white, male, heterosexual group that has been excoriated pretty thoroughly in recent years by proponents of the groups dominated by them. Their “covenant with the past,” to use another Jay Anderson term, is an affirmation of the European experience in America. There need be no apology at a rendezvous for such a Eurocentric stance. Buckskinners vary to a considerable degree in the extent to which they are open to other points of view about history, to cultural relativism, and to embracing diversity. The people represented at rendezvous were invaders once and are still viewed as such by some. Many buckskinners, in turn, feel “invaded” by the demands of resident marginalized peoples and by the literal migration to the United States of persons from still other cultural backgrounds.

The improvisational play at rendezvous, at its best, is a way to explore and change historical myth so that it can be adapted to the cultural shifts that must be a part of the future of this country. How should America deal with Other-ness that appears to threaten it? At its worst, improvisation at rendezvous is a retreat into ethnocentricity that valorizes the Euro-American experience, shadowing or even effacing the history that preceded the arrival of Europeans and
regarding recent immigrants as Johnny-come-latelys who must adapt to the kind of “American Way” that was being forged during the early 1800s. The United States is theoretically a country that tolerates difference. The inconsistencies of this tolerance are constantly being challenged, as they should be. Also being challenged in recent years are the limits of tolerance, played out in the legal battles about the rights of suspected terrorists. Here, I think that rendezvous and its improvised mythologies can provide some perspective on these issues. Awareness that our popular historical viewpoints are, in fact, our myths helps all Americans look perhaps more honestly at our past, to see it as more complicated than we thought it was.

It seems to be fashionable these days to pretty much trash white guys with guns and their capitalist imperialist system and to blame them for most of the world’s problems. Although much that is truthful and worthwhile can come from these endeavors, I am inclined to think that such an attitude is just as limited as perpetrating rosy historical myths of American exceptionalism and heroizing the persons who lived them. In with the capitalist imperialist bathwater one can find some babies worth saving: the very ideas and ideals that permit us all to question “tradition” and to claim equality under the law. Rendezvous is a world created by Euro-Americans as a way to dialog creatively with the past and reach for an understanding of it. It is an environmental theatre in which participants can ask questions and try out new ideas by embodying them. Buckskinners can explore aspects of personal and collective identity within a supportive milieu that is at once openly playful and governed by the rules of historical authenticity. Buckskinners can affirm previously held notions about identity and history, or they can explore them and question them.

Where do I go next with this line of research? Writing this project has been an exercise in dealing with distractions, with ideas for other papers and books that have emerged as I have wrestled with what I have to say. The first endeavor, of course, is refining the dissertation into a publishable book. But other areas of study suggest themselves. I would like to examine in more detail, perhaps in a journal article, how the improvisational form differs from scripted plays about historical events, re-enacted battle scenes, and restored villages like Plimoth Plantation. Another journal article might grow from the question of whether one’s own cultural or blood ancestors are “Others” and who has the “right” to claim their experience.

A more meaty project that wants to be a book involves the politics of embodying cultural others. I only touched very briefly on the politics of non-Indians playing Indian, but that idea has already found its way into a 35-page paper that I abandoned because it kept growing larger and getting in the way of this dissertation. I see very clearly the viewpoint of Indians who protest erasure of their own perspectives by non-Indians who claim to know more about Indians than Indians do or who make some other claim to Indian culture. However, trying to solve this problem by only allowing Indians to do Indian-ness ignores the very real cultural syncretism (and literal intermarriage) that has been ongoing since contact. Playing the Other has the potential to erase the Other in favor of one’s fantasies about the Other, but it also has the potential to help understand the Other and to build bridges between self and Other.

The book after that, a long-term project, is to write a history of American theatre that traces how formal and informal performances of American-ness are both products of the changing culture and politics and forces that shape the culture and politics. Such a book would give full expression of my interest in how identity and performance are connected on individual and collective levels. This dissertation is only a first step.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Page Rozelle was born on October 14, 1951, in Portland, Maine. She graduated from Winchester High School in Winchester, Massachusetts, in 1969 and received a Bachelor of Science Degree in Botany from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, in 1976. She received a Master of Arts Degree in Expressive Therapies from Lesley College in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1991.