

“There goes hoss and beaver!” *Games played at Rocky Mountain Rendezvous 1825-1840*

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”Shortly after, General Ashley and Mr. Sublet came in, accompanied with three hundred pack mules, well laden with goods and all things necessary for the mountaineers and the Indian trade. It may well be supposed that the arrival of such a vast amount of luxuries from the East did not pass off without a general celebration. Mirth, songs, dancing, shouting, trading, running, jumping, singing, racing, target-shooting, yarns, frolic, with all sorts of extravagances that white men or Indians could invent, were freely indulged in. The unpacking of the medicine water contributed not a little to the heightening of our festivities.”¹

-James P. Beckwourth

Although known as a notorious liar, Beckwourth is probably right when he describes the Rocky Mountain rendezvous as a wild place attended by wild men. Getting together after a year of working their trapping grounds and hard trails seems to have brought out the drunk, the gambler and the “Don Juan” dressed in greasy buckskins. The purpose of this article is to take a closer look at the games actually played by mountaineers and Indians when they attended this festival of the wilderness.

Games can be fun and games can be devastating. Loosing “hoss and beaver”² can turn any man bitter. So be careful, you don’t want to buy next years supply on credit!

Card games

”There was a game of cards going on upon a clean apichimoe, by light of a fire of pitch-pine cut in small pieces, which continually fed, kept up a bright blaze, and there were several persons round a tin kettle of shrub...”³ -William D. Stewart

To play a card game, the first thing you need is a deck of playing cards. There were several such decks sold to mountaineers during the period of interest. A great Jazaniah Ford (1780-1830) reproduction used to be available at the Museum of the Fur Trade (MFT). According to MFT decks from this maker were sold by the American Fur Company at rendezvous.⁴

Many different card games were played among the mountaineers, the stakes were “... ”beaver,” which here is current coin; and when the fur is gone, their horses, mules, rifles, and



A game of cards going on upon a dirty apichimoe, during Wolf Pack Track 2009

¹ The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth pg. 105.

² Adventures in Mexico and the Rocky Mountains 1846-1847 pg. 245.

³ Edward Warren pg. 159.

⁴ http://furtrade.org/estore/product_info.php?cPath=24&products_id=69 (out of stock April 2011)

*shirts, hunting-packs, and breeches, are staked”*⁵. High stakes usually makes the game dead serious. Joe Meek describes how “...*he was shocked to behold the revolting exhibition of four trappers playing at a game of cards with the dead body of a comrade for a card-table*”⁶, and Ruxton explains how the mountaineers if feeling tricked let their “*Rifles, at twenty paces, settle all differences...*”⁷. Perhaps this is one part of history that shouldn’t be brought back to life by the re-enactor of today.

Explaining how card games are played is a task much too complicated to fit within the frames of this article. Others have already done this work for us. Therefore I advise those of you who have access to the World Wide Web to follow the links below and there find all the info needed to play. A problem that occurs is how rules for a certain game changes over the centuries. In other words; I can not guarantee that the rules found when clicking on the links are the same rules as those used during the rendezvous era.

I have found three different card games mentioned in the literature. George Ruxton mentions them as; “...*euchre, poker, and seven-up, the regular mountain-games.*”⁸.

- **Ucre/Euchre**⁹; is a game usually played by four players with 24 cards. To the English speaking reader this might be obvious, but the word “euchre” can also be used as a verb for “trick” or “cheat” and origins from the card game. According to Britannica Online; euchre is the reason the joker was added to the standard deck in the 1860s, which explains why my MFT-deck lacks those cards.

Today euchre is played in many different ways, and that was probably the case back at rendezvous as well. Conventional euchre rules can be found at:

<http://www.pagat.com/euchre/euchre.html>

- **Old Sledge/ Seven up**¹⁰; was according to Washington Irving, a game “...*popular among these trappers of the prairies as whist or ecarte among the polite circles of the cities.*”¹¹. It is a North American version of “All Fours”, and is usually played by two persons or two teams of two using a 52 card deck. Rules can be found at:

<http://www.pagat.com/allfours/allfours.html#america>

- **Poker**; is to my knowledge only mentioned by Ruxton as above. According to James Hanson at MFT “...*poker usually referred to straight poker with no drawing from the deck.*”¹². Rules can be found where you least expect them. Just enter the World Wide Web and a pop-up will tell you where to play.

Other games

There were several other games played at this “*trapper's holiday*”¹³. Irving tells of how the mountaineers were “...*engaged in contests of skill at running, jumping, wrestling, shooting with the rifle, and running horses*”¹⁴

⁵ Adventures in Mexico and the Rocky Mountains 1846-1847 pg. 245.

⁶ River of the West Vol. 1 pg. 51.

⁷ Adventures in Mexico and the Rocky Mountains 1846-1847 pg. 246.

⁸ Ibid. pg. 245.

⁹ Ibid pg.245 & Edward Warren pg. 159.

¹⁰ The Adventures of Captain Bonneville pg.62, Adventures in Mexico and the Rocky Mountains 1846-1847 pg. 245 & River of the West Vol. 1 Pg. 50.

¹¹ The Adventures of Captain Bonneville pg.62.

¹² MFT Quarterly Vol.38, Nr. 3, Pg. 4.

¹³ The Adventures of Captain Bonneville pg.117.

¹⁴ Ibid. pg. 118.

Osborne Russell describes how; “*Some were gambling at Cards some playing the Indian game of hand and others horse racing while here and there could be seen small groups collected under shady trees relating the events of the past year all in good Spirits...*”¹⁵. Some of these games need explaining, others don’t.

- **Game of hand**¹⁶; is mentioned by nearly all who went west. The way it was played is described more or less extensive by the writers.

Just to pick a version; Rufus Sage describes it as “... *a common game with the mountain Indians. It is commenced by one of the players who encloses a gravel-stone or a bullet in the curve of his two hands by placing the palms together, then, after sundry tosts and evolutions, suddenly parting them. If the opposing party is shrewd enough to guess in which hand the stone is obtained, he wins; if not, he loses. Large amounts are often wagered upon the result of this play.*”¹⁷

”Game of hand” was seemingly a very popular game among the natives, and whites as well. Stakes were high, which Sage relates to a story which told short goes something like this:

Two Indian braves met to fight, but instead settled the battle over a game of hand. One warrior won the scalp of the other and they separated. They later met again for another game, and the scalped warrior won back his possessions including his scalp. They were still in a fighting mood and decided the time and place. The tribe of the scalped brave won the battle and he had the honor of scalping his opponent.¹⁸

- **Racing**; on foot, racing on horseback, jumping and other Olympic sports are mentioned. I believe these activities explain themselves pretty well.
- **Wrestling & Fighting**; sometimes for fun, sometimes with life at stake was a natural part of this event where according to Stewart; “*No one seemed to be sober; the glare of the fires lit the different scenes of gambling and debauch, unless where a monster blaze had been raised to show a fight,...*”¹⁹. Like today, when huge amounts alcohol are consumed it is more or less bound to happen. One of the most famous brawls at rendezvous was between a French trapper and bully named “Shunar” and the famous Christopher “Kit” Carson in 1835²⁰.
- **Shooting**; at mark as well as random salutes was an important part of the rendezvous scene back then just as it is today. On Charles Larpenteur’s arrival at Green River in 1833 “...*a tent was rigged up into a kind of saloon, and such drinking, yelling, and shooting as went on I, of course, never had heard before.*”²¹

Games outside rendezvous

Collecting information for this article I’ve encountered a couple of interesting references to games played outside the borders of summer rendezvous. While at winter camp for example;

¹⁵ Journal of a Trapper pg. 58.

¹⁶ Edward Warren pg. 161, Life in the Far West pg. 101, Adventures of Captain Bonneville pg. 257. Journal of a Trapper pg. 58 &c.

¹⁷ Rocky Mountain Life pg. 126

¹⁸ Ibid. pg.126-127.

¹⁹ Edward Warren pg.158.

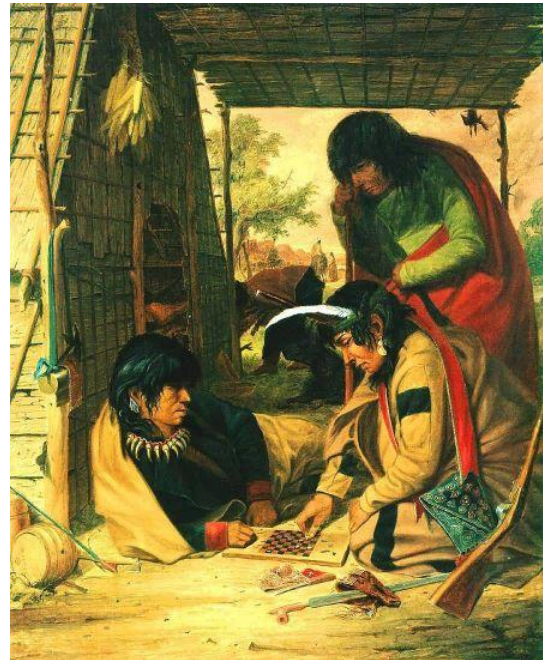
²⁰ Ibid. pg. 158, Across the Wide Missouri pp. 206-230 & Journal of an Exploring Tour pg. 66.

²¹ Forty Years a Fur Trader on the Upper Missouri pg. 27.

trappers had perhaps an even greater need for games and other more or less useful recreations. Probably just to kill time until spring hunt could commence. The now famous “*Rocky Mountain College*”²² was one such recreation of the more useful kind.

Isaac P. Rose mentions while wintering on the Snake River how; “*The trappers seemed determined to enjoy themselves to the utmost. Running, wrestling and jumping were the usual outdoor amusements, and when the weather was bad, cards, checkers and dominoes were resorted to. Often some one of the trappers would amuse his companions by relating some thrilling adventure.*”²³. In other words a bunch of interesting games including some that I haven’t found mentioned elsewhere.

- **Dominoes**²⁴; is described in a book from 1850 named “The boy’s treasury of sports, pastimes, and recreations” as “... a game of modern invention and though far inferior to draughts and immeasurably below chess in point of intricacy still it requires much attention and practice to make a skilful player”²⁵. Dominoes were not a modern invention in 1850 however. It’s early origins can be traced back as far as 12th century China²⁶. A full quote on how the game is played can be found by following the URL found among the sources.



“Chippewa Indians playing checkers” from 1848 by Seth Eastman.

- **Checkers**²⁷; or Draughts as it is called in the U.K. is the first board game I’ve encountered. It origins as far back as 3000 B.C: but it wasn’t called Checkers until the 18th century. The eight by eight squared board with a total of 24 pieces (12 for each player) is thought to have been set the standard by a 12th century Frenchman.²⁸

Rules and instructions on how to play can be found by following the URL found among the sources.

Some thoughts on sources

This article is based on a humble small scaled research. There is probably plenty of reference material untouched by the author of major on minor importance. In other words, there is still a lot of work to be done on the subject. This is only my two cents worth in the discussion that hopefully takes me and the reader a bit closer to the originals that roamed the mountains.

A problem when researching is that the most detailed sources seldom come from actual rendezvous participants. They rather come from those who tell someone else’s story, like

²² Journal of a Trapper pg. 51.

²³ Four years in the Rockies pg. 64.

²⁴ Ibid. pg. 64.

²⁵ The boy’s treasury of sports, pastimes, and recreations pg. 284.

²⁶ <http://www.domino-games.com/domino-history.html>

²⁷ Four years in the Rockies pg. 64.

²⁸ <http://www.gamesinfodpot.com/games/board/checkers/history/>

Washington Irving and Frances Fuller. George Ruxton is controversial to quote since he traveled the west six years after the last “American Fur” rendezvous. But when he describes rendezvous it sounds to me like he is describing one of the major events from the past rather than the gatherings that occurred after 1840. Either way I have chosen to trust their words in this article since most first hand records gives me “game of cards” while Ruxton specifies it as “euchre”. A well supported theory to me is that the “game of cards” might equal “euchre”.

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Websites used and game instructions

Mountain Men and the Fur Trade, <http://www.xmission.com/~drudy/amm.html>

Museum of the Fur Trade, Playing Cards (out of stock April 2011).

http://furtrade.org/estore/product_info.php?cPath=24&products_id=69

Card Game, history and instructions:

-Euchre, <http://www.pagat.com/euchre/euchre.html>

-All Fours, <http://www.pagat.com/allfours/allfours.html#america>

Dominoes, history and instructions:

-History/Instructions from 1859, <http://www.domino-games.com/domino-history.html>

-Instructions from 1850,

<http://books.google.com/books?id=BagXAAAAYAAJ&dq=dominoes&hl=sv&pg=PA284#v=onepage&q=dominoes&f=false>

-Modern instructions, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dominoes> (Viewed

Checkers, history and instructions:

-History, <http://www.gamesinfodpot.com/games/board/checkers/history/>

-Modern instructions, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English draughts>