

# Ahmik

The fur trade was the first large-scale commercial venture in North America. Organized from Montreal in the 1600s, it sent fleets of Montreal and North canoes west into the interior to trade with Native Americans for beaver and other pelts. The canoes were laden with trade merchandise, typically iron kettles, knives, axes and woolen blankets. <sup>1</sup>

In the Great Lakes country far to the west, the French traders bartered pelts for their merchandise and bundled them for shipment back down the canoe routes to Montreal.

Beaver hats, enormously popular in Europe until the mid-1800s, adorned these North American trappers when they posed for a photo in about 1870. (Duluth Public Library Collection, National Geographic Society) "The beaver does everything perfectly well," one Native American told a French trader. "He makes us kettles, axes, swords, knives and gives us drink and food without the trouble of cultivating the ground." <sup>2</sup>



*Beaver hats, enormously popular in Europe until the mid-1800s, adorned these North American trappers when they posed for a photo in about 1870. (Duluth Public Library Collection, National Geographic Society)*

Ahmik, as the beaver was known in the Anishinaabe language, was typically snared or crushed by a deadfall made of tree limbs during the winter months when its fur was thickest. <sup>3</sup>

The beaver was quickly skinned, and the pelt was stretched on a frame or pegged to the ground. The women of the Native community scraped the inside of the skin to remove meat and fat and then smeared the skin with a mixture of brains and liver. After two to three days, the skin was washed and rubbed until it was soft and dry. The women then pulled the long guard hairs out of the pelt, leaving behind only the softer fur. <sup>4</sup>

The Native American women sewed the cured pelts into robes, which their families wore during the winter. "Coat beaver" pelts were particularly popular with the voyageurs because wearing the robes caused what few guard hairs that remained to be rubbed off. Because of its soft, wooly hair, the coat beaver commanded a premium from the felters.<sup>5</sup>

The beaver pelts came down the Great Lakes in late fall or early spring on the same Montreal and North canoes that had transported trade goods up the Lakes a year or two before. In Montreal, they were stored in the warehouses of the trading companies, where they were graded and sorted for quality.

When the sails of the supply fleets appeared over the horizon each spring, the docks along the St. Lawrence River would come alive with men and oxen loading the bundled pelts into the holds of the ships. The pelts were destined for the felting factories of LeHavre, Amsterdam, and later London, where they would be turned into the most enduring fashion statement of the past 400 years.

<sup>1</sup> Carolyn Gilman, *Where Two Worlds Meet: the great lakes fur trade* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1982), pp.9-11

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Newman, *Empire of the Bay*, pp.43-44

<sup>3</sup> Jim E. Johnson, "The Ancient Skill of Snaring," *Countryside & Small Stock Journal*, May-June 1998, p.76

<sup>4</sup> Preparing the Furs – Cleaning the Pelt, [http://www.canadiana.org/hbc/stories/preparation1\\_e.htm](http://www.canadiana.org/hbc/stories/preparation1_e.htm)

<sup>5</sup> Life in the Past – Beaver Hats, [http://www.hbc.com/hbc/e\\_hi/historic\\_hbc/Beaver\\_hats.htm](http://www.hbc.com/hbc/e_hi/historic_hbc/Beaver_hats.htm)