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John Colter: The First Mountain Man

The sinewy, bearded man raced up the brushy hillside, blood streaming from his nose from the terrific exertion. He did not consider himself a fast runner, but on this occasion the terror of sudden and agonizing death lent wings to his feet.

Somewhere not far behind, his pursuers, their lean bodies more accustomed than his to the severe terrain, were closing in, determined to avenge the death of one of their own. They carried weapons, though they were unlikely to grant their quarry a quick and easy death if they caught him.



All of these thoughts coursed through frontiersman John Colter's mind as he ran for his life. Although an able shot and capable fighter, Colter's only assets at the moment were the muscles in his already-exhausted legs. His pursuers had taken his gun and knife, and had stripped him of every last stitch of clothing. The sagebrush and scrub oak tore at Colter's thighs as he ran, and sharp stones gouged the soles of his feet, but he paid the pain no mind; any torment was preferable to what the Blackfoot warriors would inflict on him if they captured him again.

In 1808, the year John Colter ran his race with the Blackfeet, Western Montana had been seen by only a handful of white men. The better-known era of the Old West, with its gunfighters, cattlemen, and mining towns, lay decades in the future. The frontier as most Americans then conceived it was many hundreds of miles further east, on the lower reaches of the Missouri and the Mississippi rivers. The High Plains, Rocky Mountains, Great Basin, and Pacific Coast ranges were still the domain of native tribes and a few doughty fur trappers.

Headed West

John Colter was born to be a frontiersman. A native of Stuarts Draft, Virginia, where he was born in about 1775, Colter grew up a woodsman. In October 1803, Meriwether Lewis traveled down the Ohio River recruiting men for his Corps of Discovery, which was about to strike out on its fabled journey across the continent to map and explore. The qualifications for recruits were very specific; enlistees in what became known as the Lewis and Clark expedition had to be "good hunter[s], stout, healthy, unmarried, accustomed to the woods, and capable of bearing bodily fatigue in a pretty considerable degree." Colter, who was then living in Kentucky, met all of these qualifications. He stood five feet ten inches — tall for his day — and was well-muscled and an expert hunter. He may also have had experience as a ranger under legendary frontiersman Simon Kenton.

Lewis was obviously impressed with Colter and offered him a position as a private with a salary of five dollars a month. The military lifestyle does not seem to have agreed with Colter at first. Before departing on the expedition, Lewis left camp to look for last-minute supplies, leaving Sergeant John Ordway in charge of his men. Colter and several others disobeyed one of Ordway's orders and were confined to base camp for 10 days as punishment. Furious, Colter threatened to shoot Ordway,



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whereupon he was court-martialed by Meriwether Lewis. The incident finally was put to rest when Colter, seeing the folly of insubordination, tendered an apology and was reinstated.

During the more than two years that followed, John Colter was an exemplary member of the expedition. He was assigned to be one of the hunters, a testament of his abilities as a tracker and shooter. He helped the group find a way through the Rocky Mountains, and he is believed to have been the first white man to cross Wyoming's formidable Wind River Range. He also became experienced at dealing with the natives, on at least one occasion persuading members of the Nez Perce to help him find a way through a portion of the Pacific Northwest. When the expedition reached the mouth of the Columbia River, Colter was among a select group of men picked to proceed on to the Pacific coast and explore the coastline northwards.

By August 1806, the returning expedition had reached the upper Missouri in what is now western North Dakota. They found villages of Sioux-speaking Mandans — one of the few groups of Plains Indians who were not nomadic — and there encountered two westbound trappers, Forrest Hancock and Joseph Dixon, who wanted a guide to take them into the Montana wilderness to find furs.

Colter, perhaps eager to strike out on his own into the vast wilderness, requested permission to go with the two trappers. Lewis and Clark granted him an early but honorable discharge, and Colter parted with the expedition on friendly terms. Through the ensuing winter, the three men trapped beaver in the Montana wilderness, but the following spring, Colter, for reasons that are not clear, parted ways with Hancock and Dixon, built a canoe, and headed down the Missouri River toward far-off St. Louis.

He never reached civilization. At the mouth of the Platte River, Colter discovered a group of 50 trappers, led by the legendary fur trader Manuel Lisa. Lisa, an ambitious man, was one of the founders of the Missouri Fur Company, and was the preeminent fur trader on the Missouri. He may have met Colter before; Lisa had helped to supply the Lewis and Clark expedition before its departure from St. Louis, where Lisa based his operations. Now, Lisa and his men were headed northwest to trap in the bounteous mountains of Montana, and he managed to persuade Colter to postpone returning to civilization and join his group. Colter alone knew the wilderness where they were headed, and he was doubtless offered handsome inducements to act as their guide.

The journey back up the Missouri attracted trouble. Mandans, Arikaras, and Assiniboines, alarmed by the large group of white intruders, attacked and threatened the expedition several times. In November 1807, at the confluence of the Yellowstone and Bighorn Rivers, in what is now south central Montana, they built a fort-cum-fur trading post, which Lisa named Fort Raymond (after his son), but which came to be almost universally known as Fort Lisa or Manuel's Fort. It was from this lonely outpost, hundreds of miles from any other settlement of white men, that John Colter and the other trappers began sallying forth into the trackless mountains in search of the furs that could make them wealthy men.

Lisa wanted as clear an understanding as possible of the surrounding country, so he sent John Colter off the first winter to scout, explore, and make contact with the native tribes and invite them to bring their furs to the fort to trade.

Colter set off on foot with only his gun, ammunition, and a pack full of supplies and gifts for the Indians. The route of his first solo journey of exploration is not known with any certainty, but he must have traveled west and south, becoming the first white man to see the magnificent Teton Range, Jackson Hole, and Yellowstone Valley with its geological wonders. He covered roughly 500 miles on foot that winter of 1807-1808, traversing modern-day Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming, and became acquainted



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with many of the tribes who inhabited the region. He traded needles, beads, knives, tobacco, and other articles to the Indians in exchange for food and lodging in the bone-chilling winter weather.

The following spring, he made it back to Manuel's Fort, where he told an incredulous audience of trappers about the geysers and hot springs of Yellowstone Valley. Assuming that the cold and solitude had addled Colter's brains, the men jokingly referred to the place as "Colter's Hell."

Yet Colter was to prove his worth and level-headedness again and again, while lesser men failed the brutal tests of the unforgiving wilderness. Only a few weeks after his return to the fort, Colter was guiding a large party of natives — Flatheads and Crow — to Manuel's Fort, when a party of more than 1,000 hostile Blackfeet attacked. Colter was shot in the leg but managed to survive the battle and then hike several hundred miles back to the fort.

A Race Run

It was John Colter's first improbable escape from death in the Montana wilds, but not his last. The following autumn, Colter headed west into Blackfoot territory along the Madison Fork River with a trapper named John Potts. The two tried to keep a low profile, hiding by day and running their trap lines at night, but their luck ran out one chilly morning as they raced to take up their traps before daylight revealed their activities. A large party of Blackfeet discovered them in a tributary of the Madison Fork and ordered them to row their boats ashore and surrender. Colter inconspicuously dropped his traps back in the river to prevent the Blackfeet from taking them, and came ashore. He probably knew enough of their language to communicate well.

His companion John Potts, distrusting the obviously hostile Indians, stubbornly stayed in his boat. One of the braves shot Potts in the hip, and the trapper returned fire, killing one of the Blackfeet. Furious, the other braves riddled Potts with arrows, killing him. The relatives of the brave that Potts had killed wanted Colter's blood as well, but one of the Blackfoot chiefs had a more creative idea.

"Can you run fast?" he reportedly asked their captive.

Colter, certain that his life was about to end, told the chief that he was a slow runner. Undeterred, the Indians stripped him of all his clothes and possessions and ordered him to run as fast as he could. Colter took off like an arrow, expecting to be shot down from behind at any moment. Instead, a group of braves ran after him, whooping and brandishing weapons, their intentions unmistakable.

At the start of the foot race, Colter was about five miles from the Madison Fork River, and managed to run three miles before blood began gushing from his nose, probably from the combined effects of the cold and pure exertion. At one point, one of the braves caught up to him. Colter whirled suddenly to confront his armed pursuer, and managed to disarm him and kill him with his own spear. Unfortunately, the spear shaft broke during the encounter, leaving Colter as weaponless as before. Leaving the body of the brave, he raced the remaining mile to the Madison Fork and plunged into the frigid water, hiding among floating logs and other debris with only his face above water to take an occasional breath.

The rest of his pursuers discovered the body of their comrade, and searched for Colter along the river the entire day, determined to find and destroy the man who had killed one of their own. They climbed on logs right over Colter's submerged body, but somehow never managed to find him.

At day's end, they finally gave up the search. Colter dragged his freezing, lacerated body from the river and set off across country to find his way, once again, back to Manuel's Fort. Rather than risk being ambushed in the only pass out of the valley, Colter climbed right over the top of a nearby mountain, a



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task that took him all night and must have taken a terrible toll on his already frozen, exhausted body. By the next day, however, he had made a clean escape and set off, still completely unclothed, across 300 miles of parched high plains to Manuel's Fort.

He reached the fort 11 days later, more dead than alive. His feet were punctured and scored with prickly pear spines, and the rest of his naked body, fearfully thin from a sparse diet of ground apples and tree bark, was sunburned and covered with blisters and cuts. Once the men at the fort recognized him, he was allowed several weeks to recuperate, somehow returning to full strength. When he returned that winter to the place where Potts had been killed to retrieve his traps, he was nearly killed again when Indians fired on his campsite.

Colter cheated death a third time in April 1810, when a band of Blackfeet attacked another party of trappers led by Colter. Five trappers were killed, but once again, Colter lived to tell the tale. Sensing perhaps that his luck was about to run out, Colter reportedly returned to the fort and announced that he was leaving the country for good in two days — "if God will only forgive me this time and let me off."

Colter made good on his promise. In the company of a man named William Bryan, he embarked by canoe down the Missouri River two days later and paddled all the way back to St. Louis. He never returned to the western wilderness.

As it turned out, Colter was not to survive by many years his emergence from the wilderness. Although he married and settled down, acute jaundice claimed his life only three years later, in 1813. The man who had survived cold, starvation, and numerous hostile Indian attacks succumbed to disease at about age 38.

Although the details of John Colter's extraordinary life and achievements are known primarily from the accounts of others (Colter kept no journals), enough is known to say with confidence that John Colter — hunter, trapper, explorer, and Indian fighter extraordinaire — deserves to be known as the first mountain man, the earliest in a lineage of intrepid men who explored the West before the Mexican War, the great Westward migrations, the cattlemen, the stagecoaches, and the railroad later in the century transformed the region. In all the annals of the American frontier, Colter's feats of sheer physical endurance have seldom been equalled. He probably achieved more "firsts" in Western exploration than any other mountain man except Jedediah Smith — who traveled with much larger, better-equipped companies.

Nearly 60 years after his death, his greatest discovery, Yellowstone Valley, became America's first national park under President Ulysses S. Grant. But the only memento of the man himself that survives is the so-called "Colter Stone," a stone with Colter's name and the year "1808" carved on it, discovered in the early 1930s by an Idaho farmer and his son. If genuine, as it is generally assumed to be, the stone is witness to the bravery of this modest man who first broke a path through what today is settled and civilized farm and ranch country, but 200 years ago was savage and sparsely inhabited wilderness.



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