

Winter Gifts

Indians have always contributed to the prosperity of other Americans. Just as the Mille Lacs Band's gaming enterprises benefit the communities today, the great fur trade business, which flourished in the early days of our country, would not have existed without the gifts of the American Indians.

In the early nineteenth century, fur trading was one of the largest economic forces in the United States. John Jacob Astor, once considered the richest man in America, first amassed his fortune by trading goods for furs trapped by Ojibwe and other northeastern Indians.

The furs of animals that lived in northeastern United States and Canada were a valuable commodity in cold northern Europe and in the mountains of China. Because these furs were thickest and most beautiful in winter, it was necessary to trap animals when the snow was deep.

This presented a problem. Early European frontiersmen had no knowledge of trapping. Hunting was considered "recreation" in Europe, and only the very wealthy were allowed to hunt or trap. Because most European settlers came from poor families and lacked hunting knowledge, Astor's enterprise and others like it would never have survived without American Indian know-how.

The American fur business depended completely on Indians. Indian men, who were skilled hunters, would trap the animals and bring them back to hunting camps where Indian women would carefully process them for market. The age-old process

the Indians used provided the softest, most pliable skin and fur, and was in very high demand.

The fur business also depended on Indian transportation. Horses and wagons, used in Europe, were useless in deep snow. Indians had developed the best methods of transporting goods in winter — toboggans pulled by dogs and snowshoes. These two inventions allowed people and goods to travel on top of snow, and made it possible to ship furs across America. Until modern times and the invention of the snowmobile, snowshoes and toboggans provided the most efficient ways to convey goods across snow.

Snowshoes: An American Indian Invention

In the deep of winter, traditional Ojibwe hunters strapped on snowshoes to maneuver through thick snow. Aagimug (snowshoes), which were developed by American Indians in the Great Lakes region, allowed the hunters to move more easily in their efforts to feed their families.

Traditional snowshoes were made of two basic parts: a hardwood frame and a netting made of hide, twine or sinew (animal tendon). Wide and strong, snowshoes distributed the hunter's weight across a larger surface, preventing him from sinking into the snow.

Ojibwe People called the rounded type of snowshoe the "bear paw" because the contraption left a bear-like print in the snow (legend even stated that crafty bears wore similar devices for quicker movement through the snow). Other American Indian tribes referred to the snowshoes as "catfish" because of their shape.

Although the Great Lakes Indians had used the devices for centuries, Europeans trappers and hunters had never seen snowshoes before meeting Indians. Most Europeans, new to the region, relied on horses for transportation, but the deep snow made this kind of travel nearly impossible in the winter. So, after forging friendships with local Indians, European trappers and hunters began using snowshoes, too.

Few people, Indian or non-Indian, continue to trap or hunt during the winter. But snowshoes are now known throughout the world and are widely used for sport and recreation.

that stood in the way of obtaining land. They burned down entire villages and murdered Indian men, women and children. This was a very tragic time in American Indian history. It changed the Indian Peoples' lives forever.

http://www.real-dream-catchers.com/Ojibwe_culture_and_language/