Romance Makers
oil, 1918, courtesy Snite Museum of Art, University of Notre Dame, Indiana

THE FREE TRAPPERS

The mountain man, the free trapper, the fur trader...was an extraordinary breed. He usually left no records and we learn of him only indirectly through the records of the great fur companies who depended on his fearlessness and stamina. The trappers knew the Indians intimately and understood their languages and customs.

Anyone with capital, courage and luck could penetrate the wilderness and emerge with a fortune. Why did all this power and intrigue fasten on the lowly beaver in his mountain stream? Because fur was valued in Europe (for beaver hats). It is not too much to say that the first economic development of Montana was a consequence of fashion five thousand miles away.

An aura of romance exists to this day...and rightly so for exploration and discovery, save for Lewis and Clark, was a consequence of the fur trade...the emigrants owed far more than they knew to this reckless breed of men.

Belt Butte and the Highwood Mountains form the backdrop of this painting. The band of rock visible across Belt Butte led to the naming of the nearby town, the Little and Big Belt Mountains and the belt formation of rocks.