

Custer County Historical Society Monthly Program

Lois Wells – Program Director

Rachel Nepper -- Recorder

“James Clyman and the Mountain Men”

Ms. Linda Hasselstrom – March 5, 2016

Lois introduced Linda Hasselstrom, frequent speaker, known author, Hermosa rancher to the audience. Linda was editor of the book, *Journal of a Mountain Man*, about James Clyman, the topic of her presentation. She told of his life and exploits chronologically starting as a young man moving to Ohio in 1811 and then on to Indiana to work as a farmer and 1820 to a hunter for a survey crew in Illinois and in 1823 to St. Louis and meeting up with William Ashley and joining his second expedition of fur traders going up the Missouri River. He was ready for the adventure of trapping and was also the oldest and most experienced of the men, who could also read and write. Trapping beaver was miserable work. Linda demonstrated the procedure of loading a muzzle load rifle which was necessary in the various skirmishes the trappers had with the Indian tribes. She read about one account with an Arikara village. The next year Linda was pretty sure they were around the Black Hills and it might be Hell Canyon where Jedediah Smith tangled with a grizzly bear breaking his ribs and laying his skull bare. It was Clyman who dressed his wounds, sewing his ear back on. In 1824 Clyman ended up walking 600 miles to Council Bluffs, IA, after Pawnees took his blanket and rifle. He told of digging out the ball in a buffalo, to bite it, forming it into a ball again to be used. This was known by others to save on the supplies. In 1825 the first trappers rendezvous supposedly took place. Linda's family had gone to buckskinning camps and she had a variety of items utilized at these camps. Nothing was to be showing at these camps that came after 1830 (what she had was replicas including a brain-tanned skin shirt, nose flute, jaw harp, firer starter kits with flint, steel and char-cloth, powder horns, pipe bag, breechcloth, elk-hide dress and many more objects the audience could peruse). Clyman had continued his adventures canoeing on the Great Salt Lake, escaping from Indians, getting \$4.50 a pound for his beaver pelts in 1827 in St. Louis. The beaver trade had declined in the 1830's when Europe went to silk instead of felt and by 1870's had mostly stopped. Clyman stayed in Illinois for a number of years then in 1844 went

to Oregon and in 1846 was in California then back to Wisconsin. He warned a party of settlers heading west not to take the Hastings Cutoff but they failed to take his advice – it was the Donner party. In 1848 he was in the California gold fields. At age 57 he married a 30-year old and had five children with one daughter surviving. His final diary entry was in 1871 and he died when he was 89 years old. The audience learned much from the display and talk of a distinctive mountain man, James Clyman.