

There are two types of survival situations these days, those that are planned where we practice our skills, and those that are unplanned. We have popular shows of survival situations like *Lost* and *Survivor*. Popular movies have been produced involving survival in various genres: everything from *The Edge* to *The Castaway* to *Damnation Alley* to *Rambo*. The variations of survival situations are almost unlimited, but they have several things in common. They occur beyond our normal support systems: such as hospitals, supermarkets, and prefab homes. The person involved must depend on what they know, what they have on them, and their desire to survive. While the modern person can look for rescue within several hours to days, this was not an option for the mountain man. They were in a hostile environment and had weeks to months to get back to civilization. The basic skills needed to survive then are the same priorities we have today: Positive mental attitude, first aid, shelter, fire, water, and food. From there you can start looking at tools and signaling. I will show how historically some of the mountain men met these basic needs.

- A. **First aid.** First and foremost you have to treat any injuries and care for any situations that are immediately life threatening. Once these are taken care of you can focus on meeting the other needs as they arise. In the case of the mountain men, this may have involved anything from dealing with gunshot wounds, maulings, stabbings, or other injuries, or getting away from hostile war parties. You have to be able to stay alive before you can worry about your basic needs.

In the Black Hills in 1823 Jeremiah Smith is attacked by a Grizzly bear, ending up with several cracked ribs and his head tore up. To Quote Clyman:

*The bear had taken nearly all his head in his capacious mouth close to his left eye on one side and close to his right ear on the other and laid the skull bare to near the crown of the head...one of his ears was torn from his head out to the outer rim....after stitching all the other wounds in the best way I was capable and according to the captain's directions...I told him I could do nothing for his ear....O you must try to stitch up some way or other said he. Clyman did. (Berry 65) (Hafen 26-27)*

In 1827 Thomas I. Smith was trapping in North Park on the North Platte River. At camp one morning an Indian shot Smith from ambush, shattering the bones in his lower left leg. With the help of

Milton Sublette, Smith cut through the skin and tendons with a butcher knife, amputating his foot just above the ankle joint. (Robertson 200)

1828 Glass got into fresh scrapes which necessitated his traveling 700 miles with an arrow festering in his back so a fellow trapper could cut out the arrowhead with a razor. (Morgan 319)

Osborne Russell is camped near the mouth of a small stream that feeds into Yellowstone Lake in 1836. He and White are in camp when they are surprised by Blackfeet. White takes an arrow to the hip; Russell takes one to the hip and then the thigh. He and White get to some fallen logs and hole up. They head down to the lake and lay out for the night. White's wound has healed but Osborne's is swollen and he has to make crutches to walk. They have to avoid their camp as the Blackfoot are still there. They tie up with a Canadian of their party and only have a bag of salt. Russell treats his wounds with salt water and beaver oil and castoreum. (DeVoto 170-173) (Russell 101-109)

**B. Shelter.** Cold and heat are enemies of survival. Exposure to the elements can be very dangerous and extremes in either heat or cold can and will kill you. Natural shelters may be available, or a person may need to make something as simple as a trench or debris shelter. A person must be creative and use their surroundings the best they can. A shelter may provide protection from the wind and cold, or it may provide shade and protection from the heat and sun depending on the environment. The mountain men found themselves both in inhospitable cold and searing heat. They survived both.

In 1808 Colter was captured by the Blackfeet. He was released to run for his life. Part of his surviving that run was finding shelter that kept the Blackfeet from discovering him. "Every moment of this time was improved by Colter, who, although fainting and exhausted, succeeded in gaining the skirting of the cotton wood trees, on the borders of the fork, through which he ran, and plunged into the river. Fortunately for him, a little below this place there was an island, against the upper point of which a raft of drift timber had lodged. He dived under the raft, and after several efforts, got his head above water amongst the trunks of trees, covered over with smaller wood to the depth of several

feet. Scarcely had he secured himself, when the Indians arrived on the river, screeching and yelling, as Colter expressed it, "like so many devils." They were frequently on the raft during the day, and were seen through the chinks by Colter, who was congratulating himself on his escape, until the idea arose that they might set the raft on fire. In horrible suspense he remained until night, when hearing no more of the Indians, he dived from under the raft, and swam silently down the river to a considerable distance, when he landed, and travelled all night. (Bradbury 181)

In 1823 Hugh Glass loses a fight with a Grizzly Bear and is left behind by Ashley's Party to be cared for by John Fitzgerald and a greenhorn Jim Bridger. Bridger and Fritz pull in saying Glass has gone under. They claim it took 5 days. They claim they buried him, collected his gun and knife and other gear and bring it to the fort. Fast forward. Hugh Glass wakes in the thicket the bear had mauled him. No gun, knife, or fixens. He has the brush for a natural debris shelter. He manages to slowly crawl towards the spring and meets his next priority water. Among the bushes he finds various berries, probably choke cherries, and buffalo berries.

February of 1824 we find Glass on the Platte river carrying dispatches for Henry with Dutton, Marsh, Chapman and More. The trappers were headed down river in a bull boat. They float down to the mouth of the Laramie River, spot a camp of Pawnee lodges and put ashore to attend a feast. Unfortunately all but Dutton leave their guns in the bull boat. Glass notes the squaws carrying away their effects. It suddenly becomes apparent that these are not friendly Pawnee, but a group of Rees. The trappers break out of the lodge and head for the bull boat. They cross the river and scatter. Dutton is not pursued because he is armed. Marsh out runs the Indians and hooks up with Dutton to head down the Platte. Glass goes to ground and sees the Indians butcher Chapman and More. At night fall the Ree return across river and Glass can move on. To quote the Missouri Intelligencer:

*Although I had lost my rifle and all my plunder, I felt quite rich when I found my knife, flint and steel in my shot pouch. These little fixens make a man feel right peart when he is three or four hundred miles from anybody or any place—all alone among the painters and wild varments. (berry 61)*

In April 1823, Alexander Ross was traveling in the Big Hole country and his party included a group of Iroquois. They had left a camp near some hot springs and were in a large open plain when they were caught in a blizzard. He called out for each person to shift for themselves. They finally got into the woods a bit before dusk and passed the night. They holed up for another day before they could travel on. They found they were missing two of the Iroquois and their families. They thought the families were lost as they had found their horses with their saddles and baggage on their backs. As they were crossing the plains looking for the bodies they spotted a dog belonging to them howling in a low place. They found the families alive buried under three feet of snow.

*“as soon as the storm broke out they dismounted, and rolling themselves up in a leathern lodge lay quiet; they had tried to get up, and had made their way to the light of the sun but the snow having melted about them, their clothes had gotten all wet, and the weather so piercing cold that they durst not leave their hiding place, where they had been for three nights and two days without food or fire, and must have soon perished for want of both as they had nothing to strike a fire and were at least six miles from the woods. We however dug them out and wrapping them up in our clothing got them to our camp, when after some care they all recovered” (Ross 237-238)*

*Clyman and Sublete: Although the wind blew and the fine frosty snow crept in and around us this was not the worst for the cold hard frozen earth on which we lay was still more disagreeable so that sleep was out of the question by turning every method for rest day light at last appeared when we consulted what we had best do under the circumstances and it was agreed that I should arise and gather some sage brush which was small and scarce and would remain under the Buffalo robe and keep his hands warm if possible to strike fire  
(Clyman Narrative)*

September 1823 Jedediah Smith: *With our best exertion we pushed forward, walking as we had been for a long time, over the soft sand. That kind of traveling is very very tiresome to men in good health who can eat when and what they choose, and drink as often as they desire, and to us, worn down with hunger and fatigue and burning with thirst increased by the blazing sands, it was almost insupportable*

*At about 4 O Clock we were obliged to stop on the side of a sand hill under the shade of a small Cedar. We dug holes in the sand and laid down in them for the purpose of cooling our heated bodies. (Smith Crossing)*

On his way to the Pierre's Hole Rendezvous with packhorses in tow, Fitzpatrick was ambushed by 30 Gros Ventres in July 1823. Leaving the packhorses behind, Thomas forced his horse up a steep slope through the brush and over deadfalls. The resulting falling rocks slowed the pursuit of his attackers. When his horse gave out, Thomas found refuge in a hole, covered it with brush. This disguise foiled the pursuit. (Berry 284-285) (DeVoto 74-77) (Hafen 109-111)

Osborne states “*my companions s threw some logs and rubbish together forming a kind of shelter from the night breeze but in the night it took fire (the logs being pitch pine) the blaze ran to the tops of the trees we remove a short distance, built another fire and laid by it until morning. They head out, and on the third day the Canadian kills a couple ducks. All they have are the clothes they were wearing and the powder and balls that was on them. That night they kill and elk and jerk the meat. They build a shelter from the wind of pine branches and built a large fire of pitch knots in front of it, so that we were burning on one side and freezing on the other alternately all night. (Osborne 101-109)*

In 1824 Clyman scouts down river for a camp to stage sending furs down river. While constructing shelter in the willows, a war party of twenty Indians shows up. *Sweetwater is generally bare of all kind of timber but here near the mouth grew a small thick clump of willoes in this I cut a lodging place and gathered some driftwood for a fire which I was just preparing to strike fire* Clyman heads up to a ridge to watch. (Clyman 31-34)

**B. Fire.** Fire can have multiple uses: it provides warmth, security, provides purified water and a means to cook food.

*Although the wind blew and the fine frosty snow crept in and around us this was not the worst for the cold hard frozen earth on which we lay was still more disagreeable so that sleep was out of the question by turning every method for rest day light at last appeared when we consulted what we had best do under the circumstances and it was agreed that I should arise and gather some sage brush which was small and scarce and would remain under the Buffalo robe and keep his hands warm if possible to strike fire But all our calculations failed for as soon our hands became exposed to the air they became so numb that we could not hold the flint and Steel we then resorted to our guns with no better success for the wind was so strong and for the want of some fine material to catch the fire in we or my comrade rapped himself in his robe and laid down after a great struggle I made out to saddle my horse and was about to leave the inhospitable not wishing to leave my friend I asked him if he could ride if I saddled his horse but he thought not and was unwilling to try I then made several unsuccessful efforts to obtain fire Just as I was about to mount and leave I ran my hand in the ashes to see if any warmth remained to my joy I found a small coal of fire alive not larger than a grain of corn throwing it in to hand full of material I had gathered it started a blaze in a minute and in one minute more I had a fine fire my friend got out and crawled up to my side drawing our robe around our backs we tried to warm ourselves but the wind being so strong the smoke and fire came into our faces by the back current I saddled the other horse packed up the meat while Sublet gathered sagebrush to keep up a fire which was no little job for carried away almost as fast as he put it on at length we mounted and left I put my friend ahead and followed urging his horse along We had about four miles to timber I found I would be liable to freeze on horseback so I got off and walked it being a north inclination the snow was about one foot deep I saw my friend was too numb to walk so I took the lead for the last half mile and struck a grove of timber where there was an old Indian but one side of which was still standing I got fire almost immediately then ran back and*

*whoped up my friends horse assisted him to dismount and get to the fire he seemed to no life to move as usual he laid down nearly asleep while I went Broiling meat on a stick after awhile I roused him up and gave him his Breakfast when he (he) came to and was as active as usual (Clyman Narrative)*

Without horses, Fitzpatrick walked to Pierre's Hole living only on roots and berries. On the fifth day he found part of a buffalo carcass. Scraping from the bones what meat remained, he cooked it in a hollow of earth by a fire made by rubbing two sticks together. (Berry 284-285)(DeVoto 74-77) (Hafen 109-111)

Osborne states “*my companions s threw some logs and rubbish together forming a kind of shelter from the night breeze but in the night it took fire (the logs being pitch pine) the blaze ran to the tops of the trees we remove a short distance, built another fire and laid by it until morning.* They head out, and on the third day the Canadian kills a couple ducks. All they have are the clothes they were wearing and the powder and balls that was on them. That night they kill and elk and jerk the meat. They build a shelter from the wind of pine branches and built a large fire of pitch knots in front of it, so that we were burning on one side and freezing on the other alternately all night. (Devoto 170-173) (Russell 101-109)

Clyman kills two badgers with a horse bone and strikes a fire with his gunlock. (Clyman 31-34)

**D. Water.** You can survive only a few days without water.

Hugh Glass wakes in the thicket the bear had mauled him. No gun, knife, or fixens. He has the brush for a natural debris shelter. He manages to slowly crawl towards the spring and meets his next priority water. (Berry 61)

Jedediah writes: *Previous to this and a short time after sun down, I saw several turtle doves, and as I did not recollect of ever having seen them more than 2 or 3 miles from water I spent more than an hour looking for water, but it was in vain. Our sleep was not repose, for tormented nature made us dream of things we had not and for the want of which it then seemed possible, and even probable, that we might perish in the desert unheard of and unpitied.*

*In those moments how trifling were all those things that hold such an absolute sway over the busy and the prosperous world. My dreams were not of Gold or ambitious honors, but of my distant, quiet home, of murmuring brooks, of Cooling Cascades. After a short rest we continued our march and traveled all night. The [sound] murmur of falling waters still sounding in our ears and the apprehension that we might never live to hear that sound in reality weighed heavily upon us.*

*The Mountain of which I have before spoken was apparently not far off, and we left him and proceeded onward in the hope of finding water in time to return with some in season to save his life. After traveling about [traveling about] three Miles we came to the foot of the Mt and there, to our inexpressible joy, we found water. Goble plunged into it at once, and I could hardly wait to bath my burning forehead before I was pouring it down [in a] regardless of the consequences. (Smith Crossing)*

Clyman has plenty of powder but only 11 balls. He kills buffalo on the way and jerks meat. He states “*I was forced to keep near the water for there were no springs on streams on the plain.*” Clyman crosses the river about two weeks later and goes into an Indian village where he is taken in and spends the night. He gets barbered and released back on the trail. He keeps to the grass and frequently took to the ridges. “*The second day in the afternoon I came to a pool of water under an oak drank* “ (Clyman 31-34)



**E. Food.** Food is the least important survival priority. A person can survive for weeks without food.

Although happy in having escaped from the Indians, Colter's situation was still dreadful: he was completely naked, under a burning sun; the soles of his feet were entirely filled with the thorns of the prickly pear; he was hungry, and had no means of killing game, although he saw abundance around him, and was at least seven days journey from Lisa's Fort, on the Bighorn branch of the Roche Jaune River. These were circumstances under which almost any man but an American hunter would have despaired. He arrived at the fort in seven days, having subsisted on a root much esteemed by the Indians of the Missouri, now known by naturalists as *psoralea esculenta*. (Bradbury 181)

Hugh Glass wakes in the thicket the bear had mauled him. No gun, knife, or fixens. He has the brush for a natural debris shelter. He manages to slowly crawl towards the spring and meets his next priority water. Among the bushes he finds various berries, probably choke cherries, and buffalo berries. This keeps him alive for 10 days. After 10 days he decides to head back to fort Kiowa. Somehow he manages to get up and start walking. Along the way he comes on a fresh wolf kill of a buffalo calf. He waits until they gorge and then works on the calf himself. After a couple of days working on the calf, he continues on his way eating found berries and scraps from wolf kills he can find.

Once again Glass sets out. He cuts across Nebraska and South Dakota. Since it was early spring, initially he dines on newborn buffalo calves. But, as the trek continues the calves become stronger and faster and he is reduced to a diet of bark, buds, and roots. (Berry 61)

On reaching the Snake, he constructs a raft which falls apart leaving him with only his knife. Without horses, Fitzpatrick walked to Pierre's Hole living only on roots and berries. On the fifth day he found part of a buffalo carcass. Scraping from the bones what meat remained, he cooked it in a hollow of earth by a fire made by rubbing two sticks together. The hardship of this journey turned his hair white (Berry 284-285)(Devoto 74-77) (Hafen 109-111)

Between the Humboldt and Owyhee River (present juncture of Oregon, Idaho, and Nevada state lines) Largest game was beaver, and could not be eaten because of beaver diet of poisonous plants. Milton Sublette's party has run out of meat and are reduced to the same diet as the Digger Indians. To quote Joe Meek:

*I have held my hands in an ant-hill until they were covered with the ants, then greedily licked them off. I have taken the soles off my moccasins, crisped them in the fire, and eaten them. In our extremity, the large black crickets which are found in this country were considered game. We used to take a kettle of hot water, catch the crickets, and throw them in, and when they stopped kicking, eat them. This was not what we called... good meat... but it kept us alive.*

The men also bled the mules at night to make a blood soup. Milton Sublette and Fraeb wearied of their diet of crickets and headed for the Snake. They improvised some fishing gear and caught enough to furnish them "*furnish them a hearty and most delicious repast*". (Berry 305-306)(Devoto 87)

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The basic skills needed to survive then and now are the same today: Positive mental attitude, first aid, shelter, fire, water, and food. I have shown historic examples of various mountain men and how they met these needs to survive. Many of the skills and techniques they used are the same things we use today whether we are practicing primitive skills or actually in an emergency survival situation. Whether it is an example of the mountain men sewing each other up or performing an emergency amputation, we may find ourselves in the same circumstances, though we no longer have to worry about the hostile Blackfeet war parties. Shelter is still a priority. It may be as simple as Glass's brush shelter or Fitzpatrick's natural rock shelter, or if time allows it may start as a debris trench and built into a Mandan earthen lodge given time. There were multiple ways to start a fire, from flint and steel, to rubbing two sticks to using a gun lock. In this day and age a person is well advised to know and carry as many as they can. Where one may fail another may work. Clyman and Sublette are a perfect example of this. Water is a higher priority. Today we have to worry about giardia and chemical contaminants, but water is still a priority in survival. You either need to learn where to find it or you are limited to traveling by it so you can survive. Finally food needs to be procured, whether it involves driving off other predators or using tools such as traps and snares. They may have used tools as simple as a piece of horses bone to kill a badger or they may have improvised fishing tools. Meat is meat; it may meant cricket soup, wolf kill, or beating badgers to death, men do and did what they needed to survive. In summary the same skills that the mountain man used to survive in an emergency situation are the same we need today.

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