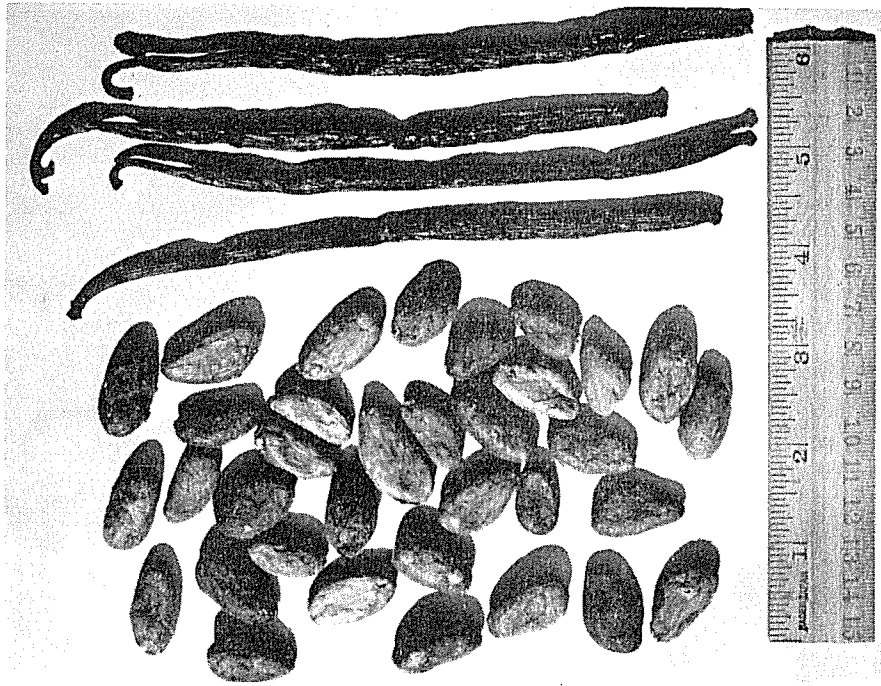


# Chocolate in the Fur Trade

## By the "Engages"

Tea was consumed by the ton in the fur trade and coffee was certainly popular in the American West, but chocolate also deserves recognition for its place in the things of the fur trade.

It came to the frontier from two directions. The Canadian traders imported prepared chocolate from England for their people in the field. Alexander Henry described a harrowing trip on the Saskatchewan in the winter of 1776 where his men were reduced to a ration of very weak chocolate for a whole day of traveling. He made it by boiling one square at a time



Left: cocoa beans before grinding (courtesy of Hershey Foods Corporation).  
Right: Mexican vanilla beans.



Eighteenth century copper chocolatero of classic style. From a Texas collection and now in the Museum of the Fur Trade.

from a cake of chocolate he had saved for just such an emergency. At Rocky Mountain House in 1810, the younger Alexander Henry noted in his journal that a sick boy had tasted nothing but chocolate for six days. One invoice in 1806 to Robert Dickson & Co. at Michilimackinac included a large quantity of tobacco and four boxes of chocolate worth 22 pounds 10 shillings.

However, it was in the Spanish provinces that chocolate held undisputed sway as the drink of the people. The earliest Spanish immigrants adopted its use from the natives of Mexico and the West Indies, and chocolate was soon an important item of commerce from the lower provinces to New Mexico. From there it was carried to distant outposts of the fur trade. Trappers visiting Taos learned to enjoy it and Dr. Wislizenus saw them eagerly buying cocoa beans for two dollars a pint at the Rendezvous of 1839. "With their hairy bank notes, like beaver skins, they can obtain all the luxuries of the mountains, and live for a few days like lords. Coffee and chocolate is cooked; the pipe is kept aglow day and night; the spirits circulate; and whatever is not spent in such ways the squaws coax out of them, or else it is



Early "squat-style" copper chocolatero. Dug up at Alameda, New Mexico. Museum of the Fur Trade Collection.

squandered at cards."

And so, at this point, a word to the modern Mountain Man: it is perfectly authentic for you to enjoy a steaming cup of chocolate around the campfire if you prefer it to coffee!

It is interesting to note the Wislizenus specifically mentioned "cocoa beans." The beans of the cacao are borne in pods on a small tree. When ripe, the pods are cut down and opened. The seeds, or beans, are then placed in some kind of box or trench and allowed to ferment. This gives them color and flavor. After a few days the beans are removed, cleaned and dried. The primitive people of Mexico and the West Indies roasted the beans, ground them on a stone metate and winnowed out the hulls. This was still the standard Mexican method in the 1830's. The fine chocolate flour was either cooked with sugar, vanilla and other flavoring and made into little cakes or it was boiled with water to which sugar and flavoring was then added and the whole beaten up into a frothy drink. Often in Mexico water with very fine corn flour was used to make a smoother hot chocolate. When cake chocolate was used, it was dissolved in hot water and then beaten up with more hot water, milk, or the corn flour and hot water.<sup>5</sup> The Mexican chocolate beater was a long stick with a carved knob end.

Without more detailed investigation we can only assume that chocolate was generally shipped to New Mexico in the form of cocoa-beans since they would stand rough handling and excessive heat. Wislizenus mentions it coming to the Rendezvous in bean form. In 1776 Fray Francisco Dominguez mentions chocolate being shipped in barrels or casks with a skin cover like a drum head.<sup>6</sup> Once at their destination, many of them were probably processed into cakes for ease in further preparation. Fray Joaquin Ruiz, missionary at Jemez in 1776, mentioned that their mission kitchen had a little separate oven for making chocolate,<sup>7</sup> and

Father Escalante mentioned having cakes of chocolate on his journey to the Interior Basin in 1776.<sup>8</sup> In his novel, *The White Chief*, Mayne Reid described refreshment vendors at a New Mexican festival: "Some squat before fires, and prepare *tortillas* and *chile colorado*; or melt the sugared chocolate cake in their urn-like earthen *ollas*."<sup>9</sup> So, here again we can only assume that the chocolate for the Rendezvous had to be roasted and ground on the spot just as the coffee was.

People from the United States, already acquainted with European and American prepared chocolate, were enthusiastic about New Mexican chocolate. In 1826 George C. Sibley wrote that he was served "a Cup of very fine, Rich chocolate" at the home of the priest at Santa Cruz.<sup>10</sup> W. W. H. Davis, U. S. Attorney for New Mexico in 1853, said: "The chocolate is peculiarly fine, and excels that prepared in the United States."<sup>11</sup>

A number of spices for the chocolate are mentioned by early writers but the prime flavoring was, and still is, vanilla. Before the days of artificial extracts vanilla flavoring came from the long seed pods of a climbing plant which was native to Mexico. The ancient Indians of Mexico used it and the Spaniards adopted it. About 1666 Penolosa mentioned the delivery in New Mexico of a basket containing twelve pounds of cacao and a bundle of vanilla.<sup>12</sup>

Some early recipes mention boiling the ground beans and skimming off the excess oil present in their natural state. Today manufacturers define "chocolate" as the product obtained by grinding roasted cacao beans. "Cocoa" is chocolate from which a portion of the oil, or cocoa butter, has been extracted.

Any discussion of chocolate in the Spanish Southwest is incomplete without some mention of the chocolatero—the pot-bellied copper mug or pitcher with open-ended rattail handle. It was the universal chocolate mug from Peru to New Mexico and may have descended from the Aztec pottery cups shaped like fat hourglasses.<sup>13</sup>

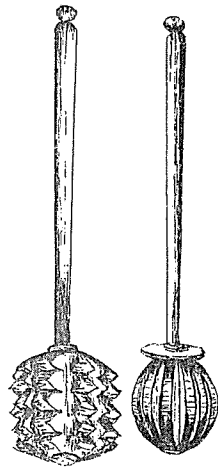
Probably the most typical form is illustrated by the accompanying photograph chocolatero found in Texas. It has the small base, long tapered body, round rattail handle and shallow pouring lip of the good eighteenth century chocolateros. It is six inches tall. Two fine and very similar examples from a late eighteenth-century mission in California are illustrated in *The Antiques Magazine* (New York). LXIV, No. 5 (November 1953), p. 374.

Another variety of early chocolatero was squat and less graceful, but generally of somewhat greater capacity. A typical example excavated during utility construction at Alameda, New Mexico (north of Albuquerque) is also illustrated. It is four and three-quarters inches tall with a maximum diameter of four and one-half inches. In the nineteenth century the chocolate cups gradually took the form of tall mugs or pitchers only slightly bulbous in the bottom half and gently flared toward the top. The rattail handle was often made of iron and some mugs had simple handles made of folded sheet copper. Today, craft shops in Mexico still sell a hand-hammered, barrel-shaped type of cup with an open handle split and riveted to the cup near its top rim.

#### NOTES:

1. Milo Quaife, ed., *Alexander Henry's Travels and Adventures in the Year 1760-1776*. (Chicago 1921). 261-262.
2. Elliott Coues, ed., *The Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry and of David Thompson 1799-1814*. (Reprint by Ross & Haines, Inc., Minneapolis 1965). 665.
3. B. C. Payette, *The Northwest*. (Montreal 1964). 293.
4. F. A. Wislizenus, *A Journey to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1839*. (St. Louis,

1912. Reprint by Rio Grande Press, Glorieta, N. M. 1969). 86-87.
5. Walter Baker and Company, *The Chocolate-Plant and its Products*. (Dorchester, Mass. 1891.; 9-12.
6. Fray Francisco Antanasio Dominguez, *The Missions of New Mexico, 1776*. (Albuquerque, 1956). 257.
7. *Ibid.*, 311.
8. Herbert E. Bolton, *Pageant in the Wilderness*. (Salt Lake City, 1972). 206.
9. Mayne Reid, *The White Chief, A Legend of North Mexico*. (New York, 1897). 20.
- Capt. Reid traveled in the Southwest and was severely wounded in the Mexican War. See *Museum of the Fur Trade Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 3, p. 7-8.
10. Kate L. Gregg, ed., *The Road to Santa Fe*. (Albuquerque 1952). 155.
11. W. W. H. Davis, *El Gringo or New Mexico and Her People*. (First published 1857, reprint by Rio Grand Press, Glorieta, N. M., 1962). 186.
12. Charles Hackett, ed., *Historical Documents Relating to New Mexico, Nueva Vizcaya and Approaches Thereto, to 1773*. (Washington, 1937). III, 226.
13. See Ambrosia Chocolate Co., *Food of the Gods-the Story of Cacao*. (Milwaukee, 1945). Chapter 3.



Two chocolate stirrers, from a seventeenth century print.

## The Nutria and the Beaver Hat

By Charles Hanson, Jr.

It is general practice in popular writings on the fur trade to blame the silk hat for the demise of the mountain man and his romantic but short-lived participation in the beaver-skin trade. Seldom is there any mention of the significant part that was also played by the inoffensive South American water rat known as the coypu or "nutria."

There is no doubt, of course, that the development of practical methods for making light, attractive and economical hats of silk had much to do with the collapse of the beaver market. The growing scarcity of that fur had pushed the price to six and eight dollars per pound, but it was necessary to use it in making the finest grades of hats. Invention of the silk hat eliminated much of the demand from the carriage trade and John Jacob Astor saw the change coming in the 1830's.

Many styles of hats, especially those for real everyday service were only practical when made of felt. For years before the period under discussion, British hatters had been experimenting with wool fibers and hair from muskrats and rabbits as ingredients for hat



The coypu or nutria. After an engraving in Wood's "Natural History."

felt. However, the first real breakthrough came with the rapid expansion of British trade with Mexico and South America as the despotic Spanish Colonial governments crumbled in the early years of the nineteenth century.

Coypu fur was incredibly cheap in Buenos Ayres and the neighboring provinces of southern South America. Coypu was very similar to the beaver and its fur had fine "teeth" along each hair that made it excellent felting material. A good article on hats in the January 1841 Supplement to *The Penny Magazine* (London) had this to say about the coypu or nutria:

Nutria is the fur of a small animal called the coypu, the *quoyja*, or the *Myopotamus Bonariensis*, found in various parts of South America. The long or coarse hairs are generally of a reddish colour; and the inner or soft hairs, brownish ash colour. It was not until about thirty years ago that hatters, influenced by the high price of beaver fur (which within a century had risen from 20s. to 80s. per pound), began to use nutria fur; but since that time the employment of them has become so extensive, that one million nutria skins have sometimes been imported in one year.

From this it is obvious that the nutria was making serious inroads into the beaver market even before 1830. People close to the fur trade were well aware of this fact. The following pertinent comments are quoted from letters sent from American Fur Company headquarters in New York to some of the company's associates in the field (American Fur Company Papers, New York Historical Society, N. Y.):

To Joseph Rollette, Prairie du Chien, June 4, 1836: --nutria are arriving both here