

Neck Scarves

By Gene Hickman

Most shirts of the L&C period only had one button or a tie at the neck. Whether the shirt was buttoned or open, a stock or neck scarf (neck scarf) was often worn under the collar and knotted at the neck. The neck scarf was part of the well dressed mans' attire. Since shirts at this time commonly did not have buttons, except at the top of the neck, neck scarves were also used to close the shirt collar. These neck scarves were commonly made of linen or silk, but could be cotton. Linen and cotton neck scarves were usually solid or checked and in any color that would be available for shirts. Often times they were un-hemmed and no more than a remnant of shirt material. The silk neck scarves were predominantly black, there is very little record of quantities of other colors being bought or sold, even in the trade records up through the 1840s. However, red, light blue, green, burgundy and other "pleasing" colors of silk scarves seem to be the most common at modern rendezvous. Brighter colors were common in the Indian trade and the French were fond of the red or blue, but everyone else seems to wear black. Even when we look at period painting of Indians from such artists as Bodmer and Kurz, black scarves predominate.

"While performing manual labor and in other very informal situations, men wore their shirt collars turned down over a folded and tied handkerchief" (Textiles for Clothing of the Early Republic, 1800-1850). Most neck scarves are at least 36" x 36" square and are rolled diagonally and knotted at the neck. For a look at how a neck scarf may be worn see pictures on Trailhead Trade Co.: <http://www.trailhd.com/>. Neck scarves are also worn next to the skin. They were not worn "Cowboy" style, backwards with the knot in back, as if you were going to wear it as a dust mask. This wear style is a later and more modern even "Hollywood" wearing style. The red or blue paisley cowboy handkerchiefs we are all familiar with, also did not exist and most certainly couldn't be worn as a neck scarf.

"Handkerchiefs made up a part of the voyageurs'... standard supplied equipment... they were sometimes used as caps or headbands. They were doubtless also regularly used for wiping foreheads, blowing noses, and trickling cold water down the neck on a hot day. It's also possible that they were used in place of a neckcloth such as a cravat or stock. [However,] neckcloths were not routinely worn by voyageurs." What Voyageurs Wore : Voyageur Clothing from Head to Toe, 1774-1821 by Angela Gottfred, Northwest Journal ISSN 1206-4203.

Now a neck scarf is something that anyone can make and most should wear. Cut the material (linen or cotton) to size and leave the edges raw. After some use and washing, the edges will fray and give the neck scarf a "period" look. Of coarse a black silk neck scarf can be easily purchased at a western wear store or from a trader or sutler at rendezvous. The silk neck scarves could either be the coarse weave or the smooth satin finish. Most neck scarves, whether silk, linen or cotton probably did not have hemmed edges. Neck scarves are utilitarian too, being used for rags, handkerchiefs, potholders, dust masks, kerchiefs, etc