



*Nebraska History* posts materials online for your personal use. Please remember that the contents of *Nebraska History* are copyrighted by the Nebraska State Historical Society (except for materials credited to other institutions). The NSHS retains its copyrights even to materials it posts on the web.

For permission to re-use materials or for photo ordering information, please see:

<http://www.nebraskahistory.org/magazine/permission.htm>

Nebraska State Historical Society members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* and four issues of *Nebraska History News* annually. For membership information, see:

<http://nebraskahistory.org/admin/members/index.htm>

## Article Title: The Upper Missouri Fur Trade: Its Methods of Operation

Full Citation: Ray H Mattison, "The Upper Missouri Fur Trade: Its Methods of Operation," *Nebraska History* 42 (1961): 1-28

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1961FurTrade.pdf>

Date: 11/15/2011

Article Summary: The fur trade flourished along the Missouri in the early years of the nineteenth century. Traders concerned solely with profit exploited the Indians who worked for them. That treatment caused a distrust of white men that lingered after the annihilation of bison herds in the early 1880s had made fur trading an insignificant business.

### Cataloging Information:

Names: Manuel Lisa; Edward T Denig; Rudolph Friederick Kurz; Maximilian, Prince of Wied; Charles Larpenteur; Kenneth McKenzie; Alexander Culbertson; Francis Chardon

Fur Trading Companies: Hudson's Bay Company; Northwest Company; Company of Explorers of the Upper Missouri; Missouri Fur Company; Rocky Mountain Fur Company; Columbia Fur Company; Western Department, American Fur Company; Upper Missouri Outfit; Sublette and Campbell

American Fur Company Trading Posts: Cabanne's Post (Nebraska), Fort Pierre (South Dakota), Fort Clark (North Dakota), Fort Union (North Dakota), Fort McKenzie (Montana)

Keywords: Manuel Lisa; Edward T Denig; Rudolph Friederick Kurz; Maximilian, Prince of Wied; Charles Larpenteur; Kenneth McKenzie; Alexander Culbertson; Francis Chardon; Hudson's Bay Company; American Fur Company

Photographs / Images: map showing fur trading posts; two views of Fort Union (Bodmer image from the days of the fur trade and 1948 National Park Service photo); two views of Fort Pierre (Bodmer and National Park Service, 1954); two drawings by W Sammons: "Fur trading scene in the 1830s," and "The fur trader takes a wife"; Indians attacking fur traders (*Harpers Weekly*, May 23, 1868); Steamboat "Yellowstone"

## THE UPPER MISSOURI FUR TRADE: ITS METHODS OF OPERATION

BY RAY H. MATTISON

UNTIL well in the 19th century, the fur trade was the principal business on the Missouri River and its tributaries. In common with much of the frontier of the United States, here the trapper and trader preceded and prepared the way for the cattleman, the miner, and the pioneer farmer.

For several centuries the traders on the frontier found a ready market for furs and skins both on the eastern seaboard and in Europe. These were used in making beaver hats for aristocratic gentlemen and luxurious coats for their ladies. The skins of beaver, ermine, muskrat, deer, otter, fox, and mink were very much in demand. Buffalo hides, converted into coats and robes, became important items in the trade until the bison were extirpated in the 1870's and 1880's.

Not long after Father Jacques Marquette and Louis Joliet discovered the mouth of the Missouri in 1673, ad-

*Ray H. Mattison, Historian, Region Two Office, National Park Service, Omaha, Nebraska, is a frequent contributor to this magazine. This paper was prepared in connection with the Missouri River Basin program of the Park Service.*

venturous French traders and *coureurs de bois*, from Louisiana and the Great Lakes Region, began to push their canoes up its muddy waters in search of the precious peltries. By the end of the French occupation in 1763, they had reached above the mouth of the Platte and perhaps as far as the Niobrara. Captain Philip Pittman wrote in 1767 or 1768 that French traders go "betwixt three or four hundred leagues up" the Missouri and "this branch of commerce is considerable." He added that this business "employs annually eight thousand pounds worth of European goods" and the trade returns "are certain of two hundred per cent profit."<sup>1</sup>

In the first two decades of the Spanish regime, traders operating under that government advanced little farther up the Missouri, than had the French. However, when the powerful English companies, the Hudson's Bay Company, a monopoly chartered by the British Crown in 1670, and its principal competitor, the Northwest Company of Montreal organized in the 1780's, began to press into the Upper Mississippi and Missouri regions Spain decided to send its own traders to counteract this rival influence. In 1794 French traders of St. Louis, operating under a Spanish license, organized the Company of Explorers of the Upper Missouri. This company sent out three expeditions, the third of which, led by James MacKay in 1795, reached the Mandan villages above present-day Bismarck, North Dakota. There he found British traders whom he ordered to leave the country. The end of Spanish domination in 1802 left the trade of the Upper Missouri, from the mouth of the Platte to the Yellowstone and Bighorn Rivers, in British hands.<sup>2</sup>

Before the United States had acquired Louisiana President Thomas Jefferson, probably with the view of wresting the control of the region from the British, took initial steps toward exploring the Missouri River to the mountains and

---

<sup>1</sup> Frank H. Hodder, ed., *The Present State of European Settlements on the Mississippi by Captain Philip Pittman* (Cleveland, 1906), 30-31.

<sup>2</sup> A. P. Nasatir, *Before Lewis and Clark* (St. Louis, 1852), I, 75-115.

finding a route to the Pacific. The purchase of Louisiana was consummated in 1803, and the following year in accordance with their instructions, Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark and 48 young frontiersmen, set out on their epic journey to the Pacific. Enroute they mentioned passing both existing and abandoned posts. On their return trip from the Pacific two years later, they encountered two American trappers above the Mandan villages. Before they reached the mouth of the Platte they met several trading parties going into the Indian country.

Stimulated by glowing reports of the newly-discovered fur-bearing regions on the Upper Missouri, Manuel Lisa, prominent St. Louis trader, in 1807, embarked on his first ambitious trapping expedition on the Upper Missouri. Inaugurating a new system of operating the business, he built strong permanent forts at strategic places where white hunters and trappers rendezvoused. These posts also served as trading houses and depositories for furs and peltries. This system was followed with some modification by the Missouri Fur Company, in which Lisa played a dominant part, Ramsay Crooks and Robert McClellan, and by later companies operating on the Upper Missouri.

In the decade and a half following the War of 1812 there was a sharp decline in the fur trade, following which there was a great revival in the business. The 1820's saw four strong outfits competing on the Upper Missouri—the Missouri Fur Company with Joshua Pilcher as one of its leading spirits; the Rocky Mountain Fur Company<sup>3</sup> supported by General William Ashley and Major Andrew Henry; the Columbia Fur Company backed by strong St. Louis interests and under the operation of former North-

---

<sup>3</sup> Failing to establish a foothold in the Blackfoot country and its party attacked by the Arikara in 1823, the Rocky Mountain Fur Company abandoned the Upper Missouri and penetrated the Rocky Mountain region. There Ashley adopted the rendezvous system for the fur trade. Under this system, the traders, instead of operating from fixed trading posts, held an annual fair, at which they exchanged products of European and American manufacture for furs and horses of the Indians. (John C. Ewers, ed., *Adventures of Zenas Leonard, Fur Trader* [Norman, 1959], xi-xiv.)

west Company employees; and the Western Department, American Fur Company, organized in 1808 under the powerful leadership of John Jacob Astor and supported by the Chouteaus and other prominent French families in St. Louis. Within less than a decade after the merger of the two last companies in 1828, the new subsidiary firm, operating under the name of Upper Missouri Outfit, had driven its two other principal rivals and a number of lesser ones from the field.

Although frequently challenged, the Upper Missouri Outfit, generally called the American Fur Company, for the next three decades, monopolized the fur trade on the river. It was always known as "the company." Those competing against it, whether an individual trader or a powerful rival, were known as "the opposition."

By the early 1830's the company had a number of permanent trading posts on the Upper Missouri. In 1833 there were Cabanne's Post, located near Council Bluff, Forts Pierre, Clark, Union and McKenzie. All, with the exception of the first, were stockaded posts with bastions and were constructed to withstand attacks by strong war parties of Indians. Fort Pierre, located near the present city of Pierre, South Dakota, was the center of operations for the trading houses from Fort Union to Cabanne's Post. Fort Union, described by Nathaniel J. Wyeth in 1833 as "better furnished inside than any British fort I have ever seen,"<sup>4</sup> and by Edwin T. Denig, well-known trader, ten years later as "the principal and handsomest trading post on the Missouri,"<sup>5</sup> was situated near the mouth of the Yellowstone. This post had superintendence of the trade and served as a depot or storage house for the other establishments higher up on the Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers and in the mountains.<sup>6</sup> About 350 miles farther up the Missouri and below

---

<sup>4</sup> F. G. Young, ed., "The Correspondence and Journals of Captain Nathaniel J. Wyeth, 1831-6," *Sources of Oregon History* (Eugene, 1899), I, 213.

<sup>5</sup> Maria R. Audubon and Elliott Coues, eds., *Audubon and His Journals* (London, 1898), II, 180.

<sup>6</sup> Reuben G. Thwaites, ed., *Travels in the Interior of North America by Maximilian, Prince of Wied* (Cleveland, 1906), I, 177.

present Fort Benton, Montana was Fort McKenzie, which carried on the fur trade with the three Blackfoot tribes.<sup>7</sup> Each of these maintained a constant supply of articles used in the Indian trade. All of these principal posts were under the charge of an agent usually called a "*bourgeois*," who was responsible to the company for its operation.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to principal and subsidiary posts there were a number of wintering houses, which were usually block houses or log houses, at which three to six men were normally employed. These were usually erected for a winter among the Indian villages within the range of their trade and abandoned the following spring if the tribe moved to a new location. The furs from these places were sent to such depots as Forts Union or Pierre.<sup>9</sup>

The main permanent trading establishments were quite self-sufficient institutions. In 1833 the company had listed on its payroll, at Fort Union, 12 clerks and 129 men.<sup>10</sup> At this post the trades of tailor, gunsmith, blacksmith, tinner, cooper, carter, hunter and trapper were represented. Forts McKenzie and Pierre were equally self-supporting. McKenzie, Union, and Pierre all maintained herds of horses and cattle, which supplied the inmates with milk and butter. Both McKenzie and Union kept a small herd of swine. Forts Union, Pierre, and Clark all maintained gardens which supplied the fort employees with corn and vegetables. Nathaniel J. Wyeth, who made a trip down the Missouri in 1833, gave a good description of the garden at Fort Pierre:

---

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> J. N. B. Hewitt, ed., *Journal of Rudolph Friederick Kurz*, hereafter cited as *Kurz's Journal*, BAE Bulletin 115 (Washington, 1937), 234-235; Hiram M. Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West* (New York, 1936), two volumes, I, 57.

<sup>9</sup> John Dougherty to Secretary of War, November 19, 1831, St. Louis Superintendency, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Archives; William Gordon to General William Clark, William Clark Papers, Volume 6, ms. Kansas State Historical Society; *Maximilian's Travels*, I, 379-380.

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Chouteau Collection, Post Accounts, Upper Missouri Outfit, July 1, 1831 to May 1836. Missouri Historical Society, hereafter abbreviated MoHS. In November 1834, there were 42 men engaged at Fort Union and 52 at Fort McKenzie. Wm. Hamilton to Kenneth McKenzie, Nov. 15, 1834, Pierre Chouteau Collection, MoHS.

[Sept.] 9th. Remained at the fort until about 1 ock. when we made by pulling 2 hours an Island 9 miles below the fort on which the Co. have about 15 acres of ground under cultivation here I remained all this day eating and drinking of the good things afforded by the earth and the cellars of the Co. Found cucumbers water & musk mellons beets carrots potatoes onions corn and a good cabin and the Company of Mr. Laidlow [*sic*] and Doct.<sup>11</sup>

Near Pierre, Union, and later Benton, were *chantiers* or boatyards where the company employed artisans to make and repair boats used in the trade.<sup>12</sup>

In the early period much of the taking of the furs, particularly of the beaver, was done by the white trappers. There were two classes of these, the hired trappers and the free trappers. Hired trappers were employed by the company, normally for a term of three years, for a stipulated sum. They were usually engaged for from one to two hundred dollars a year paid off in goods at company prices which were very high.<sup>13</sup> They performed the tasks assigned them by the company such as hunting, trapping, loading and unloading horses, mounting guard, and the distasteful duties of camp life. The company furnished their weapons, horses and equipment.<sup>14</sup> In 1830 the American Fur Company kept a record of the trappers and engagees employed by them. Each was briefly rated as one of the following: "a great Sulker," "a good man," "very good man," "trusty man," "worthless," "Good for Nothing," "deserted," "a Damd Rascal" and "not to be engaged."<sup>15</sup>

The free trappers, on the other hand, were more of an independent class. They supplied their own horses and equipment, could hunt and trap where they pleased, and could dispose of their furs to the highest bidder. Occasion-

<sup>11</sup> Young, *op. cit.*, 216.

<sup>12</sup> Audubon and his Journals, II, 180-195; Maximilian's Travels, I, 317-318, 316-317; II, 235; III, 89; Hiram M. Chittenden, *History of Steamboat Navigation on the Missouri River* (New York, 1903), two volumes, I, 96-97.

<sup>13</sup> John Dougherty to Secretary of War, Nov. 19, 1831, St. Louis Superintendency, Records of Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Archives.

<sup>14</sup> Washington Irving, *Adventures of Captain Bonneville* (Chicago, n.d.), 62.

<sup>15</sup> Acct. Book, Pierre Chouteau Collection, MoHS.

ally, when in dangerous country, it was necessary for the trapper to attach himself to some other trader for protection. In such circumstances he was compelled to conform to the ordinary rules for trapping and to the rules of the camp. He was also required to dispose of his beaver to the trader who commanded the camp.<sup>16</sup>

According to Osborne Russell, a Rocky Mountain trapper, the outfit of a trapper usually consisted of the following: "one animal upon which is placed one or two epishe-mores, a riding saddle and bridle, a sack containing six beaver traps, a blanket with an extra pair of moccasins, his powder horn and bullet pouch, with a belt to which is attached a butcher knife, a wooden box containing bait for beaver, a tobacco sack with a pipe and implements for making fire, with sometimes a hatchet fastened to the pommel of his saddle. . . ."<sup>17</sup>

In the Rocky Mountain region, much of the beaver trapping had been done by bands of white trappers traveling through the country. On the Upper Missouri, on the other hand, a large part of the trapping, particularly of the small fur-bearing animals such as muskrat, racoon, otter, and ermine was done by the Indians. The buffalo robe and a substantial tongue business, important items in the Upper Missouri trade, continued to be largely in Indian hands. With the fall in the price of beaver in the 1840's, the practice of sending large parties of white trappers through the country was discontinued. Rudolph F. Kurz, who spent 1851-1852 on the Upper Missouri, wrote that in the entire North Plains Indian country "the trappers are no longer found at all."<sup>18</sup>

Each year the company sent out its Indian trade goods to its various posts on the Upper Missouri. Prior to the

---

<sup>16</sup> Irving, *op. cit.*, 62-63; See also Chittenden, *American Fur Trade*, II, 917-918.

<sup>17</sup> Osborne Russell, *Journal of a Trapper* (Boise, 1921), 85.

<sup>18</sup> Kurz's *Journal*, 125; See also J. N. B. Hewitt, ed., "Indian Tribes on the Upper Missouri by Edwin T. Denig," hereafter cited as Denig, "Indian Tribes;" *Forty-Sixth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* (Washington, 1930), 411.



use of the steamboats in the 1830's the keelboat was largely used. Goods were shipped to the principal posts where stock valued at from fifteen to twenty thousand dollars was kept. Those shipped by the larger posts to the temporary posts varied in value from five hundred to two or three thousand dollars. The principal posts apparently stocked the staple items in large amounts. In 1831 Laidlaw reported to Pierre Chouteau Jr. that Fort Tecumseh (later replaced by Fort Pierre) had on hand 6,000 lbs. of powder, 13,000 lbs. of lead and 6,000 lbs. of tobacco "and liquor a pretty good quantity" valued at \$19,700.<sup>19</sup> The most popular trade items as indicated in the inventory at Fort Union in 1831, were awls, half axes, beads, hawk bells, blankets, combs, flannel shirts, pantaloons, kettles, lead, powder, gun worms, bar iron, rifle balls, gun flints, vermilion, and coat buttons.<sup>20</sup> The Indians early showed a decided preference for woolen goods and guns of English manufacture. Sugar and coffee also later became popular. Whiskey, although never authorized by law and later forbidden entirely became, in spite of every effort of the government to prevent it, the principal and one of the most lucrative articles of trade.<sup>21</sup>

By the 1850's the Indians' desires for white man's goods had expanded. Henry A. Boller listed the miscellaneous merchandise at Fort Atkinson, an opposition post near Fort Berthold, in 1858, as follows: blankets, all sizes,

<sup>19</sup> Wm. Laidlaw to Pierre Chouteau Jr., Pierre Chouteau Collection, MoHS.

<sup>20</sup> Inventory of Goods, Upper Missouri Outfit, Pierre Chouteau Collection, MoHS.

<sup>21</sup> Dougherty to Secretary of War, Nov. 19, 1831, NA, Gordon to Clark, Oct. 27, 1831, KSHS. The inventories for 1852 and 1855 for the Missouri River posts of the Upper Missouri Outfit (American Fur Co.) were as follows:

	July 1, 1852	August 23, 1856
Fort Pierre	34,744.47	1,405.00
Fort Pierre (Supp.)	916.02	.....
Fort Union	14,717.11	19,154.93
Fort Berthold	4,759.21	1,552.81
Fort Benton	7,369.89	4,686.82
Fort Clark	7,365.58	9,885.84

(Anne McDonnell, ed., *Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana*, Vol. X [Helena, 1910], 236.)

all colors, calicos, prints, cotton, ticking, blue and scarlet cloth, lindsay, blue ducking, guns, fuses, revolvers and rifles, prepared bullets ( $\frac{1}{2}$  ounce.) shot and an abundance of powder, together with flints, percussion caps, powder horns, gun worms, awls, beads, all sizes and kinds, hawk bells, gilt buttons, gold and silver lace, sewings, ribbons, fancy caps, combs, "enough to clear out all the heads in the country," butcher knives, files, shears, vermilion, chrome yellow conchonical (used to dye quills for garnishing), brass tacks, Jew harps, brass kettles, camp kettles, tin cups, dippers, copper pots of all sizes, small trunks covered with red morocco and plentifully studded with brass tacks, coffee mills, tin pans, crockery, bowls, mugs and many other articles. "Sugar, coffee and tea are the most profitable articles of trade," he wrote.<sup>22</sup>

The items popular in the Indian trade were obtained from numerous sources. The little bells and mirrors came from Leipzig, the clay pipes from Cologne, beads from Italy, merinos and calicos from France, woolen blankets and guns from England, sugar and coffee from New Orleans, clothing and knives from New York, powder and shot, meat, etc. from St. Louis. At that time the American Fur Company had factories both at home and abroad for the manufacture of its staple goods. Its operations extended from the Upper Mississippi to Mexico.<sup>23</sup>

The extent of the sale of liquor by the American Fur Company and its subsidiaries has long been a subject of controversy. Denig wrote in 1854 that all the Indians "drink whenever they can get it—men, women, and children—except the Crow Indians, who will not taste it."<sup>24</sup> Following the distillery incident at Fort Union in 1833-1834 in which the government learned that the Company had a distillery and was manufacturing liquor in violation of the spirit of the law, the American Fur Company was under considerable criticism for its use of liquor in its trade. The

---

<sup>22</sup> Henry A. Boller, Letter to his father, Aug. 10, 1858, ms. State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck.

<sup>23</sup> *Kurz's Journal*, 234.

<sup>24</sup> Denig, "Indian Tribes," 530.

firm's correspondence discloses that its traders did not feel that they could compete with the "opposition," who always seemed to have an ample supply for Indian trade, unless they also used liquor in the business. It appears that at that time liquor was not openly traded within the doors of the company's posts. However, Larpenteur indicates its traders always freely disposed of whiskey outside the walls of the trading establishments.<sup>25</sup> Kurz leads one to believe that while he was at several of the company posts in 1851-1852, the American Fur Company did not trade liquor. He expressed Denig's view that liquor did the Indians no harm whatever and that "they were more reliable, more industrious, and cared more for personal appearance at the time when Uncle Sam allowed them to barter for whisky." The traders' desire for the return of whiskey as an article of trade, Kurz observed, "is the enormous profit they derive from the sale of it—a profit out of all proportion to the one now realized."<sup>26</sup>

The market for products of the fur trade varied considerably throughout the century. During the first four decades beaver was in great demand. Maximilian estimated in 1833 that the company shipped down the river approximately 25,000 skins. These were shipped in packs of 100 pounds each comprising about 60 large skins in a pack. The usual price was \$4.00 per pound.<sup>27</sup>

By the end of the 1830's, a new fashion brought about a great change in the fur trade. For many years the beaver hat had been a symbol of distinction. Silk hats replaced those made from beaver, which were becoming increasingly scarce. As a result, the demand for beaver skins decreased and their price fell.

However, the decline of the beaver trade did not bring an end to the fur business. Other skins and peltries became increasingly important with the decline of the beaver. From

---

<sup>25</sup> Elliott Coues, ed., *Forty Years a Fur Trader on the Upper Missouri: The Personal Narrative of Charles Larpenteur, 1833-1872* (New York, 1898), two volumes, *passim*.

<sup>26</sup> Kurz's *Journal*, 177.

<sup>27</sup> Maximilian's *Travels*, I, 380-383.

1840-1860, the trade shifted to buffalo robes and to small fur-bearing animals. During the period from 1860-1885, the business in small fur-bearing animals sharply declined and owing to the demand for leather, there was a shift in the need from buffalo robes to hides of that animal. In the 1830's the price for buffalo skins was \$4.00; in the 1850's the price for robes was \$3.00. Other furs and skins of importance in the trade were muskrat, mink, deer, bear, fox, wolf, ermine, badger, wild cat, and skunk. There was also a market for buffalo meat, pemmican (dried buffalo meat), and buffalo tongues which were a delicacy.<sup>28</sup>

The Indian trade at the posts was frequently conducted with considerable ceremony. During his visit to Fort McKenzie in 1833, Maximilian, Prince of Wied, was very much impressed with the elaborate ritual which preceded the trade. When a trading party approached, the post hoisted the flag and discharged cannon signalling that trade was about to commence. Then the principal chief and the head men, dressed in the colored great coats and round hats with tufts of feathers, given them by the company, and bringing horse or beaver skins for gifts, arrived at the trading post, they were welcomed with a salute of guns and met by the bourgeois who shook hands with them. The chiefs, after delivering their colors on a long ensign staff in military style, were followed by the warriors, all of whom were admitted to the fort, seated, fed, and given drinks and tobacco by the company. This was followed by an exchange of oratory in which the bourgeois sometimes rewarded those loyal to the company and to the whites with special presents. After dispensing with the ceremonies, trade begun. This ritual, with some variations, apparently continued to be observed for several decades at the Upper Missouri posts.<sup>29</sup>

Thaddeus Culbertson, who accompanied his brother Alexander up the river in 1850, described a feast which

---

<sup>28</sup> Denig, "Indian Tribes," 310-311; Merrill G. Burlingame, "The Buffalo in Trade and Commerce," *North Dakota Historical Quarterly*, III, (1929).

<sup>29</sup> *Maximilian's Travels*, II, 125-131; See also Denig, "Indian Tribes," 458.

accompanied a trade at the Yankton Trading House, below Fort Pierre:

... The Indians had bought all our horses that were for sale and they came to the houses with us. There Alex had a feast prepared for them and they all appeared well satisfied. A feast for the Indians is a very simple affair—a little coffee and some gammon, or mush served in the simplest style serve them. There were 60 or 70 gathered at this one; before it was ready they came in and out and sat talking, joking and passing around the pipe just as whites spend their time when gathered for a dinner. When the things were prepared the two kettles were placed in the middle of the floor and each one was furnished with a pan of some kind to eat in, but they got no spoons or anything to answer the same purpose. Alex then made quite a long speech . . . . One of the old men then arose, shook hands with him, resumed his seat on the floor and made quite a long and animated speech. I could not understand a word but was much interested by his earnest manner.<sup>30</sup>

The chiefs were apparently given presents according to their rank, the more important being given more generous gifts. Larpenteur described the departure of Moose Dung, an influential chief, in 1835 following a visit to Fort Union:

July 7—The 22 Indians which arrived on the 6th started back today to their Camp with a little Ammunition and Tobacco the Moose Dung as being a very considerable man received a present of three hundred Balls and powder seventy twist[s] of tobacco two Knives four gun worms ten flints two awls one vile of Pepper mint one vile of eye water and one yard of Calico . . . . Traded from them eleven good Robes.<sup>31</sup>

Sometimes the Indian visits to the posts were accompanied with much unpleasantness and the traders were glad to see their guests leave. One diarist recorded such a visit to Fort Union in 1855, by a party of Crows, following which the bourgeois gave them a certificate of good behavior to present to their Indian Agent. He described the visitors as:

... a lousy, thieving, Beggerly set of Rascals. [While at the fort] They shot a dutchman Killd a Boar cut up two carriages stole everything they could lay their hands on.

---

<sup>30</sup> John Francis McDermott, ed., *Journal of an Expedition to the Mauvaises Terres and the Upper Missouri in 1850 by Thaddeus A. Culbertson*, BAE Bulletin 147 (Washington, 1952), 53.

<sup>31</sup> Larpenteur's Original Journal, Vol. I. Ms. Minnesota Historical Society.

Begged & Bothered Mr. Kipp to death got credits & never paid run everywhere through the Fort insulted and annoyd every one.<sup>32</sup>

Although custom required the traders to be hospitable to the Indians, they ordinarily took no chances of letting the latter get out of control while the business was being conducted. At both Forts Union and McKenzie, during the early 1840's, the trade was carried on without the Indians being admitted to the interior of the posts.<sup>33</sup> Boller wrote that at Fort Atkinson, located near Fort Berthold, "The store is only open when the Indian wants to trade, and not more than 5 or 6 allowed in at one time, & are prevented by a high square counter from any more than passing a threshold."<sup>34</sup>

On the other hand, at Fort Clark, located among the comparatively peaceful Mandan, the Indians generally had free access of the establishment during the day. Maximilian wrote in 1833-1834 that at this place there was no separate apartment for them so they were in every room, and stood in front of the fireplaces during the cold winters so that they prevented the heat from coming into the apartments. They required food and smokes. The company in one winter gave an estimated 200 lbs. of tobacco to regale them. Most of them seemingly endeavored to come around the dining room at dinner time in order that they might be invited to a free meal.<sup>35</sup>

Although the ostensible profits from the fur trade appear to have been excessive, the real ones were not as great as they appeared. The goods traded in the 1830's for buffalo robes and beaver skins, at the place of exchange, would indicate that the trader received a profit of from 200 to 2,000 percent. Denig wrote about 1854 that "all goods are sold at an average profit of 200 percent."<sup>36</sup> However, the

---

<sup>32</sup> Mrs. Anna McDonnell, ed., "Fort Sarpy Journal," *Montana Historical Society Contributions*, X, 158-159.

<sup>33</sup> *Audubon's Journals*, II, 185-186, 193.

<sup>34</sup> Boller to his father, August 10, 1858.

<sup>35</sup> *Maximilian's Travels*, II, 290.

<sup>36</sup> Denig, "Indian Tribes," 460.

expenses involved above original cost, in carrying out this business, were immense.

Kurz wrote in 1851 that although the fur traders formerly made a "gain earlier ranging from 200 to 400 percent; their gain today is not more than 80 percent."<sup>37</sup> At that time the Indian received in exchange for a buffalo robe, which sold wholesale in St. Louis for at least \$2.00, two gallons of shelled corn, from three to four pounds of sugar or two pounds of coffee. The price of coffee at Fort Union was \$1.00 a pound; brown sugar, the same; meal 25 cents a pound; seven ship biscuits, \$1.00; one pound of soap \$1.00; and calico, \$1.00 a yard.<sup>38</sup> The "agents and bourgeois," Kurz wrote "can easily realize 100 percent profit if they know the trade."<sup>39</sup> At that time the American Fur Company apparently did not openly trade liquor in its posts.<sup>40</sup>

Boller, a clerk at Fort Atkinson, in 1858, gave a similar picture of prices. "4 cups of either sugar, coffee or tea is the price of a robe, which I shall show you hereafter a few prices for it and enough. The articles just named are sold at \$1 per cup! . . . We have no money currency up here; robes taking its place, for example, you want to buy a horse from an Indian—he will, if [for] a 'buffler' horse ask 30 robes for him; you will pay him in goods from the store, to the value of 30 robes, estimating each at \$4, altho' the actual St. Louis cost of the goods would not be more than 30 or 40 dollars."<sup>41</sup>

The American Fur Company officials always contended that competition was undesirable in the business. "The Indian trade does not admit of competition," wrote Denig. "The effects of strong rival companies have been more in-

---

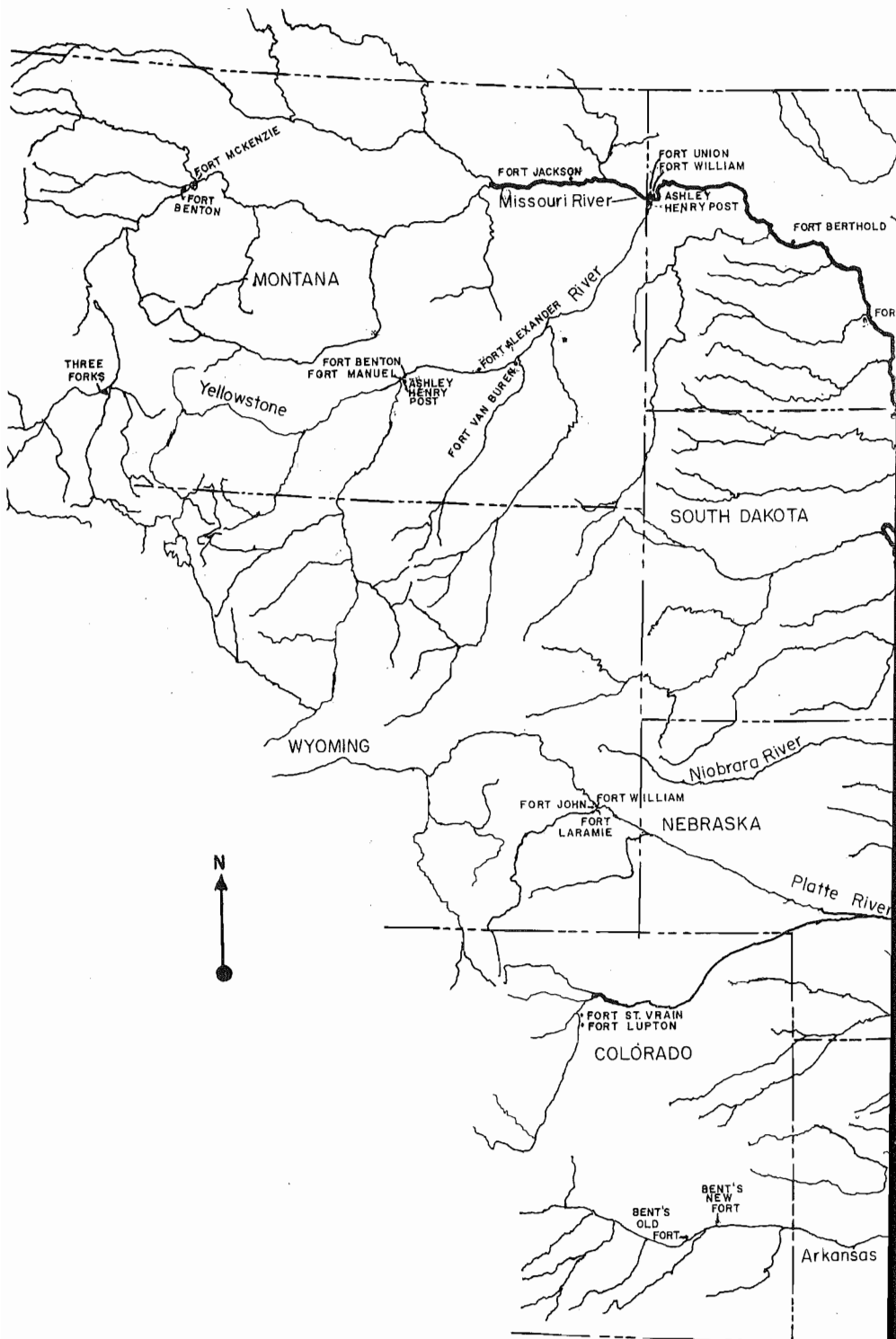
<sup>37</sup> *Kurz's Journal*, 177.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

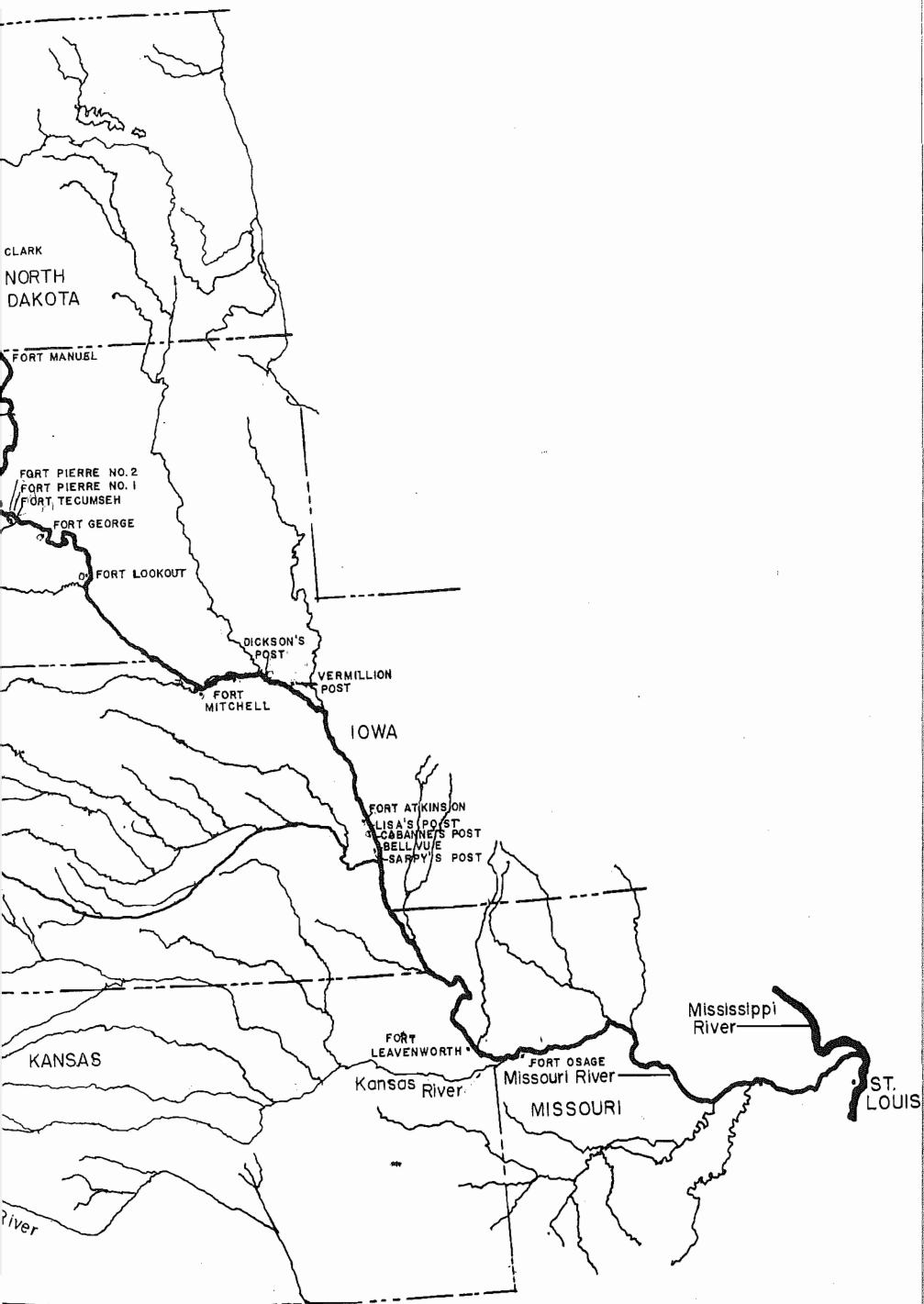
<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

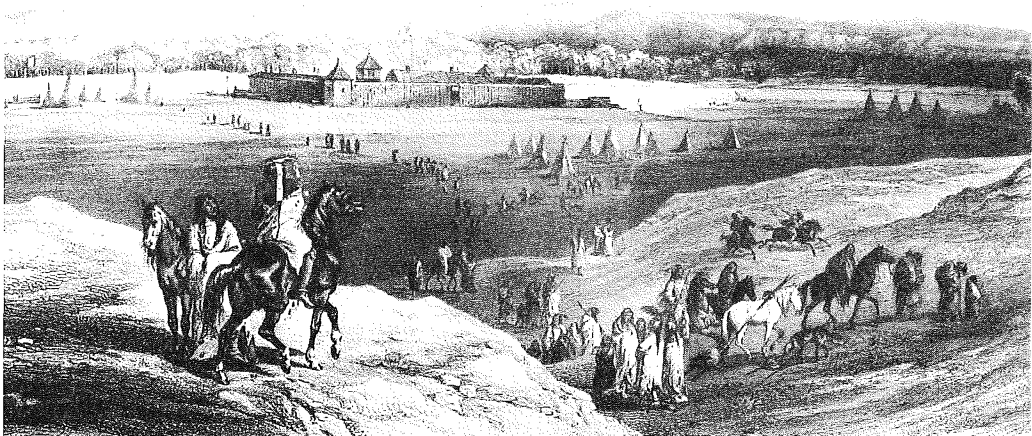
<sup>40</sup> Denig stated in 1854 that the cost of a buffalo robe in merchandise was about \$1.35 in cash and other expenses at \$1.20 more for each robe, which brought the total cost to \$2.55. The best sale made of a large quantity was \$3.00 each. (Denig, "Indian Tribes," 460.)

<sup>41</sup> Boller to his father, August 10, 1858.



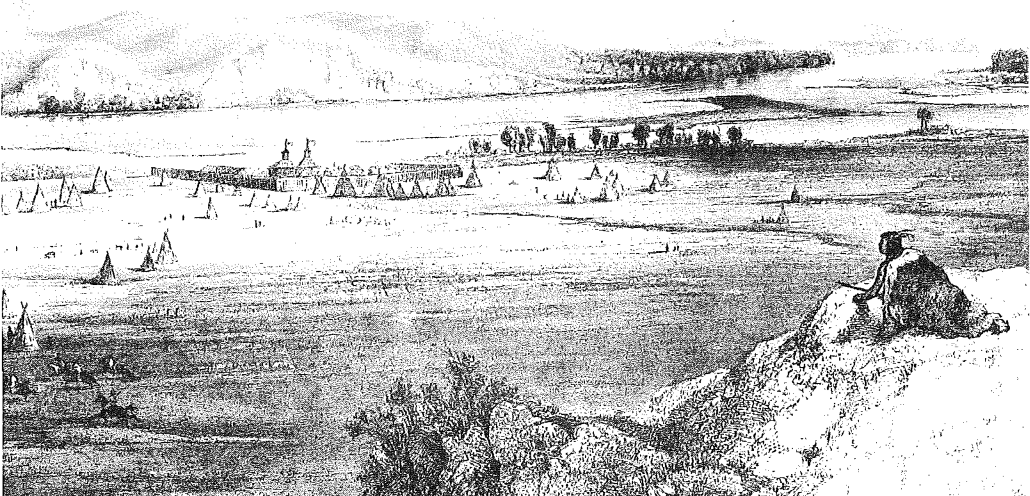






Fort Union, at Mouth of the Yellowstone, from Bodmer  
Below—1948 view, courtesy National Park Service





Fort Pierre, from Bodmer

Below—1954 view, courtesy National Park Service



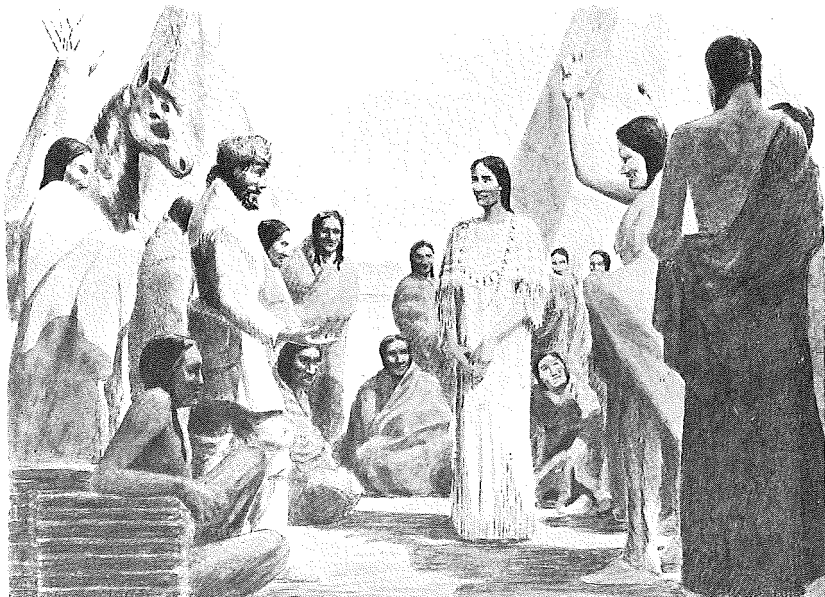


### FUR TRADING SCENE IN THE 1830'S

Friendly Indians, eager for the necessities & luxuries which the fur traders offered them, bartered valuable furs for beads, trinkets, cloths, kettles, sugar, coffee, blankets, etc.

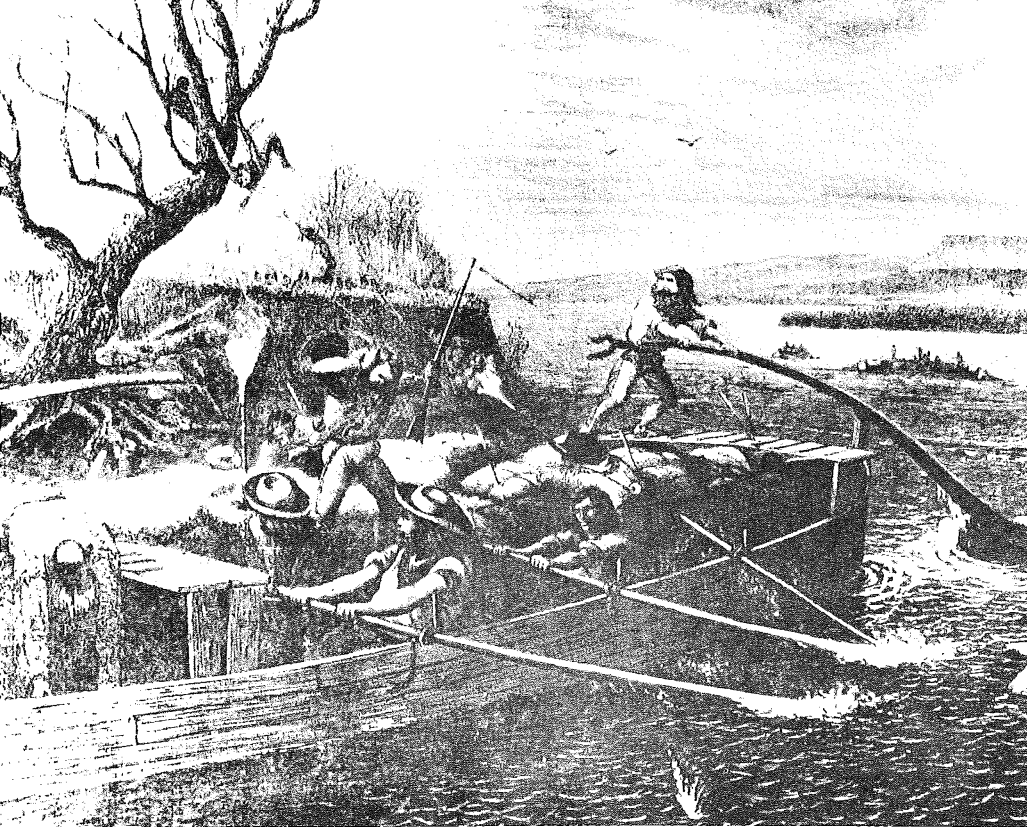
The traders & the Indians absorbed much of each other's culture. The traders imitated the Indians' style of dress while the red men obtained many articles of use from the Whites.

Drawings by W. Sammons, courtesy National Park Service



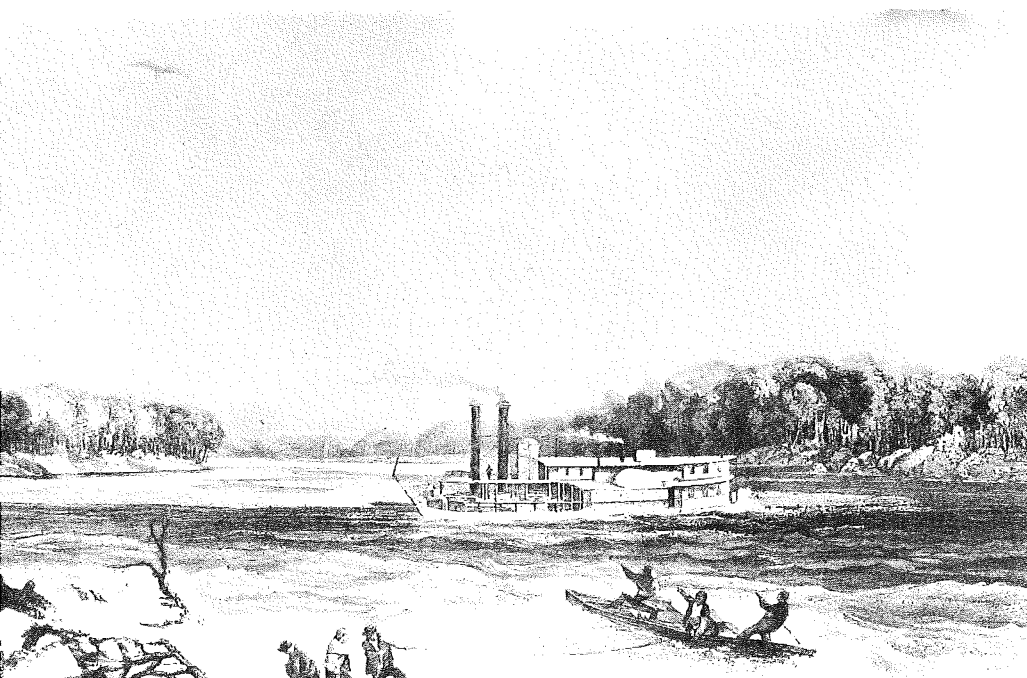
### THE FUR TRADER TAKES A WIFE

The Indians welcomed the traders on whom they depended for certain supplies. As there were no white women in the west in the early fur trading days, the traders often bargained for an Indian belle. The bride considered herself superior to other Indian squaws and demanded equipment which often taxed her husband's purse.



Indians attacking Fur Traders, **Harpers Weekly** May 23, 1868

Below—Steamboat "Yellowstone"



jurious and demoralizing to the Indians than any other circumstances that have come to our knowledge, not even excepting the sale of ardent spirits among them."<sup>42</sup> Its methods in crushing the opposition were not unlike those of many of the large companies, such as the Standard Oil Company and others, which established monopolies and fortunes in the 19th century.

*Coute que coute* and *ecrasez toute opposition* (cost what it may and crush all opposition) seems to have been the standing order in the instructions of American Fur Company to its traders. The first step was to crush the opposition by competition. Kenneth McKenzie, bourgeois at Fort Union, explained "it is not a good policy to buy out opposition, rather work them out by extra industry and assuidity" and if "the opponents must get some robes, let it be on such terms as to leave them with no profits."<sup>43</sup>

If competition failed, the company then tried force. If the latter did not succeed, it would then endeavor to buy out the opposition. Many are the stories of its methods of liquidating small traders.

The strongest opposition the company ever encountered was in the firm of Sublette and Campbell, a St. Louis firm with considerable experience in the trade and with strong financial backing. The company's correspondence is full of letters on how to crush this firm which had a number of establishments on the Upper Missouri. Below is an excerpt from a letter, typical of others, instructing E. S. Denig, who later became a leading official, on how to deal with one "Menard" employed by the opposition:

. . . Now if you trade a Robe for 25 cents, as you say, why not give six times that rather than he [the opponent] should get the Robes. You must not allow him to undersell you unless he sells much below *prime* cost, and that I know he will not do. Let Robes be your password, and let the guard be wide awake, and have the Robes (*Coute qui Coute*) cost what they will, goods you can have as many as you choose, only get the trade. . . . You have every advantage

---

<sup>42</sup> Denig, "Indian Tribes," 458.

<sup>43</sup> Kenneth McKenzie to James Kipp, Dec. 27, 1833, Pierre Chouteau Collection, MoHS.

over Menard, and one in particular, that is his goods are nothing like [as] assorted, you ought to inform yourself well what he has got, and what he has not got—such things as he has not got keep our old prices, which will enable you to undersell him in those articles [he] has got. . . .<sup>44</sup>

As a result of the efforts of the company's agents, Sublette and Campbell were undersold wherever they attempted to maintain trading posts. At the mouth of the Yellowstone, the Assiniboin, who had at first rushed to Sublette and Campbell's post of Fort William, returned to their old allegiance at Fort Union.<sup>45</sup> The opposition there offered to sell but McKenzie refused, writing to Joshua Pilcher that he preferred that Sublette and Campbell should "try their power and finding their chance of success hopeless be compelled to withdraw."<sup>46</sup> However, the powerful opposition, in spite of its failure to compete, frightened the American Fur Company which was pleased to buy them out in April, 1834.

Smaller outfits than Sublette and Campbell were not so fortunate. Some, such as Narcisse Le Clerc, were liquidated in short order. The company's agents worked tirelessly to crush the opposition. Francis Chardon at Fort Clark wrote in 1835 that "in 53 days and nights" he never had "one hour of sleep at any one time." He boasted:

. . . I made 350 packs of Robes. My opponant only 18 notwithstanding his goods and Liquor were equal to mine. I can boast of making a good trade with some little profits although my orders were to make every necessary sacrafice to prevent my onpant from making robes."<sup>47</sup>

Within the three decades from 1830-1860, the American Fur Company succeeded in crushing practically every

---

<sup>44</sup> Wm. Laidlaw to E. S. Denig, Dec. 3, 1834; See also Laidlaw to Pierre Chouteau Jr., Aug. 29, 1833, Jan. 10, 1834; Laidlaw to Colin Campbell, Oct. 30, 1833, Dec. 22, 1834; Laidlaw to Pierre D. Papin, Jan. 14, 1834; Laidlaw to L. Crawford, Jan. 14, 1834; Laidlaw to Charles Degrey, Jan. 14, 1834; Laidlaw to James Kipp, Feb. 24, 1834, Fort Pierre Letter Book; Kenneth McKenzie to James Kipp, Dec. 27, 1833, Fort Union Letter Book, Pierre Chouteau Collection, MoHS.

<sup>45</sup> McKenzie to Kipp, Dec. 27, 1833, Pierre Chouteau Jr. Collections.

<sup>46</sup> McKenzie to Joshua Pilcher, Dec. 16, 1833.

<sup>47</sup> Francis Chardon to Pierre Chouteau, Jr., May 18, 1835; See also Ben Williamson to Wm. Laidlaw, Nov. 23, 1835, Pierre Chouteau Collection MoHS.

opposition outfit on the Upper Missouri. As suggested by Pierre Chouteau Jr. in 1840, when Cabanne and Pratte were beginning to oppose them, "it behoves us . . . to be on the alert and should such an opposition start up we should nip it in the bud."<sup>48</sup>

It was only under the stress of competition that the Indians were able to buy at favorable prices. Maximilian observed in 1833 that as the result of the opposition of Sublette and Campbell the Indians at Fort Clark received \$12 for a good beaver skin which would bring no more than \$4 in the States.<sup>49</sup> Kurz also wrote that under competition Indians received European goods at more reasonable prices. They were therefore interested in keeping it alive.<sup>50</sup>

Much of the routine work of the early trade was conducted by the *engagees* or *voyageurs*. They represented many different nationalities, half breeds, mulattoes, and negroes and came for the most part from St. Louis. The Canadians were in majority. The engagees were called "*mangeurs de lard*" or "pork eaters" because most of them were imported from Canada and in the course of their trip from that country lived largely on a diet of pork, hard bread and pea soup. Prior to the use of the steamboat, many of these "pork eaters" used to man the keelboats on their trips up the river. Kurz wrote in 1851 that a craftsman or workman received \$250 a year, a workman's assistant \$120 or less and a hunter \$400, together with the hides, and the interpreter who, unless otherwise occupied, seldom received more than \$500.<sup>51</sup>

Above the engagees were the clerks and the bourgeois. The work of the clerks appears to have varied but seems to have been principally the supervision of the normal operations of the post. Charles Larpenteur's first assignments

---

<sup>48</sup> Pierre Chouteau Jr. to Wm. Laidlaw, Jan. 10, 1840; See also H. Picotte to P. Chouteau Jr.; Jan. 4, 1844; E. T. Denig to Alexander Culbertson, Dec. 1, 1849, Pierre Chouteau Jr. Collection, MoHS.

<sup>49</sup> *Maximilian's Travels*, II, 229.

<sup>50</sup> *Kurz's Journal*, 253, 304.

<sup>51</sup> *Kurz's Journal*, 123, 236; Chittenden, *History of the American Fur Trade*, I, 59; *Maximilian's Travels*, I, 174.



as clerk at Fort Union in 1834 were opening the gates of the post early in the morning and closing them at night, seeing that the horses and tools were in order and kept in their proper places, and helping with the stores. Later, he supervised the rebuilding and new construction of the fort, the gardening and the supplying of wood for the post. Kurz, the clerk at the same post in 1851-1852, was irritated with his duties. Because of the sore thumb of the bourgeois, he was required to serve as his secretary. Kurz complained:

... He [Denig] is vexed if I cannot account for every rope, every nail, tool, implement, stock, ring, saddle, nay, even every mouse in the fort. I am to keep a sharp lookout in all directions, so as to know what is in stock, what is wanting, what is out of place; I am to know from actual observation everything, even to the smallest objects, that is stored in the attic under the roof, in boxes and chests, in barrels and casks, in the cellar, in places to which I am not admitted, in outhouses, even among dunghoops in a stall; for shovels and hose or something else may be left lying there neglected or forgotten. . . .<sup>52</sup>

The clerk's salary seems to have varied according to his length of service and the responsibility of the position. In 1834 the American Fur Company engaged inexperienced clerks for a three year period for \$500 and a complete suit of clothes of fine broadcloth. Larpeur, who had some experience, was employed in 1834, for the first year, for \$250 and a suit of clothes. For his second year he received \$350. Kurz wrote in 1851-1852 that the clerks and traders who had a knowledge of the Indians at the particular post at which they were stationed, commanded a salary from \$800 to \$1000 a year.<sup>53</sup>

The wages given the employees were comparable to those paid in the States. Most of them bought on credit from the company at exorbitant prices and seldom laid anything away. Many married. The bourgeois endeavored to bind the more capable ones for another year, by advancing them sums and goods on credit. However, since the com-

---

<sup>52</sup> Kurz's *Journal*, 258; See also Elliott Coues, ed., *Forty Years a Fur Trader on the Upper Missouri: The Personal Narrative of Charles Larpeur*, 1833-1872 (New York, 1898), two volumes, I, 72-74.

<sup>53</sup> Coues, *Forty Years a Fur Trader*, I, 67, 76; Kurz's *Journal*, 236.

pany furnished both board and lodging, an employee could, under certain conditions, as Kurz pointed out, save almost his entire income. He "must have on hand a supply of clothing, must be content with the fare of the fort, indulge in no dainties or feasting, and never allow himself to come within 10 feet of the Indian women."<sup>54</sup>

There was a caste system at the larger posts such as Fort Union and social amenities were observed. Clerks and the bourgeois were served at the first table which was furnished with such luxuries as flour, bread, bacon, cheese, butter and milk. The bourgeois sat at the head of the table, on which was spread a white tablecloth and was attended by waiters. The employees were seated in accordance to rank.<sup>55</sup> Kurz wrote in 1851, "We have meat, well selected, bread, frequently soup and pie on Sundays."<sup>56</sup> The mechanics, hunters, and workmen ate at a second table with meat, biscuit, black coffee and sugar.

Many of the agents, clerks and other personnel of the trading posts, married Indian women. These "Indian marriages," as they were called, were normally of a temporary character and when the white trader moved to another station or returned to the States, often to his white wife and children, he abandoned his Indian wife and his half-breed offspring. Men in charge of the fur trading posts endeavored to marry into prominent and influential Indian families because by such connections their adherents were increased and they made greater profits. The Indian relatives remained loyal and traded nowhere else. According to tradition, when Manuel Lisa in 1819 brought his white wife from St. Louis to live with him at Fort Lisa, he sent a messenger ahead with instructions that his Indian wife, the daughter of an Omaha chief, should be sent to the village of her people. James Kipp, bourgeois at Fort Clark, had a Mandan wife at that post and a white wife and children at Liberty, Missouri. Denig, at Fort Union, had two Indian

---

<sup>54</sup> Kurz's *Journal*, 236.

<sup>55</sup> Young, *Wyeth's Journals*, 213; *Audubon's Journals*, II, 182-183; *Forty Years a Fur Trader*, I, 70-71.

<sup>56</sup> Kurz's *Journal*, 236.

wives, a young one and an old one. For a clerk, however, a woman of rank was too expensive and brought him no advantage since he worked at a fixed salary.<sup>57</sup>

Not all of the traders, however, abandoned their Indian wives when they returned to civilization. When Denig retired from the fur trade in 1856, he took his Assiniboin wife and his mixed-blood family with him to the Red River Settlement in Canada and placed his children in school. The children married and spent their lives in Canada.<sup>58</sup> In 1858 Alexander Culbertson, who had amassed a fortune of some \$300,000 as an American Fur Company trader, brought his wife, Natawista, the daughter of a Blackfoot chief, and their family to Peoria, Illinois. There they built a nine-room mansion and had a stable with fine carriage horses which were staffed with servants and stablemen. He married his Indian wife according to white men's rites and sent his children to white schools. As a result of bad speculation and reckless spending, the Culbertson fortune was soon dissipated and the family was forced to return to the Indian country. Many of their descendants are now living on the Fort Peck Reservation in Montana.<sup>59</sup>

Kurz observed that marriages between the white men and Indian women depended in a large measure on the girl's parents. If the girl came from a good family, she was loyal to her husband. Since the engagees normally married riffraff, their children inherited and acquired the bad characteristics of their parents. The half-breed children of the clerks and traders, however, were "a credit to the white race."<sup>60</sup> At the various Indian agencies on the Upper Missouri, many of the more prominent mixed-blood families still bear the name of their white fur trader ancestors.

<sup>57</sup> Kurz's *Journal*, 78, 126-127; Douglas, *op. cit.*, 392-395; *Montana Magazine of History* (Jan., 1952), 5-15; George Catlin, *Illustrations of the Manners, Customs and Condition of the North American Indians* (London, 1857), two volumes, I, 120.

<sup>58</sup> John C. Ewers, "Literate Fur Trader Edwin Thompson Denig," *Montana Magazine of History* (Spring 1954), 1-12.

<sup>59</sup> Mildred Walker Schemm, "The Major's Lady, Natawista," *Montana Magazine of History* (Jan., 1952), 5-15.

<sup>60</sup> Kurz's *Journal*, 240.

Francis Chardon, bourgeois at Fort Clark in the 1830's, had several Indian wives of whom he wrote in his journal. Although Pierre Chouteau Jr. regarded Chardon's "conduct too notorious to inspire confidence,"<sup>61</sup> the latter's journal indicates that life with Indian women was not always one of bliss. His Sioux wife gave him a beating for being unfaithful to her.<sup>62</sup> When she died several months later (April 1837) he briefly recorded, "My childrens Mother died this day at 11 OClock—Sent her down in a canoe, to be entered [*sic*] at Fort Pierre, in the Land of her Parents."<sup>63</sup> He apparently took a Ree wife a month later from whom he separated in the following May.<sup>64</sup> About six weeks later Chardon wrote in his diary, "having lived for two Months a single life, and could not stand it any longer, I concluded to day, to buy myself a Wife, a young Virgin of 15—which cost \$150."<sup>65</sup> However, this young Ree wife deserted him in less than two months.<sup>66</sup> He proceeded to discipline his next wife, whom he stole from Jacob Halsey on a trip to Fort Pierre in the summer of 1838, in true Indian style. "Gave a good whipping to my young Wife, the first since our union,"<sup>67</sup> he wrote. This last young Indian girl apparently was not too attentive to her duties as a housewife as he wrote several months later, "Gave a whipping to my beloved wife, for not mending my Moccassins."<sup>68</sup>

The white hunters employed at Fort Clark had equally bad luck with their Indian wives. Chardon wrote that N. Durant could not leave his "*squaw*—for fear of someone running away with her."<sup>69</sup> When Durant was accidentally killed by a war party a short time afterwards, Chardon caustically remarked "his [Durant's] wife left the Fort this Morning, to take up her quarters in the Village. She ap-

<sup>61</sup> Pierre Chouteau Jr. to Pierre D. Papin, July 20, 1836, Chouteau Collection, MoHS.

<sup>62</sup> Annie Heloise Abel, ed., *Chardon's Journal at Fort Clark, 1834-1839* (Pierre, 1932), 78.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 182-183.

<sup>69</sup> Abel, *op. cit.*, 78.

pears to not care much about it. What affectionate Wives We all have in this Country!"<sup>70</sup> John Newman, another hunter, also had trouble with his Indian wives. "Newman and his wife, after six days quarreling and Pouting with each other had a seperation," Chardon wrote, "he started down to the Ree Camp in quest of an other. O may success attend him, in the Wife line, it is his third since his fall hunt—."<sup>71</sup>

The cynical Kurz, whose Indian consort left him, observed that to keep the respect of an Indian wife, the husband must administer "sound lashings . . . from time to time to keep alive her respect and affection."<sup>72</sup>

Other whites found it disadvantageous and very expensive to be married to an Indian woman because they were required to keep the larder of the in-laws well supplied with coffee, meal, sugar, and molasses.<sup>73</sup>

The life of the fur trader was attended with numerous dangers. Some lost their lives in boat wrecks transporting furs and merchandise on the Missouri. While the Indians were normally friendly toward the fur traders, they sometimes attacked and pillaged small parties. In 1830 three white traders were murdered and robbed of their merchandise by the Arikara who had smoked with them and had given every indication they were friendly.<sup>74</sup> A short time later, the Arikara pillaged and robbed Kenneth McKenzie's party while they were transporting goods.<sup>75</sup> Such incidents were not rare.<sup>76</sup>

The trader was frequently in danger at the posts themselves. The Indians, being a primitive people, were very suspicious. They blamed the white man for such plagues

---

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>72</sup> *Kurz's Journal*, 155.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 303-304.

<sup>74</sup> J. F. A. Sanford to Wm. Clark, Oct. 20, 1830, Wm. Clark Papers, KSHS; See also Charles E. DeLand, ed., "Fort Tecumseh and Fort Pierre Journal and Letter Books," *South Dakota Historical Collections*, IX (1918), 133.

<sup>75</sup> DeLand, *op. cit.*, IX, 143.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 107, 137, 144, 160, 165; See also Abel, *op. cit.*, 56-57.

as the small pox and cholera which carried away many on the Upper Missouri. During these epidemics, the traders' lives were often in danger. The Indians' code was "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Every injury real or imaginary called for revenge. They were always unpredictable. Larpenteur relates that in the 1830's a drunken Indian, the son of a chief, rushed into his lodge and tried to kill him because he believed Larpenteur had cheated him.<sup>77</sup>

On another occasion, despite the company's opposition, one of the Arikara chiefs at Fort Clark had gone down to Council Bluffs on the company's boat and was killed by the Pawnee. The Arikara blamed the company for his death and decided to make them pay for it. When the company boat arrived at the Ree village at Fort Clark, the following year, the Indians invited Alexander Culbertson to feast with them. Unarmed, he and a young man of the fort went to a hut where the feast was to be held. There he found the Indians all armed to the teeth. He learned that great dissatisfaction existed among them. They charged Culbertson with murdering the chief and demanded pay for his blood. After a stormy session, Culbertson settled the matter by promising to pay them two horses. They allowed him to depart in safety and he later sent them the horses. Similar incidents happened to other traders.<sup>78</sup>

The habitations of the traders, except perhaps those of the bourgeois in the larger posts, were generally primitive. Kurz described his quarters at Fort Clark as "A dark room, lighted only by a tiny window, the panes of which seem never to have been washed." It was equipped with "A large fireplace and two wooden bedsteads, which I found upon closer inspection to be inhabited by bedbugs."<sup>79</sup> At Fort Union he had better quarters. Boller, the storekeeper at Fort Atkinson, lived in a room which he shared with another white man, his Indian wife and the couple's three

---

<sup>77</sup> Coues, *Forty Years a Fur Trader*, 128-129; See also Abel, *op. cit.*, 123, 124, 126, 127, 128-129, 131.

<sup>78</sup> McDermott, *Journal of an Expedition to the Mauvais Terres and the Upper Missouri in 1850*, 96.

<sup>79</sup> Kurz's *Journal*, 73.

children. Boller had a table and kept the store records in the room.<sup>80</sup>

Life at the trading posts was frequently dull and monotonous. Jacob Halsey, at Fort Tecumseh in 1830 wrote: "this is the most disagreeable hole I ever was in my life. The mosquitos are not only very thick, but the fleas are still in greater abundance. My health continues bad I have a fever at night and a violent headache throughout the day."<sup>81</sup> Kurz, at Fort Berthold in 1851, complained "Neither by day nor by night do we get any relief from mosquito choruses and mosquito bites."<sup>82</sup> Chardon, at Fort Clark, recorded in his diary: "One Single word *lonesome*—would suffice to express our feelings any day throughout the Year—We might add—discontented."<sup>83</sup> Some of the traders such as Halsey and James Kipp turned to liquor to relieve the monotony of their existence.

The larger posts were not without their social life. Balls were occasionally held at Fort Benton and Union. The diarist at the former post recorded in September 1854: "Mr. Culbertson gave men a feast in the evening a ball at which two only of the number made a sorry display of their reasons."<sup>84</sup> When the renowned naturalist John Audubon was at Fort Union in 1843, he described a dance he attended: "Several squaws, attired in their best were present," he wrote, "with all the guests, engagees, clerks, etc. Cotillions and reels were danced with much energy and apparent enjoyment." Alexander Culbertson played the fiddle, Guepe the clarinet, and Pierre Chouteau the drum.<sup>85</sup> Kurz, who witnessed a ball at Fort Union was surprised that the Indian men and women attending were dressed according to European mode. "The cotillion," he wrote,

---

<sup>80</sup> Boller to his father, August 10, 1858.

<sup>81</sup> DeLand, *op. cit.*, IX, 131.

<sup>82</sup> Kurz's *Journal*, 103.

<sup>83</sup> Abel, *op. cit.*, 55; See also p. 58, 60, & 65.

<sup>84</sup> McDonnell, Fort Benton Journal, *Montana Historical Society Contributions*, X, 1.

<sup>85</sup> Audubon's *Journals*, II, 33; See also John F. McDermott, ed., *Up the Missouri with Audubon: The Journal of Edward Harris* (Norman 1951), 101.

"which the squaws went through with much grace and far more correctness than I should have expected, seemed to be the favorite dance." Also in attendance at this dance were the personnel from the opposition post of Fort William.<sup>86</sup>

Holidays were frequently the occasion for special celebrations. Chardon observed Christmas at Fort Clark in 1835 by a dinner prepared by "Old Charboneau [*sic*]." It consisted of "Meat pies, bread, fricassied pheasants Boiled tongues, roast beef — and Coffee." In attendance were "Indns Half Breeds, Canadians, Squaws, and children."<sup>87</sup> After partaking of a midnight dinner of "stewed oysters, stewed peaches, stewed rabbit, bang, molasses and coffee," the personnel at Fort Atkinson on New Years Eve of 1859, went over to the opposition post of Fort Berthold to fire salutes.<sup>88</sup> The Fourth of July was sometimes observed. The diarist at Fort Benton recorded in 1855, "Independence Aniversary fired three Shots ea. at Morning noon & Night."<sup>89</sup>

The fur trading posts were frequently the scenes of carousels, drunken brawls, and violence in which the red men as well as the trading fraternity took part.<sup>90</sup> Practically all of the river boats smuggled liquor into the country, so for a day or so following the arrival of a steamboat, a grand spree would take place among the drinking employees of the fort. "Great drunken frolic took place last night liquor being obtained from the Steamer agnes which arrived from [Fort] Benton," wrote Larpenteur in 1867.<sup>91</sup> However, drinking bouts were not confined to the male members of the fort personnel. Larpenteur recorded:

Sept. 15 [1865] . . . Great Row among the Squaws at night having Smuggled down a five gallon Keg of whiskey

---

<sup>86</sup> *Kurz's Journal*, 125.

<sup>87</sup> Abel, *op. cit.*, 18.

<sup>88</sup> Boller to his parents, Jan. 17, 1859.

<sup>89</sup> McDonnell, "Fort Benton Journal," 37.

<sup>90</sup> Coues, *Forty Years a Fur Trader*, 58-59, 74, 128-129, 158-159, 208-210.

<sup>91</sup> Larpenteur's Original Journal, II, July 12, 1867; See also Aug. 4, 1867.



upon which they immediately Commenced. A search was made but nothing was found, they got so drunk that they Commenced breakin[g] the windows. We turned them all out and on making another search we found the five gallon and one bottle which was put into the cellar. Very little while after having been turned out they became sober and turned in again, thus ending the row. . . .<sup>92</sup>

In times of plagues and sickness, the Indians sought the assistance of the white traders. During the smallpox epidemic at Fort Union in 1837, the post took immediate steps to prevent the spread of the disease. Since there was no vaccine at the post, the traders in accordance with instructions in a medical book, innoculated 30 Indian women and several men with the smallpox itself. Their efforts proved fruitless as practically all of the Indian women died. At one time there were 51 cases of that malady at the fort. Abandoned Fort William was used for a hospital for Indians, the old women being the attendants. During the cholera epidemic at Fort Berthold in 1851, Kipp, the bourgeois, vainly served out small doses of whiskey to prevent the disease. Kurz described a scene at the post during the epidemic:

Our surroundings have the appearance of a hospital—eight decrepit old women squat beside one another in the sunshine along by the palisades, pick off the lice from their bodies, and eat with relish the flesh of wild animals. The young sister-in-law of Quatre Ours lies naked in the corner of the bastion, while her husband continually goes to and fro, bringing her fresh water from the river; a blind girl, convulsed with cramps, pounds her abdomen with her fists in an effort to get rid of the dreadful pain. . . .<sup>93</sup>

Although the fur traders exploited the Indian and depraved him with their liquor, they regarded themselves on the whole as benefitting the red man. In answer to charges that he cheated the Indians, Manuel Lisa in 1817, voiced these sentiments:

. . . ten months in the year I am buried in the depths of the forest, and at a vast distance from my own house. I appear as a benefactor, not as a pillager: of the Indian. I carried among them the seed of the large pumpkins; . . .

---

<sup>92</sup> Larpenteur's Original Journal, II, Record for Sept. 15, 1865.

<sup>93</sup> Kurz's Journal, 104; Coues, *Forty Years a Fur Trader*, 131-135; J. A. Hamilton to Pierre Chouteau, Jr., Feb. 25, 1838, Pierre Chouteau Jr. Collection, MoHS.

also the large bean, the potato, the turnip; and these vegetables will make a comfortable part of their subsistence; and this year I have promised to carry the plow. Besides, my blacksmiths work incessantly for them, charging nothing. I lend them traps, only demanding a preference in their trade. My establishments are the refuge of the weak, and of the old men no longer able to follow their lodges; and by these means I have acquired the confidence and friendship of the natives and the consequent choice of their trades.<sup>94</sup>

Others of the trading fraternity expressed similar views. Denig pointed out the numerous acts of charity of the traders who were continually called upon to treat afflicted Indians with white man's medicines and skill. The forts served as hospitals for the sick and a place of refuge for the old, the lame, the feeble, and the crippled. A few of the trading posts were financial liabilities. Voicing similar sentiments, Kurz contended that the material well-being of the Indian was improved by his contact with the whites.<sup>95</sup>

With the approach of white civilization on the Missouri in the middle of the 19th century, the once flourishing fur trade declined. Fort Pierre was sold to the Government in 1855. Although several other fur trading establishments sprang up in the vicinity, these had a short life.

Both the Civil War and the Sioux Uprising in Minnesota in the early 1860's, had an adverse effect on the Indian trade. The several military campaigns conducted by the army following the Sioux Uprising, had a disturbing influence on the trade relations of the two races. Suspected of pro-southern sympathies and their Indian trade sharply declining, the Chouteau's, in 1865, sold the Upper Missouri Outfit to the Northwestern Fur Company.<sup>96</sup>

During the late 1860's and the 1870's, much of the Indian trade was conducted by the sutler at the army posts or the authorized traders at the Indian agencies rather than at the old trading posts. Fort Union was abandoned in 1867. In 1869 the Northwest Fur Company sold out its

<sup>94</sup> Manuel Lisa to Governor William Clark, July 1, 1817, Walter B. Douglas, "Manuel Lisa," *Missouri Historical Society Collections*, Vol. III, 380-383.

<sup>95</sup> Denig, "Indian Tribes," 460; *Kurz's Journal*, 176.

<sup>96</sup> Lucile M. Kane, "New Light on the Northwestern Fur Company," *Minnesota History* (Winter, 1955), 325-329.

business above Fort Buford and in the following year liquidated its business south of that post. For a few years the firm Durfee and Peck and several smaller outfits, continued to be active in the Indian business on the Upper Missouri.

During the 1870's and early 1880's, white hunters relentlessly pursued the remaining buffalo herds on the Northern Plains. The slaughter of these animals, upon which the Indian depended for food, made the red man subject to the white man's regulations. By 1884 the buffalo had been almost entirely destroyed. With the virtual annihilation of the bison herds, the fur trade ceased to be an important industry on the Upper Missouri.

The fur trading fraternity's contributions to the development of the Upper Missouri region, have been both positive and negative. Stories of the rich fur-bearing resources of the region no doubt resulted in encouraging many adventurous individuals to come into the region and explore every stream and ravine. In this way they made it easier for the permanent settlers.

The fur trader did very little toward furthering the civilization of the red man. Instead, he greatly exploited the Indian largely in the interests of a few absentee owners in St. Louis and New York. Although some instances may be cited where he materially helped the red man, these are far outweighed by those in which he plied the Indians with liquor, cheated him, and prostituted his women. He also introduced white man's diseases among the various tribes which killed thousands. As a result, the Indians became suspicious of all whites, a feeling which a century of consistent effort by the Government has been unable to eradicate.

The fur trader contributed little toward the permanent development of the region. He discouraged farming and permanent development since these would interfere with his business. Unlike his counterparts in Canada, as represented by the Hudson's Bay Company, the American trader destroyed the wild life very quickly and left the country in search of more fertile fields.