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Article Summary: In the fall of 1831, the newly appointed Secretary of War, Lewis Cass, requested John Dougherty provide him with general information about the fur trade. The body of this article is his reply and is one of the few contemporary descriptions of the trade west of the Missouri River.

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Photographs / Images: John Dougherty; Keelboat scene painted by Swiss artist Karl Bodmer in 1833; Omaha Indian earth lodge ; Drawing of a crude press used to compact buffalo hides



John Dougherty (1791-1860) was a fur trader on the Upper Missouri River between 1809 and 1818, interpreter and sub-agent at Fort Atkinson, Nebraska, between 1819 and 1826, and agent for the Omaha, Oto, and Pawnee Indians at Bellevue after 1832. He concluded his career in the West as contractor to Forts Kearny and Laramie between 1848 and 1856. (Courtesy of Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis)

A DESCRIPTION OF THE FUR TRADE IN 1831 BY JOHN DOUGHERTY

Edited by RICHARD E. JENSEN

INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 1831, the newly appointed Secretary of War, Lewis Cass, wrote to John Dougherty requesting general information about the fur trade. As Indian Agent for the Upper Missouri and a former fur trader, Dougherty was especially well suited to provide the secretary with this kind of information. His reply, which forms the body of this article, is one of the few contemporary descriptions of the trade west of the Missouri River. Its value rests on the data it provides on the everyday workings of the permanent posts along the Missouri and the activities of the trapper in the Rocky Mountains. The letter also points out Dougherty's concern about the effect of the trade on the Indians and contains some rather prophetic remarks about their future.

A similar reply by Thomas Forsyth of St. Louis to Cass's request was published by Hiram Chittenden in his great work on the fur trade.¹ His answer was oriented toward a business history of the trade and he did not appear to have Dougherty's first hand knowledge of the outposts and the people on the frontier.

In spite of Dougherty's obeisant opening remarks in his letter he probably knew as much about the trade as any other individual. At the age of seventeen he left his home in Kentucky and came to St. Louis where, like many other adventurous

young men, he found employment with the Missouri Fur Company.² A year later, in 1809, he ascended the Missouri River with a company brigade to hunt and trap in the Rocky Mountains of present-day Wyoming and Montana. From 1811 until he left the Missouri Company in about 1818 his activities as a trader and trapper were centered in the plains of Nebraska and the Dakotas. During these years he learned the fur trade business and also acquired a thorough knowledge of the Upper Missouri country and its people.

By 1819 John Dougherty had launched into a second career, this time as a government employee in the Office of Indian Affairs. He was first hired as an interpreter and soon promoted to sub-agent under Benjamin O'Fallon at Fort Atkinson. When O'Fallon resigned in 1826, Dougherty replaced him as agent for the Upper Missouri, a position he held for more than a decade.

In 1838 when his superior, Superintendent of Indian Affairs William Clark, died in office, Dougherty applied for the position. His ability, experience, and tenure made him a logical choice but politics intervened. Dougherty was a Whig and in 1838 the Democrats were in office. Secondly, Dougherty had made it very clear that he considered the interests and well-being of the Indians at least as important as the interests of the fur traders. While he may have survived the inopportune political affiliation he could not overcome the powerful fur lobby. Joshua Pilcher, a former American Fur Company employee, was selected to replace Clark. Dougherty submitted his resignation in 1839 after twenty years of service and returned to Liberty, Missouri, to take charge of his farm and real estate business.

A microfilm copy of the original letter is in the National Archives Microfilm Publications in the series entitled "Letters Received by the Office of Indian Affairs, Upper Missouri Agency 1824-1835" (microcopy number 234, roll 883). It has been copied as accurately as possible from the microfilm with no attempt to correct the spelling or punctuation except in a few instances indicated in brackets, where it seemed almost mandatory for the convenience of the reader. Two paragraphs have been omitted and summarized in the footnotes since they are digressions on Dougherty's part and do not pertain directly to the fur trade. — R.E.J.

DOUGHERTY'S LETTER

Cant. Leavenworth³ November 19th 1831

Hon. L. Cass⁴
Secretary of War

Sir:

Your communication under date of September 9th accompanied by a number of quaeries on the subject of the Fur trade were duly received an met my immediate attention but from an ardent desire to comply fully, with your wishes, by casting some light on each of the several points which are made the subject of enquiring I defered an attempt to embody my reply till I could confer with Some of the Traders who alone possessed a Knowledge of many matirical facts called for— Finding my efforts to obtain the desired information unasailing, I am now, even of this later period, compelled to lay before you Such facts only, as have come within my own knowledge, and such opinions as have been the result of personal observation.

Thus unaided I am well aware that I shall not be able to give a satisfactory response to every question connected with the several subjects of enquiry; consequently I have deemed it necessary to give only a general reply; limiting my remarks to such part of the several topics as the state of my information will enable me to speak on, with resonable certainty.⁵

The American Fur Company⁶ has a trading post on the Kanzes River a few miles above its confluence with the Missouri and in the immediate vicinity of the towns of the emigrating Deleware and Shawnee Indians.⁷ The same company occupies all the trading posts on the Missouri River.⁸ The first as you descend [ascend] is on the left bank a Short distance below the Black Snake Hills about Seventy-five miles (by water) above the mouth of the Kanza River.⁹ The next in order is at Roy's Grave on the right bank of Missouri about two hundred and Fifty miles (by water) above the last mentioned one. It is also about Six miles below Council Bluffs (by land) and say Thirty above the mouth of the great Platte¹⁰—above this there are three, the first at the mouth of the Little Missouri about Six hundred miles above Council Bluff¹¹ and second at the Mandan Villages four hundred miles further¹² and the Third Eight miles above



Keelboats were a major means of transporting furs in the era preceding the river steamer. This scene was painted by Swiss artist Karl Bodmer in 1833 while in the employ of Alexander Philip Maximilian, Prince of Wied-Neuwied, Prussian explorer in the West.

the mouth of the Yellow Stone.¹³ The six posts mentioned may be called regular trading establishments at which are kept a constant supply of the various articles used in the Indian Trade, such as Powder, Ball, Blankets, Strouds, Calicoes, Axes, Hoes, Tobacco, Beads, Vermillion etc. From these all the temporary trading places draw their supplies of goods, of which the Company has one or more at each Indian Village within the range of their trade. They have one at each of the four Pawnee Villages¹⁴ and also at the Otoe¹⁵ & Omaha,¹⁶ So likewise among the Ponkautis¹⁷ the various tribes of the Sioux¹⁸ etc. At these places the trader keeps his goods in the lodge of some chief during the stay of the Indians in their villages [,] when they leave for their Hunts the trader it is believed frequently accompanies them taking with him a portion of his goods for the purpose of trade during the time they are procuring these Furs Robes and Pelteries.

The number of men employed at and under the control of the several regular establishments perhaps may be estimated at an average of thirty at each. These men are employed in

conducting packs of goods to and from the several temporary trading places and likewise in conducting in the furs, Skins and Pelteries and in securing preparing and transporting them by water to St. Louis. Some are likewise employed as expresses and hunting for the purpose of procuring subsistence for the establishment. Having enumerated most of the principal pursuits it is deemed unnecessary to particularize farther; for to give a minute detail of all the multifarious calls and employments attendant on the whole trading operation is deemed almost impracticable.

These men engage for from one and two hundred dollars per Annum.¹⁹ This sum is most commonly discharged in goods at very high prices, and not infrequently considerable portions of it paid off in Whiskey at the rate of from Eight to Sixteen dollars per gallon²⁰ their principal subsistence at some of the establishments being corn cultivated at the post, and at others Chiefly Buffaloe and other meat procured by Hunting. The goods for these trading establishments are taken up in Boats belonging to the Company—which also furnishes one other principal employment for their men; after landing the goods at the respective posts they are hence (or such quantities of them as are needed) transported on horses and mules to the several temporary trading places.²¹ A considerable portion of the provisions consumed by the agents and Clerks of the Company are procured at St. Louis and shipped with the goods. To some of the tribes a part of the goods are sold on Credit; but when thus sold are rated at much higher prices with a view to cover the loss sustained on the part which may remain unpaid in this way it is believed that the traders real loss even should he not collect more than one half the amount of his credits (which is a very ample allowance) is in the end little or nothing[.] debts of this kind, I believe are generally considered desparate [void] after the expiration of the first year.

Parties destened for these posts leave St. Louis (the place of supply) during the Months of March, April, May & June and reach their places of destinating generally in the months of September, October and November and return with the proceeds of their trade and Hunt during the succeeding Spring months.²² One half it is probable or more, of the provisions consumed by the traders and those in their employ is furnished by the Indians, consisting principally of the Meat of Buffaloe



This Omaha Indian earthlodge is similar to those seen by Dougherty at the Omaha village near present-day Homer, Nebraska.

and other wild animals common in the hunting regions, and in some instances particularly at the post near Council Bluffs the Indians furnish some supplies of corn.

The furs are considerable diminishing on the Missouri, and in fact the whole region of Country from the mouth of Kanza River to the Pavkau [Ponca] Village a distance of say Five hundred miles (by water) and perhaps Three hundred fifty by land has become comparatively destitute of the Fur bearing animals, nor is this all. It is with difficulty that the Indians who inhabit this tract of country can by any exertion whatever procure by hunting sufficient food to subsist on—no Buffaloe remaining and but few Elk and Deer and these rapidly diminishing, the day is close at hand when the Indians who inhabit this tract of Country must cultivate the Soil or perish by hunger.²³ The Otoes and Omahas are among the number and know but little about agriculture. Higher up the Missouri altho the furs may have diminished yet they abound to some degree, increasing in abundance as you assend the River to its head. This upper region also abounds in vast Herds of Buffalo and other wild animals.²⁴

Notwithstanding as has been remarked that the furs are diminishing and particularly for some considerable distance up the Missouri River yet the total trade in that article together

with the trade in Robes and peltries is certainly more profitable now, than at any former period, owing it is probable to the better acquaintance with the Countries and a more thorough knowledge of the trading operation by those engaged in it and also in some degree perhaps to the diminished danger and hazzard from hostile Indians, nor is it altogether certain that the furs in the mountains have diminished, but that they have I conceive, however, may be stated as probable.²⁵

I am not prepared to speak favorably of the inland trade to Mexico in its present condition nor can I believe that it is productive of much profits embarassed as it is by hazzard from hostile Indians and the heavy duties imposed by the Mexican Government but for these impediments it is probable that the trade would be attended with profit. The dread and actual danger from Indians would be greatly lessened by the location of troops at the point spoken of [on the upper Arkansas River]. The other impediments can only be removed by a Commercial Treaty between the two Governments. Expeditions to Santa Fe frequently pass, before they reach the mexican Territory parties of Kanzas, Osages and Pawnees of the River Platte who have not latterly evinced [lately evidenced] much hostility farther than the stealing of such horses and mules at times as are found separated from the parties.²⁶ After crossing the Arkansas into the mexican Territory the Indians met with are generally hostile. These are the Comanches, Arapahoes, Kiowas, Pawnee Picks²⁷ & Iatans²⁸, parties of other tribes sometime roam over that region in quest of Buffalo and Scalps such as the Pawnees of the Platte, Sioux, Crows, Blackfeet etc. The tribes that inhabit the fur regions of the Rocky Mountains and which are most commonly met with by the traders are the Crows, Snakes, Flathead and Blackfeet.²⁹ Frequent conflicts ensue between our traders and some of these Indians and more especially the Blackfeet who are considered the most hostile & formidable. It is not probable however that we loose by the Indians in the mountains more than one or at most two per cent of our men. It may be that those Indians might become more reconciled to our hunters were we to ask for, and obtain their consent to hunt which I apprehend has never been done. It therefore appears that we are actually authorizing traders to enter that country where they both trade and trap for fur without having previously made any arrangements for that purpose with the

Indians who seem to possess the Country.³⁰ Hence the necessity for the government to aid in placing the trade in a more certain foundation. When Parties enter that country they divide out into small parties of from two to Eight or Ten men. These Small Parties repair to water courses where it is expected that Beaver can be found and they traverse those Streams trapping making frequently small temporary places of defence in case of attack, until the time arrives for their return to some place previously agreed on whither they set out with the proceeds of their trapping.³¹ In the mean while some are engaged in herding horses and others in trading with Such of the Indians as will admit of approach and friendly intercourse and likewise trading with a number of halfbreeds who abide in the Country and live by hunting and trapping. Thus they proceed till the heads of the party deem it expedient to return, Sometimes leaving a number of their men in the mountains to trap & trade till they arrive next season. Those parties subsist entirely while in the Mountains on the flesh of the Beaver and other wild animals. This trade is increasing in importance and profit and in the number engaged in it, parties being now more generally successful than formerly.

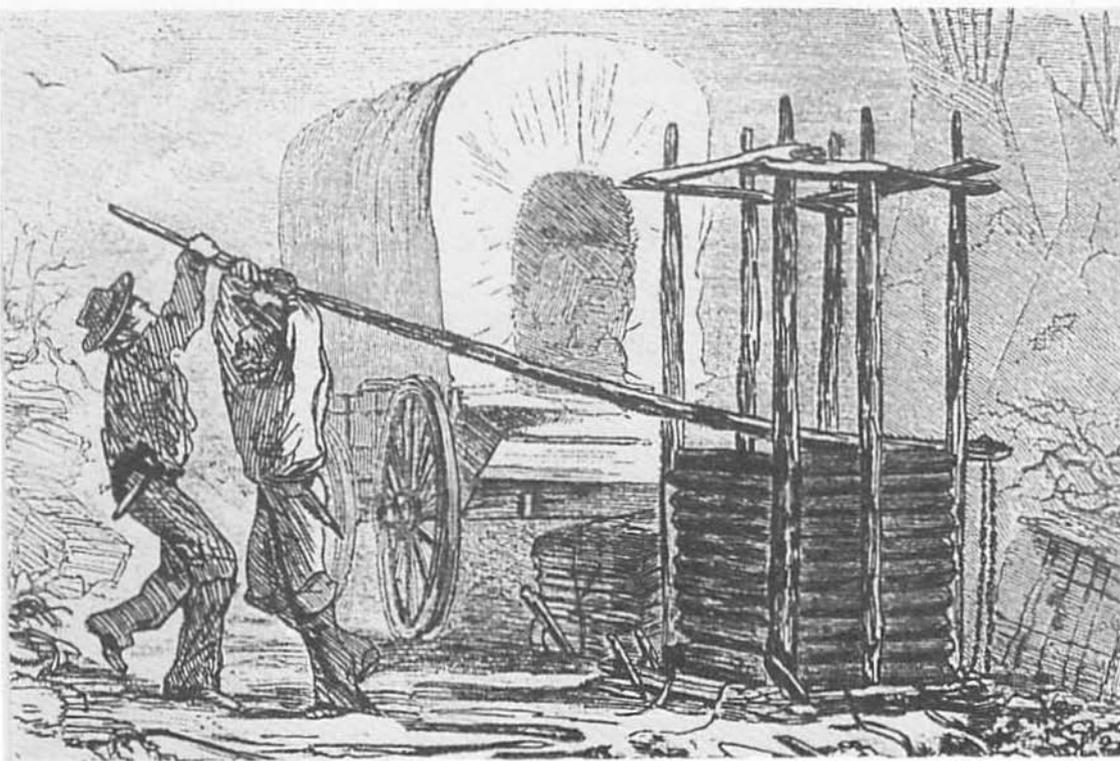
The first party that met with complete success in the Mountain trade was organized and headed [headed] by Gen. W. H. Ashley in 1824. Since which other parties have repeatedly met with success, particularly one which has been some time past and is now headed by Mr. Sublett and others.³² This party and two others one of which is headed by Messrs Fontanille & Drips and the other by Mr. Vandaburgh³³ are the principal parties engaged from this country in that trade, there are many small parties at times engaged in it but none worthy of particular notice except these three.

The country which abounds in furs is of vast extent embracing Columbia River and its branches, the heads of the Missouri Yellow-Stone, Big-Horn, Great Platte, Arkansas, Red River, Rio-del-Norte and Colorado.

Having passed over and noticed the Several topics embraced in your Communication as far as my information would enable me, permit me now to offer you a few remarks relative to the trade with the Indian Tribes in this vicinity, embracing the Omahas, Otoes, Kansas, Delaware, Pawnees [Pawnee], Kickapoos, Ioways and Sackes of the Missouri³⁴ and in fact all other

tribes that the Government desires to instruct in the Cultivation of the Soil. These Indians inhabit a region of country nearly destitute of fur and rapidly becoming destitute of all kind of wild Game. It is the interest and doubtless the habit of the traders (who have great influence over the Indians) to urge them to continue their hunting and when game is scarce in their own country to extend their excursions wheresoever they can meet with success. The effect of this is to thwart the purposes of the Government with the several tribes where efforts are making to advance them in the knowledge and practice of agriculture. [Hunting] Brings them into difficulties with their Red neighbors and finally leaves them without the habit or knowledge of cultivating the Soil and in a country entirely destitute of Game hence the result must be Suffering and ultimately Starvation. I would therefore respectfully suggest the just propriety and sound expediency of prohibiting traders from holding trade or any intercourse whatever with such Indians as are named.³⁵

A crude press used to compact buffalo hides before tying into bundles of ten. Theodore R. Davis, a buffalo hunter on the Stinking Water Creek of southwestern Nebraska, illustrated his article, "The Buffalo Range," with the above drawing in Harper's Magazine in 1869.



And in order that they may be furnished with such suitable and necessary articles as their needs may require I would suggest that public agents or factors be stationed among them and supply them with such articles at Cost and receive in payment their surplus products at their value.³⁶ This produce could be forwarded to and consumed at the Military posts or otherwise disposed of it is believed without loss to the Government. This would have a most powerful influence over the Indian to encourage him in agricultural pursuits and moreover it would destroy every conflicting influence and leave the Government the entire control over him, so that his management would be attended with little or no difficulty.

I would in conclusion recommend most seriously the absolute prohibition, to the taking of Spiritous Liquors into an Indian country by the Traders under any pretence whatever.³⁷

I have the honor to be most
Respectfully your Ob. Svt.
Jo Dougherty
Ind. Agt.

NOTES

1. Hiram M. Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1902), 926-938.

2. Biographical data is from Merrill J. Mattes, "John Dougherty," *The Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West*, Vol. 8, LeRoy Hafen, editor (Glendale, California: A. H. Clark and Co., 1971), 113-141.

3. The cantonment was founded in 1827 and was later named Fort Leavenworth. It was the seat of Dougherty's agency until 1832, when it was moved to a new site near modern-day Bellevue, Nebraska.

4. Lewis Cass was secretary of war under President Andrew Jackson from August of 1831 until 1836. The Office of Indian Affairs was a division of the War Department.

5. This apologetic preface is a typical example of Dougherty's style, especially when writing to his superiors.

6. By 1831 John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company had monopolized the trade along the Missouri through its chain of permanent trading posts and forts.

7. This trading post was located about ten miles up the Kansas River. It was built in 1828 and was operated by Cyprian Chouteau. (Maxmillan, Prince of Wied, "Travels in the Interior of North America," Ruben Gold Thwaites, editor, *Early Western Travels*, Vol. 22 (Cleveland: The Arthur H. Clark Co., 1905), 251.

8. There were a few small independent posts on the lower Missouri at this time. A short time later the successors of Ashley's organization mentioned in the letter would build their own posts along the river in an unsuccessful attempt to break the American Company's monopoly.

9. This post was located in present-day St. Joseph, Missouri. The supervisor was Joseph E. Robidoux whose independent company had been purchased a few years earlier by the American organization Merrill Mattes, "Joseph Robidoux" *Mountain*

Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West, Vol. 8, 300.

10. John P. Cabanne's post was at the northern edge of Omaha, Nebraska. It was an important outfitting station for the brigades of trappers who used the Platte valley route to the Rocky Mountains. During the 1830's hundreds of company men would camp briefly near the post on their way to the rich fur fields in the mountains.

In the spring of 1831, an incident occurred at the post which illustrated the nature of the competition in the fur trade. Cabanne ordered the seizure of a boat load of goods belonging to an independent trader, Narcisse Leclerc. He justified this "citizens arrest" on the grounds that Leclerc was carrying illegal whiskey into Indian country. In the ensuing battle the American Company nearly lost its trading license and Cabanne was "promoted" to a less conspicuous position in the firm (Ray H. Mattison, "John Pierre Cabanne, Sr.," *Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West*, Vol. 2 (1965), 70.

11. Fort Pierre was on the west side of the Missouri just north of the mouth of the Little Missouri (today's Bad River) in central South Dakota. This post and the ones above it were forts with high log walls and corner blockhouses containing small cannons. Inside the enclosure was the trader's house, quarters for the workers, and storehouses. Maximilian (*ibid.*, 317) reported that in 1833 they had \$80,000 worth of goods stores here.

12. Dougherty may be referring to Fort Clark, built in 1831, or its predecessor built in 1822. They were located a short distance below the mouth of the Knife River in central North Dakota. *Ibid.*, 344.

13. Fort Union, built at the mouth of the Yellowstone River in 1828, was the most important post on the Upper Missouri. About a year after Dougherty wrote his letter, Fort Cass was built two hundred miles up the Yellowstone, and Fort McKenzie was erected three hundred miles up the Missouri. *Ibid.*, 376.

14. These villages were on the north side of the Loup River in Nance County, Nebraska, and there may have been one on the south side of the Platte River in northeastern Hamilton County.

15. On the Platte River near Yutan, Saunders County, Nebraska.

16. Either on the Elkhorn River near Stanton or on the Missouri near Homer, Nebraska.

17. He is probably referring to the Ponca in northwestern Knox County, Nebraska.

18. The Sioux were nomadic hunters who traveled through the Dakotas and western Nebraska.

19. This was the usual wage for an inexperienced employee. In 1833 Joshua Pilcher turned down a government job with a salary of \$500 per year for a better paying position with the American Fur Company as supervisor of Cabanne's post. John E. Sunder, *Joshua Pilcher* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), 98.

20. So-called whiskey left St. Louis as alcohol costing about 16 cents a gallon. Before it was retailed it was diluted with an equal amount of water and flavored with a twist of tobacco and a pinch of gun powder.

21. All of the posts tried to become self-sufficient. At the more southerly locations where the climate was more favorable large gardens, fruit trees and fields of corn were successfully cultivated, and hogs and cattle were raised in considerable numbers. Horticulture at the more northerly outposts frequently met with failure. David Wishart, "Agriculture at the Trading Posts on the Upper Missouri," *Agriculture History*, XLVII, (1973).

22. The larger parties usually left St. Louis shortly after the river was clear of ice. In 1831 the fur companies used keel boats which were sailed, paddled, poled, or pulled up the river as the circumstances dictated. One of the fastest ascents was made by Manuel Lisa's party in 1811. It took them only eighty-five days to go from St. Louis to the Mandan villages in central North Dakota a distance of approximately

1,400 miles H.M. Brackenridge, "Journal of a Voyage up the Missouri," Ruben Gold Thwaites, editor, *Early Western Travels*, Vol. 22, pp.

23. Dougherty rarely misses an opportunity to make this point. He realized that far-reaching changes in the Indians' culture and economic base were imminent. Perhaps what he did not understand was the extent of the problem being faced by the Plains tribes. To a very large degree their culture was centered around hunting wild animals, an activity not to be replaced by tending tame animals without a tremendous cultural upheaval.

24. At this point Dougherty launches into a lengthy digression in which he proposes that several military forts be established in the western territories. He feels that garrisons would insure strict adherence to government regulations in Indian territory, protect the traders from attack by Indians, and establish a firm American claim on territory still not entirely uncontested by the British in the north and the Spanish in the south. Needless to say, his recommendations were not followed.

25. He seems to have overestimated the extent of the trapping in the mountains, for the most profitable era in the Rockies was just beginning. There follows a short paragraph in which he directs his reader's attention to a previous report in which he estimated costs and profits in the trade. This report has not been located.

26. The trade with Mexico was in what became the American Southwest and centered around Santa Fe. The trail crossed central Kansas, forded the Arkansas River near the western border of the state, and continued in a southwesterly direction to Santa Fe.

27. Wichita.

28. Possibly Ute.

29. These tribes lived in the mountains and high Plains of northern United States generally above the fortieth parallel.

30. This comment illustrates Dougherty's concern about the Indian.

31. Here Dougherty refers to the annual summer rendezvous usually held in either the Teton Basin or the Green River valley. At this gathering salaries and debts were paid and furs were bought and sold.

32. William Henry Ashley and his partner, Andrew Henry, hired men in St. Louis to go to the Rocky Mountains and trap beaver. They only incidentally bartered with the Indians for furs. Dale L. Morgan, *The West of William Henry Ashley*, 1964.

Milton Sublette's company continued the practice of the Ashley organization. In the 1830's it was the principal opposition of the American Company and tried unsuccessfully to break the monopoly on the Missouri by establishing their own trading posts. Hiram M. Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, Vol. 1 (1954), 305-307.

33. Dougherty seems to be uncertain about the affiliations of these men. Lucien Fontenelle and Andrew Drips had taken American Fur Company parties to the Rocky Mountains but at the same time operated their own trading house near Bellevue, Nebraska. In 1831 Vanderburgh was in the Rockies working for the company. Harvey L. Carter, "William H. Vanderburgh," *The Mountain Man and the Fur Trade of the Far West*, Vol. 7 (1969), 317.

34. These tribes resided in or near the territory assigned to Dougherty. He was agent for the Pawnee, Omaha, Oto, and Missouri tribes.

35. Advocating a policy such as this did not curry favor with the influential fur companies and was one of the reasons Dougherty did not gain the superintendency he sought in 1838.

36. This proposal is a retreat to the so-called factory system tested by the government and abandoned nearly a decade earlier.

37. Federal regulations permitted the companies to take one gill of whiskey per man per day into Indian territory for their own use, but large quantities were illegally imported for use in the trade. Throughout his career Dougherty tried unsuccessfully to bring about a complete prohibition.