

Papers on the North American Fur Trade

ON NOVEMBER 1-3, 1965, the Minnesota Historical Society in co-operation with the Hudson's Bay Company, the James Ford Bell Foundation, Albrecht Furs, and the St. Paul Council of Arts and Sciences sponsored an international conference on the North American fur trade. Participating in it were scholars, writers, and authorities on fur trade history drawn from many parts of the United States and Canada. England was represented by Professor Kenneth G. Davies of the University of Bristol and the Hudson's Bay Record Society.

In all, twenty-eight speakers addressed the conference; the nine essays presented here have been selected from among their papers. The number to be published was limited only by the editorial time and the space available, and the choice was hard to make. A variety of viewpoints was represented at the conference — those of the librarian, the archivist, the naturalist, the archaeologist, the economist, the ethnologist, the historic sites administrator, the geographer, and others, including, of course, the traditional historian. The resulting papers did not fit a neat pattern; each approached the fur trade and its history from a somewhat different angle. The total picture was sometimes illuminating, sometimes confusing, and sometimes contradictory, yet now and then the crosscurrents brought into sharp focus the existence of unexplored fields. New problems of scope and definition were raised; many fresh lines of research were pointed out; and untapped sources of knowledge were suggested. It is hoped that the selection given here will reflect some of this interplay.

Dale L. Morgan's discerning survey of "Some Problems in the History of the Fur

Trade" is placed in an introductory position, although his paper was read on the final day of the conference. The essays that follow deal with the three great fur trading companies of North America, representing three nations and widely varying techniques of operation, as re-examined in the light of recent historical research. Next are two brief picture essays, both based upon slide talks which traced the surviving physical evidences of the fur trade era in Canada and the United States. The final group of articles presents the viewpoints of allied disciplines: ethnohistory, archaeology, and economic history. Each gave rise to an unusual amount of discussion and comment among the conference participants.

Those papers which because of space and time limitations could not be included were: Victor H. Cahalane, "Wildlife, Ecology, and the Fur Trade"; Kenneth Dawson, "Archaeological Investigation at the Site of the Longlac Trading Post"; John C. Ewers, "Some Problems in the Study of the Indian Side of the Fur Trade"; LeRoy R. Hafen, "The Fur Trade Rendezvous of the Central Rockies"; Kenneth E. Kidd, "The Functions of a Fur Trade Research Center"; W. Kaye Lamb, "Bibliographical Control of Fur Trade Sources"; John Francis McDermott, "A Pictorial Archive for the Fur Trade"; Valentine McKay, "Personal Reminiscences of a Fur Trader"; Eric W. Morse, "Fur Trade Main Line — Lachine to Athabasca"; Doyce B. Nunis, Jr., "The Role of the Fur Trade in Shaping Anglo-American Affairs, 1783-1784: Furs, Forts, Indians, and Evacuation," and "Needs and Opportunities for Fur Trade Research"; Grace Lee Nute, "Men of the Fur Trade"; Walter O'Meara, "The Women of the Fur Traders"; John Parker, "The Fur

Trade and the Emerging Geography of North America, 1600-1800"; Francis Paul Prucha, "The United States Army and the Fur Trade"; G. Hubert Smith, "The Buildings of the Fur Trade"; John E. Sunder, "Problems and Opportunities in Fur Trade Research"; Waldemar F. Toensing, "A Librarian Looks at Fur Trade Literature"; Arthur Woodward, "Fur Trade Goods"; and Alan R. Woolworth, "Archaeological Excavations at Grand Portage: An Eighteenth Century Fur Trade Metropolis." Unedited copies of all these essays are available from the Minnesota Historical Society for the cost of duplication.

Persons who attended the conference will recall the postconference discussions on the need for the establishment of a fur trade research center or clearinghouse for information. A short time later, officials of the Hudson's Bay Company indicated an interest in contributing to the support of such a center. Other companies and foundations will be approached as soon as plans are more clearly drawn.

In the meantime, the Minnesota Historical Society decided not only to pursue this objective but to increase its efforts to locate new sources of information. The society is pleased to report that it has employed a field representative to search for unknown collections of fur trade materials in Canada—

with gratifying results. In less than a year, two major collections have been microfilmed: One, an extraordinary group of Alexander Mackenzie papers, was located in Quebec City. The institution owning the papers graciously permitted the society to purchase a microfilm copy and granted publication rights as well. A second exciting acquisition will be announced in the spring of 1967 through a joint American-Canadian release. In each case microfilm copies will be placed in Canadian depositories as well as in the society's collection.

Co-operation between the two countries has been increasing steadily in the area of fur trade history, where they share a common heritage. Undoubtedly the greatest single factor contributing to this co-operation has been the joint Canadian-American underwater archaeology project, begun by the Minnesota Historical Society in 1961 and expanded over the years until it now involves several provinces as well as the state of Minnesota.

Numerous inquiries have been received about plans for another fur trade conference. The University of Manitoba has expressed an interest in serving as host to such a gathering. There is a possibility that a second conference can be held in 1970 to coincide with the three-hundredth anniversary of the Hudson's Bay Company. Ed.

THE ILLUSTRATIONS on the following pages are from a variety of sources. Those featured in the essays on pages 188-191 and 192-197 were supplied by the authors, and the accompanying maps were drafted by Mary D. Nagle. The painting on page 159 is by William de la M. Cary and is owned by the American Museum of Natural History, New York; the sketches on page 161 are from the Newberry Library, Chicago; and the engraving on page 165 is from G. M. Grant, *Ocean to Ocean: Sandford Fleming's Expedition through Canada in 1872* (London, 1873). A copy of the map reproduced on page 173 was furnished by Mr. Davies. The drawing on page 177 is in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* of June, 1879, and the one on page 185 is from Robert M. Ballantyne, *Hudson Bay* (London and New York, 1876). The painting on page 199 is used by courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution. The pen and ink sketches of animals and the beaver hats on page 187 are by Rhoda R. Cilman.



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The FUR TRADE and Its HISTORIANS

DALE L. MORGAN

FEW WOULD EVER have heard of Frederick Jackson Turner, probably, had he stayed with his early preoccupation with the fur trade (or "Indian trade") of the Wisconsin area. Turner enunciated in 1893 a hypothesis about the importance of the frontier in American history, and his elaboration of that hypothesis by degrees made him famous, though the hypothesis has had its ups and downs in scholarly opinion. Some years later, a Texan maverick, Walter Prescott Webb, was acclaimed a powerful and original thinker for outlining a novel way of looking at the Great Plains, still later for writing up a vision of American history as a four-hundred-year boom on which time has run out. Turner's disciples are still trying to nail down his frontier hypothesis with specifics; and Webb's more grandiose conception, it seems likely, we shall be unable to test very effectively until we have waited a few hundred years to gain a useful perspective. The harder it is to pin something down, the more compelling the idea; it would seem that thinking must achieve a certain level of abstraction to command general admiration.

Very few, I suspect, would place Hiram Martin Chittenden in the same class with Turner and Webb, either as innovator or as investigator. Yet anyone disposed to inquire into the historiography of the past sixty years will find that Chittenden's *The American Fur Trade of the Far West* has influ-

enced nearly everything written about the history of the West in the first half of the nineteenth century—that it has, indeed, been more largely influential than the only general work Turner himself ever published (his *Rise of the New West, 1819-1829*, which leaned on Chittenden's history and described it as "excellent"). From the year of its publication, 1902, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West* has not only been referred to constantly by writers of every description, but has also powerfully shaped their ideas. As recently as 1947 Bernard DeVoto observed that Chittenden's study "remains the most valuable single book about the trade and the only general history of it," though as DeVoto further remarked, "a staggering amount of new material has come to light and a great deal of scholarly work has been done." (Since DeVoto made this comment, Paul C. Phillips' *The Fur Trade* has appeared posthumously. It has a wider field of view than Chittenden's and is more continuously factful, but it is a basically less thoughtful work.) The idea may affront the professional historians, but it can be seriously maintained that neither Turner nor Webb has had an impact on the writing of western history comparable to Chittenden's.

The American Fur Trade of the Far West is not a narrative history but a rather episodic commentary on various aspects of the

trade and on enterprises, personalities, and related historical developments. Although he reviewed at considerable length John Jacob Astor's ill-starred attempt to establish the American fur trade on the Columbia between 1811 and 1814, in the process giving H. H. Bancroft a brisk going-over for outrageous treatment of Washington Irving, Chittenden conceived the western fur trade primarily in terms of an economic activity based on St. Louis, which became important after the return of Lewis and Clark and fell into desuetude when the tide of western emigration set in after 1840. "The true period of the trans-Mississippi fur trade," Chittenden argued, not altogether correctly, embraced the thirty-seven years from 1807 to 1843.

The point I more particularly wish to make is that Chittenden settled the ideas of two generations of historians who, directly or indirectly, have had to come to terms with the fur trade. His was a liberating influence originally, for he provided a rationale by which a diffuse and refractory history was made intelligible. Over the course of time, however, Chittenden has evolved into something of a tyrannical force, for he is still conditioning the thinking of students who should be pushing the frontiers of knowledge a good deal farther out. Pioneering is never easy, but it is time those interested in the fur trade should be stepping out on their own.

BEFORE I elaborate some ideas, let me touch upon certain difficulties, illustrated by Chittenden but not unique to the historian of the fur trade. Reading Chittenden is a necessary part of any student's apprenticeship, but one who reads him is going to find himself brainwashed to some extent. An author like Chittenden by his very usefulness has a crystallizing influence on one's thinking, on the actual formulation of concepts, to the point that one's capability for original thinking may be squeezed down and blunted: it is possible to find oneself walled off from reality.

Let me cite an example out of my own experience. In the course of writing my biography of Jedediah Smith some years ago, I arrived at the chapter dealing with the historic rendezvous of 1826, when William H. Ashley, whose energies had powered the advance of the American fur trade from the Missouri River to the Rockies during the three preceding years, sold out to a newly organized firm, Smith, Jackson & Sublette, and went back to the States with an agreement to furnish his successors with goods. I knew, as everyone had known since Chittenden's day, that in 1826 Ashley withdrew from the fur trade to devote his time to other affairs, and that he never laid eyes on the Rockies again. Thanks to the Missouri Historical Society's incomparable fur trade collections, I had copies of all the surviving documents that bore upon the negotiations at rendezvous and the subsequent developments. I wrote a draft of this particular chapter. And when I got through, it was all wrong; my text did not say what the documents imported. I wrote the chapter over, and the second version turned out no better than the first. At length it dawned on me what the trouble was: I "knew" what had happened, and I was writing my text to conform with what I knew — in defiance of the record at hand. I tossed out everything I thought I knew and wrote a third version. And since this rested upon the documents themselves, which told a plain, entirely logical story when allowed to do so, that third version did the job and was eventually published. My frame of reference had not been large enough to accommodate the data I had brought together, and I was slow to adjust.

What makes the incident worth relating is that I have a great deal of company in this mental incapacity. I do not know how many times in contemporary historiography I have run across formal conclusions contradicted straight down the line by the "facts" marshaled in their support. Bernard DeVoto had the same disrupting experience, for in *The Year of Decision: 1846* he said of

Justin Smith's *The War with Mexico*: "The research behind Professor Smith's book is certainly one of the most exhaustive ever made by an American historian, and if it came to an issue of fact I should perforce have to disregard my own findings and accept his. But it is frequently — very frequently — altogether impossible to understand how Smith's conclusions could exist in the presence of facts which he himself presents. If there is a more consistently wrong-headed book in our history, or one which so freely cites facts in support of judgments which those facts controvert, I have not encountered it."

I SEEM to be arriving at the awkward position of denying the utility of written history, asking that the student forget what others tell him, return constantly to the sources, and form his own ideas from those sources. But I have already indicated how difficult it is to approach history *de novo*, without regard to what has been found out, or thought, or believed before. The possibility of being led down the garden path is one of the hazards of getting an education; but if nobody pays any attention to what has been written already, we may be confronted with the spectacle of a hundred different students writing Chittenden all over again rather than pressing out toward the new frontiers I have envisioned.

The pioneering spirit is, of course, as rare in fur trade history as anywhere else, and let us not make the mistake of blaming Chittenden for our own lacks. Why this history has not been written on as high a level as might be wished is worth meditation.

To begin with, many historians are in too much of a hurry for a payoff; they will not take the time to qualify themselves to the point that they know what they are talking about; they do not stop to *think*. Inside the academic community, this scrambling haste (often expressing itself in a mere piling up of "facts") is known as the "publish-or-perish" syndrome, though critical standards would have to advance only very

slightly for the syndrome to be rephrased as "publish-and-perish," the scholar's ritual cooking of his own goose. If publication becomes a public exposé of incompetence, we need only establish some proper accounting system to effect a great improvement, for example, reducing a professor's salary \$1,000 per year for every piece of balderdash he publishes. When there are real risks to academic publication, we may expect the *quality* to improve.

In and out of the academic community, haste in publishing may be dictated by financial considerations; it can cost too much in dollars and cents to acquire the necessary education, an education no one is ever going to come by simply or easily; and the cost is going to keep on rising as more and more material emerges into view. Fur trade history has always been extremely complex, and I see no prospect that it will ever be otherwise.

Money is a factor, but so is simple human laziness. Men there are aplenty who parrot information because it is easier than embarking upon independent inquiry; these are the men who most appreciate stereotypes and abandon them with anguished outcries. A characteristic, if not distinguishing, feature of this class of historians is their unwillingness to stand up and declare themselves before the bar of judgment. They will remark that one authority says this, while another says that; and for them, there is the end of the line: we shall have no digging into the basis of this divergence of judgment, no assessment of the facts.

Also — let us face it — the fur trade field has its full share of characters who not only are unable to write but who give evidence of being unable even to read. Once upon a time, back in my college days, in a dog-eared unabridged dictionary of uncertain antecedents, I stumbled upon a lovely word, "disnoetic," defined as "incapable of knowing what one sees." I employed the term to devil a fellow columnist on the student newspaper, whose specialty was pontificating on the passing scene. I have not had occasion to

use the word since, but after thirty years, the season has come round: surely some will agree with me that the fur trade as a field of scholarly inquiry has its quota of "dis-noetic" practitioners.

ACTUALLY, simple incapacity may be easier to abide than the popularizers who clutter up the literature. These popularizers, as often as not, are frustrated novelists. At worst they are akin to the writers and producers of television scripts who are insufficiently gifted to create fictional worlds and use reality as a crutch, not scrupling to distort reality, with artistic license their justification. (The amorality that seizes upon Wyatt Earp, Billy the Kid, Jesse James, Daniel Boone, Kit Carson, or whomever and does violence to truth may yet come to be recognized for what it is.) At best, fur trade popularizers may rise to the level of a Stanley Vestal, who was willing to work at writing but not at research. A scholar acquainted with him has recently summed up Vestal, not unkindly, by saying, "He was convinced that the day-to-day stuff of which history is composed would bore his readers, whereas unique, startling characters and incidents would sell well." Except as entertainments, and a source of income, the majority of Vestal's fur trade books should never have been written; they added nothing to knowledge, and by merely existing, by preempting the field, may have inhibited scholars and publishers alike from going ahead with books that needed doing.

I am complaining about popularizers, not synthesists. Of the latter we are never going to have enough, and we lost a great one when Bernard DeVoto succumbed to a massive heart attack in 1957. The mark of the synthesist is that he is indeed interested in facts, deals honestly and intelligently with them, clothes them with excitement, and has a gift for isolating the details that bring history to life. We would all be the gainers if more of our historians, so often preoccupied merely with the grinding out of "facts," could find within themselves the resources

to illuminate these facts for our understanding.

As an illustration of what is possible, consider a passage in DeVoto's *The Course of Empire*, a description of the Chippewas at the time the younger Alexander Henry was trading with them in the Red River country about 1800. These Chippewas, DeVoto tells us, "were at their farthest west here, and uneasy outside the forest, which ended a little farther east. As a result, they were in practically continuous terror of the Sioux." So far, the factual observation; the average historian would now have broken off in the conviction that he had done his job. DeVoto, however, went on to elaborate the scene and the situation, with exquisite attention to detail: "Every moment might be a threat of massacre, even a drift of cloud-shadow across the edge of the plain. Let anyone come in sight above the horizon or along the edge of an oak grove, let a horse stumble in the brush or leave a hoofprint in the mud of the riverbank, let a squaw have a painful dream or a bird dart low over a cook fire—it was enough to start the women screaming and digging foxholes and the braves running in circles and firing muskets at the sky." In a very few words DeVoto evoked a place, a time, and a whole culture. If any of our scholars have a comparable capability—imagination, the power to bring it to bear upon communication, a way with words, and mastery of background—let them not hide it away.

WHATEVER we call him—a synthesist or simply a historian working deftly, understandingly, and imaginatively at his trade—there is plenty of scope for a good man prepared to give himself to the charms of fur trade history. How useful, for example, would be a history of the Rocky Mountain trade that would view this segment of the trade in long perspective, as an integral part of the whole North American fur production. We have seen much loose writing about the "incredible richness" of the Rocky Mountain beaver preserves at the time ex-

ploitation began. But did the Rocky Mountain yield ever really compare with that of the Canadian fur lands, or even with that of the Great Lakes region fifty or a hundred years earlier? Maybe the American West was rich only in poor man's terms. It would be interesting to find out!

And how useful would it be to have some sound economic studies of the trade! I can scarcely imagine a more pressing want. James L. Clayton, of the University of Utah, has lately occupied himself in digging out some of the economic facts of fur trade history and has demonstrated that the fur trade did not lie down and die in 1843 as the Chittenden stereotype has led us all to suppose. The Rocky Mountain fur trade, as a way of life that drew sustenance from the annual rendezvous, had indeed ceased to exist, and well before 1843. But the fur trade itself went on. John Sunder, in his *The Fur Trade on the Upper Missouri, 1840-1865*, has well recorded how a part of that trade sustained itself into the sixties; the inland (or outland) trade, with more emphasis upon the buffalo robe and less upon the beaver pelt, flourished in its own fashion throughout the same period. Another change in emphasis came with the virtual extermination of the buffalo by hide hunters who were actively encouraged by the Indian-hating army. The robe trade died out, but the fur trade continued, doubtless more valuable today than ever.

The economic history on which I lay such stress should, of course, be broad enough to embrace the problems of the entrepreneurs and fur merchants achingly neglected while historians have preoccupied themselves with the fur trade mainly as a force in geographic exploration. For a long while now our ideas have been dominated by the viewpoint of the trappers, individual mountain men colorful enough to have become the subjects of biographies, one after another. Such men bawled their fury when they felt themselves ground down by the entrepreneurs; their voices have mainly been heard in the literature, and the uproar that is their legacy has

deafened historians to virtually all other voices. A beaver skin taken in by a trader was not, as many have supposed, the equivalent of so much gold, to be deposited in the U.S. Mint or a mattress in the back room: it had to be sold. Dealers in fur could, and often did, lose their shirts. It is time all this was explored with some understanding that the fur trade did not exist in a world beyond time and circumstance. The prices placed upon goods traded for beaver in the mountains or along the rivers, the size, nature, and justification for markups, even a clear exposition of the type of goods traded, where bought, on what terms, to whom sold (Indians or white trappers), their quality, and the use made of them—all these facts would be instructive and need not be boring. Fights with grizzlies, tall tales, battles with the whisky jug, high jinks at rendezvous, and other familiar ingredients of the storyteller's art are not the only means of enlivening histories of the fur trade. By all means, let us have some well-written economic history with its own commanding excitement!

The fur trade teems with possibilities for investigation. No good history of the trading posts up the Missouri River, not even a dependable checklist to replace Chittenden's shaky essay in that direction, has been attempted yet; probably 50 per cent of what has been published about these forts is flatly wrong, and the errors propagate themselves with the vigor that weeds alone seem to possess. A scholar could have himself a fine time getting at the facts, and a good many of us would rather have the flowers than the weeds. Individual fur trading concerns in the vast basin of the Missouri similarly await thorough investigation. It is incredible that we do not yet have a useful history of the company which bore various names at different times but was always dominated by the Chouteaus of St. Louis. Only this primary lack makes it surprising that the Columbia Fur Company, founded in 1822 and transformed five years later into the American Fur Company's Upper Missouri

Outfit, has been subjected to no critical study, the accepted beliefs about this concern being fable to the extent of perhaps 40 per cent.

Clearly, the Indian tribes need to be re-studied in relation to the fur trade. Some interesting ideas have been advanced lately about noneconomic motivations of Indians in their relation to traders, for example, the status that was so highly prized by the "carrier tribes" who transported furs from the south of Canada to Hudson Bay, willing to starve and die for the ill-paid privilege. It would be fascinating to see such ideas pursued further. And I, for one, would be pleased to see serious studies undertaken of the relationships between particular traders and particular tribes—who the men were, how they established themselves among the tribes, the effect they had upon subsequent tribal history—the whole works. For that matter, we have scarcely a single history of a western Indian tribe that makes adequate use of fur trade sources. The ethnologists have tended to pursue their own mystique, and their inclination has been all against reliance upon documentation preserved in a different culture. This avoidance of the appearance of evil would be ludicrous, except that historians formally concerned with the fur trade have been just as inept. I should like to say, however, that Alvin M. Josephy's lately published *The Nez Perce Indians and the Opening of the Northwest*, a work with a historical rather than an ethnological bias, shows brilliantly what can be done, both with Indians and with fur trade sources. Josephy having established a precedent, maybe we will see studies of other tribes reflecting a comparable mastery of fur trade documentation.

WHAT I HAVE SAID here is dominated to a considerable extent by my own specialization in the history of the trans-Mississippi West. I am not really competent to discuss the state of the art elsewhere, the Minnesota region, for example, or much of Canada. My personal horizons, nevertheless, continue to

widen; the more I find out, the more I need to know; and peripheral interests have a way of becoming central. In a sense it is a comfort to be involved with such a large area of knowledge, one which with due regard for human mortality has no limits, never an end to the possibilities for learning something new. There are discomforts, too. It is easiest to write authoritatively on a subject when you do not know too much about it. The more you learn, the more you are tied down by facts, and the more difficult you find it to express a complex of fact with any degree of grace. But this essentially is a literary problem and though it does away with "authority" forever, I think we need to take a fresh look at practically everything.

We have gone a circuitous course to arrive back at the Messrs. Turner, Webb, and Chittenden. I ventured the opinion at the outset that Chittenden may have made a fundamentally more useful contribution to western history than either Turner or Webb. Chittenden has been useful to this degree because his hypotheses proceeded out of a body of data subject to being checked. We have reached a point where we ought to strike out beyond Chittenden, doing so, however, by a series of controlled hypotheses, constantly subject to the discipline of factual correction. If chroniclers of fur trade history are equal to this challenge, Chittenden is going to be one of the casualties; from here on, his reputation can only decline.

He would not have been dissatisfied by that, I think. As a military man, Chittenden understood something about the bubble reputation pursued in the cannon's mouth. He did not set out to be one of the immortals, to feel himself brushed by angels' wings. He did a work for his day, a work no one had had the wit or the will to do before him; and because he did well what he set out to do, within the limitations of what it was then possible to do, Chittenden will have his own imperishable place in the historiography of America and its West. Any who follow him may rest content if their life work is assessed as comparably valuable.

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The NORTH WEST COMPANY

PEDLARS EXTRAORDINARY

W. L. MORTON

THAT THE North American fur trade was essentially a commercial marriage of primitive ways and needs to the more advanced techniques and demands of European and Chinese markets is one of those truths so evident and general that they could scarcely be proved if there were need. Similarly, the North West Company before 1821 was an extraordinarily successful union of the primitive culture of the forest Indian tribes with the sophisticated civilization of Western Europe. This paper tries to point the way toward a study of the company's effective merger of commerce and culture; it attempts to be a critical essay rather than a piece of research.¹

Let us begin by noting that the North American Indian with whom the fur trade was conducted was an inland forest dweller.

¹ The history of the North West Company has now been reconstructed with sufficient completeness both to establish the character of the company as a business organization and to explain its role in the North American fur trade. This has been done despite the lack of documentary evidence for most of its business affairs. The historical task has been carried so far chiefly by two recent and massive works: Paul Chrisler Phillips, *The Fur Trade* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1961); and E. E. Rich, *The History of the Hudson's Bay Company 1670-1870* (London, 1958, 1959).

Unlike the Eskimo and the European, he neither lived by nor used the sea. Trade between him and the transoceanic European, accordingly, turned upon either the Indian going to the shore or the European going inland.

The earliest barter was of course entirely coastal, even when separated from fishing voyages and pursued as a distinct undertaking. The scattered references we possess to the fur trade of the sixteenth century all allude to trade on the coast, whether casual or at a seaside rendezvous. The first historically known rendezvous was Tadoussac on the Gulf of St. Lawrence; Quebec, Trois Rivières, and Montreal were each in turn meant to be the same, but the trade was carried steadily inland by the happy accident of the great sea entry of the St. Lawrence River. A similar entry was Hudson Bay, and a far more successful example of the coastal trade was that pursued by the Hudson's Bay Company from 1669 to 1774, until the competition of the trade from Canada forced the English company also to begin trading inland.

The obvious commercial advantage to Europeans of the coastal trade was that it placed on the Indians the cost of trans-

porting furs to the seaside and goods inland. More significant to the theme of this paper is that for the Europeans it avoided the necessity of mastering the techniques and manners of Indian travel and life. Coastal trade provided a meeting place for commercial barter with a minimum of cultural exchange, whereas the inland trade could be carried on only by Indian means. The Europeans had to become "Indianized," and cultural exchange was greatly increased. The French traders led in this process, and the North West Company, as the heir of the Frenchmen, became the principal representative of European commerce and culture in the inland fur trade.

BEFORE the rise and character of the company are discussed, it is necessary to examine the part played by one of the two partners in the fur trade — the primitive or Indian. The Indians of the northern forest zone were a seminomadic people who lived by food gathering: hunting, fishing, and picking fruits in season. Tribes like the Montagnais and the Cree, who depended purely on hunting and fishing, were more strictly speaking nomadic. Many tribes, however — notably the Iroquoian — had acquired the culture of Indian corn; some were harvesters of wild rice; and some tapped the hard maple for sugar.² The need to return to or remain by the cornfields, the rice lakes, and the sugar bushes explains why they are termed seminomadic, and even this is perhaps not to be applied to tribes like the Hurons or the Onondaga, whose lands were rich in corn. But these people had a "shifting" agriculture, and almost no Indian tribe was fully and finally committed to one spot — "settled" in the European sense of the word.

Even with supplements like corn, wild rice, and maple sugar, most Indians relied in the main on hunting and fishing for their food. Both meant considerable movement, dispersal in the winter to the hunting grounds, and congregation at the fishing runs and the fields and berry patches in

summer.³ On the hunt the Indian relied almost wholly on deer hide and beaver robes for his clothing. Thus his culture possessed two necessities of the fur trade: the means to live on the country as it was, and furs themselves.

Commerce with the whites might improve the means of hunting and of fishing. Such items as the gun, the iron hatchet, and the steel trap increased the Indian's efficiency, but his own culture had long provided the essential tools, such as the bow and arrow, the stone ax, and the deadfall — plus a forest craft not easily learned, let alone improved upon. To live in the forest it was imperative to be able to move, both as a lone hunter and in bands. This the Indian could do with a skill which the European was to surpass only by the aid of the mechanical inventions of the nineteenth century. The Indian possessed the canoe in its most exquisite form — the birchbark. This product of the northern forest and the remarkable craft of canoe building was in fact to be the prime mover of the Canadian fur trade. It was used from the first by the Indian to bring furs to the coastal rendezvous, and by the European to penetrate inland. Fragile it was, but it possessed the inestimable advantage that it could be repaired on the spot, given a readily available supply of birch bark, spruce root, and spruce gum.

The canoe gave to the Indian a summer range of hundreds — even thousands — of miles. No such travel was possible in winter, but the Indian culture did provide means

² Maple sugar is rarely taken into account by fur trade historians; yet note the frequent references in Elliott Coues, ed., *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest: The Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry and of David Thompson, 1799-1814*, 1:4, 25, 30, 101, 112, 122, 130, 162, 170, 192, 196, 211, 244, 259, 275, 281, 2:492, 629, 681 (New York, 1897); and in Charles M. Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders of the Northwest*, 32, 37, 44, 165, 234, 236, 270, 273 (St. Paul, 1965).

³ The necessity for this movement is brought out with painful clarity in Edwin James, ed., *A Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner* (Minneapolis, 1956). On the importance of fruit, see, for example, Henry, in Coues, ed., *New Light on the . . . Greater Northwest*, 2:485.

for the movement of men and goods necessary to hunting and following trap lines. Snowshoes and moccasins made walking possible over the deep, soft snow of the northern woods, and the toboggan enabled the hunter to transport his game and furs. These two means of movement were as indispensable to the fur trapping of the winter as the canoe was to the fur trade of the summer.

THUS there were in the primitive economy all but two of the elements needed to sustain the fur trade. These two—market demand and capital to finance a year's operation of fur collection, transport, and sale—Europeans were to supply, along with the management that was to bring all together in a functioning system. But it was not only tools and techniques that the

⁴ This is one of those self-evident facts which, if not made explicit, is sometimes seriously neglected. The importance of Indian manpower was drawn to my attention by Mr. Jan Kupp and will be developed by him in his doctoral dissertation for the department of history, University of Manitoba.

⁵ See Henry, in Coues, ed., *New Light on the . . . Greater Northwest*, 1:44-77; 2:452; Richard Clover, ed., *David Thompson's Narrative, 1784-1812*, 229 (Toronto, 1962).

Indian culture supplied to the trade. Most important of all was manpower.⁴ The aboriginal Indian was the first hunter and trapper, the first canoeman and snowshoer, and the white trapper and voyageur were his pupils. In the lands that became the United States the latter largely supplanted him as trappers and boatmen, but in the Canadian forests the local Indian has remained the principal fur-taker down to the present. The fur trader relied not only on local hunters; he sometimes persuaded whole bands to move with him or used Indians like the eastern Iroquois, who found regular employment in following the trade.⁵

The work of the Indian hunter and trapper was augmented by that of the Indian woman, preparer of food, carrier of burdens, curer of furs, and sewer of shirts, leggings, and moccasins. These tasks, of course, were exclusively the squaw's work, such being the rigid division of labor between the sexes in the Indian culture. It was therefore practically impossible to live off the country and carry on the fur trade without the assistance of Indian women. It is not necessary to mention their additional role as mothers of new manpower, but it is perhaps fitting to

"En Route to the Trading Post"



recall the remarkable economy with which they performed all these necessary functions. As the Chipewyan chief, Matonabee, pointed out in man-to-man fashion to Samuel Hearne, "Women were made for labour; one of them can carry, or haul, as much as two men can do. . . . the very licking of their fingers in scarce times, is sufficient for their subsistence. . . . [and they] keep us warm at night."⁶

Even this does not quite exhaust the services of the Indian woman to the fur trade. As in all commerce, there was a considerable element of diplomacy, which was necessary to soothe tribal rivalries and prevent tribal wars, and as in all diplomacy, women had a part to play. From the day of Pocahontas on, there are indications that women sometimes eased diplomatic relations between Indian and European. Certainly, as astute traders noted from time to time, marriage to a chief's daughter might well be good for business, and the kinship marriage conferred greatly eased the difficulty of persuading Indians to remain loyal to those who financed their hunt.

Children born of such unions came to be a significant and useful group in the fur trade. Not European, not Indian, although closer as children of the wilderness to the Indian way of life, the métis, or mixed-bloods, came to make up a large part of the work force and were a striking example of the Indianization of the European in the fur trade. They were in their own persons — not always happily — the very realization of that union of the primitive and the sophisticated that was the fur trade as practiced by the North West Company.

In the Canadian fur trade, therefore, the only good Indian was not a dead one; he was, on the contrary, a live one who would follow his trap line. From this need for the Indian as a fur-gatherer arose the traders' interest in Indian population and the attempts to estimate it, as in the census of the Northwest recorded by Alexander Henry the Younger.⁷ The Indian band had its own hunting grounds, a territory on the wildlife

of which it could live by hunting, aided with such other food as could be grown or gathered. Hunting grounds were vague areas, changed by war or epidemic disease, or by deliberate migration, such as that of the Chippewa from north of Lake Huron westward to the Lake of the Woods and the Red River country. In exploring for new fur country it was therefore necessary to know not only the wildlife, food resources, and waterways; equally important were the number, disposition, and needs of the people. It was never enough that there should be beavers and martens; there must also be Indians from whom to buy food and purchase furs.

SOLEMNLY TO discuss the historic Indian in the language of a modern labor gazette is, of course, rather quaint. The Indian was a happily primitive person. He had not been made a laborer, a hand, or a businessman of punctual habits and tense drive by centuries of disciplined civilization. He suffered many miseries, but unemployment and gastric ulcers were not among them. He did only what was necessary to keep himself alive. It was exceedingly difficult to add to his wants, except by replacing a known article by a superior one of a like kind: a bow by a gun, a birch-bark vessel by a brass one, or a moose hide by a woolen blanket. Only liquor — and for the Plains Indian, the horse — created a want hitherto unknown and a means of inducing him to trap beyond the need to obtain the essentials of his simple life. Liquor, however, could not be used merely as a commodity, because drunken Indians were likely to become murderous and reduce their scant numbers at an alarming rate. Accordingly, the skilled trader used it as a treat, a loss leader, an inducement given freely to win the Indian to work.

To what degree the Indian ever under-

⁶ Quoted in J. B. Tyrrell, ed., *Hearne: A Journey from Prince of Wales's Fort in Hudson's Bay to the Northern Ocean*, 102 (Toronto, 1911).

⁷ See Henry, in Coues, ed., *New Light on the . . . Greater Northwest*, 1:282; 2:516, 522, 530.

stood or adopted European commercial and economic concepts of exchange is open to question. He was of course quite as intelligent a being as the European trader and had a very keen sense of how the primary producer benefited from the rivalry of competing buyers and of how he suffered from monopoly. But this arose from practical observation, not from economic reasoning. His culture gave exchange another meaning than the commercial one. His nomad's sense of hospitality to the stranger, his tribal sense of obligation to kindred, led him to give freely what others needed and to expect to receive freely in return. To him trade was reciprocity in giving, not mutual benefit in exchange.⁸

The Indian and even the métis lacked the commercial sense. He did not precisely understand credit or price changes, and he felt little obligation to pay debts. He did, however, acknowledge the obligation to give to those who had given to him, a sense that had to be kept alive by constant care lest the image of the trader who had given credit should fade in the presence of a rival who would offer new presents for the furs

that should have gone to settle the accounts of his competitor.

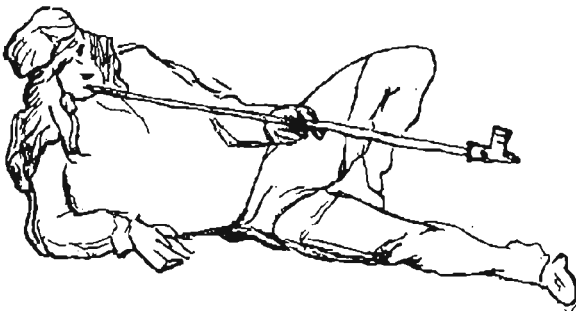
Similarly, the Indian quite lacked any sense of the need to work for the morrow or to grow in riches. He met each day's needs if he could; if not, he starved, enduring privation with singular equanimity. Except for some individuals, he was as unsatisfactory a workman as he was a producer. How unsatisfactory he could be to a well-brought-up young Scot or Yankee can be seen on page after page in the journals of the younger Alexander Henry or of Daniel Harmon.⁹ In this the Indian was the product of his total environment. His being so only increases the significance of the skills, endurance, and courage of the fur trader who had to be everything from doctor to policeman, while filling his canoes as well. The greatest accomplishment of such men was the North West Company, a mighty business organization that existed by the capacity of its wintering partners to induce the Indian to trap regularly.

It was this ability of the North West Company to use the manpower and the skills of

⁸ For a discussion of these attitudes, see E. E. Rich, "Trade Habits and Economic Motivation Among the Indians of North America," in *Canadian Journal of Economic and Political Science*, 26:35-53 (February, 1960). Mr. Rich emphasizes the Indian's lack of a "sense of property" rather than a lack of a commercial sense.

⁹ See W. Kaye Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years in the Indian Country: The Journal of Daniel Williams Harmon, 1800-1852*, lxxxv (Toronto, 1957).

Métis (below) and voyageur, as sketched by Frank B. Mayer in 1851



primitive culture that made it at its height the greatest of all Canadian—perhaps of all—fur trading companies. Its ultimate failure was as a business concern, not as a fur-gathering organization. Probably the most significant commentary on its efficiency is the fact that between 1774 and the union of 1821 the Hudson's Bay Company adopted all of its field techniques except the use of the canoe.

THE SUCCESS of the North West Company stemmed in large part from adopting and developing the modes and personnel of the French fur trade as it existed before and in the years just after 1760. Personifying French skill in the trade were the voyageurs, or canoemen. Under the system of "engagement" young men from the Quebec parishes (usually bound for three-year terms) were employed and trained as voyageurs, then returned to the land and later re-engaged, or left as "freemen" in the Northwest. Some of the latter were employed at the wilderness posts in such capacities as smiths, carpenters, canoe builders, or ax men. Others were used as traders *en derouine*—that is, were sent to drum up business with the Indians and to collect debts in the form of furs. Still others, if literate, might rise from clerks to be "bourgeois." The bourgeois was the trader who had invested his skill, his courage, and (if he had any) his money. He was responsible for the returns from the district to which he had been assigned.¹⁰

The voyageurs remained both the symbol and mainstay of the Canadian fur trade, but as traders the French generally proved too individualistic, too much devoted to small and limited enterprises, and too poor at business to compete with their Yankee or Scottish rivals.¹¹ It may well have been this, rather than lack of access to capital, which explains the gradual replacement of the French-Canadian bourgeois by Scottish, English, and American traders after 1760.

The Nor'Westers also adopted the canoe, as developed by the French in the *cânot de maître* and the *cânot du nord*, and the cus-

tom of provisioning the brigades with dried corn and grease to Grand Portage. Also taken over was the use of the fur post in all its variations from a log shack for a winter's occupation to the stockaded fort with its component dwelling houses, stores, and shops. (The Hudson's Bay Company used forts also, but those on the shores of the bay were English structures built by naval carpenters, not wilderness stockades.) Incorporated, too, as the name indicates, was the *regale* or treat—liquor given the Indian in the spirit of nomadic good fellowship to establish cordial relations and encourage the hunter to trap for his friends.

The *regale* was only a symbol of the French genius for accepting the Indian with all his casualness, his moodiness, his sensitivity, his insistence that the door always be open to him, his expectation that if in need he would be given what he required. In these respects the Nor'Westers, especially the Scots, were apt pupils of the French, and often succeeded where the Englishmen and the Orkney men in the service of the Hudson's Bay Company failed, through private reserve or restraints imposed by the organization. (It is of course to be noted also that the detachment of the Bay men usually preserved them from involvement in the passions, feuds, and trickery of Indian life and often was rewarded in the long run by a reputation for honesty and fair dealing.)

Another North West inheritance from the French were the *métis*, with all that their existence implied. The rough judgment that on balance the *métis* added to the strength and success of the North West Company is probably defensible. They were an impor-

¹⁰ How much of this was actually French practice, and how much developed from French practice it is difficult to state in our want of detailed knowledge of the organization of the French fur trade. There is a revealing though brief description of the resumption of activity by French traders after 1760 in a forthcoming volume by Hilda Neatby of the University of Saskatchewan, to be published under the title "Quebec: The Revolutionary Age," as one of the *Canadian Centenary Series*.

¹¹ See David Thompson's comments on this point in Glover, ed., *Thompson's Narrative*, 41.

tant part of the labor force of the Canadian fur trade, particularly in their role as buffalo hunters during the company's last years. By 1816, the year of the affair at Seven Oaks, they probably held the fate of the Northwest in their hands. One of the first needs of the united company was to conciliate them and to employ them as dependents of the fur trade and as defenders against the Sioux.¹²

ALL THESE inherited and borrowed techniques for dealing with the wilderness were combined by the shrewd Nor'Westers with a superior business organization. Connections with English business houses gave the Canadians access to higher quality trade goods and better credit than their French counterparts had secured. When the entrepôt for much of the American fur trade, formerly centered at Albany and New York, was shifted to Montreal, the size and vigor of the business was increased proportionately. The result was a great strengthening of the trade in capital and managerial ability and also an extraordinary concentration of resources. Thus for nearly three decades the North American fur trade, both that of the southwest (the American Northwest) and that of the Canadian Northwest, was centered in Montreal.

The growth of the company from partnership to partnership has been explained in terms of the need to combine and to marshal the resources and bear the costs of deeper penetration into the Northwest.¹³ This was indeed an important reason for "pooling" resources. It seems not, however, to be the

whole explanation of what occurred. There was in the very nature of the fur trade an inherent need of monopoly because of its seasonal character, its dependence on the seeming whims of a primitive and uncommercial people, the easy depletion of the numbers of fur-bearing animals by hunting or disease, and the difficulty of carrying the loss of a year's outfit. There were probably also reasons of management in the field, involving the control and distribution of goods, the giving of credit, and the collection of furs.¹⁴ Competition was not the life of the fur trade, but its death.

However that may be, the very name North West Company points to the subsequent political division of the fur country of central North America after the Treaty of Versailles in 1783. More and more there was a southwest and a northwest fur trade from Montreal. After the final implementation of Jay's Treaty in 1795 the southwest trade was increasingly surrendered to Americans. The North West Company grew in importance to the fur trade of Montreal, and the Canadian trade was pressed back upon the uninhabitable and permanently primitive wilderness of the Canadian Shield and the northern forest.

The gradual forcing of the Canadian fur trade toward the northwest intensified the need for large-scale organization. Supply bases were necessary, and with the beginning of the new century the posts on the Red River, the Assiniboine, and the Saskatchewan, along the line where the northern forest and the plains merged in the long grass and the park belt country, became more and more supply centers and less and less fur posts. The buffalo hunt and the métis buffalo hunter began to emerge as an institution and a type. Their function was to obtain from the plains the dried meat and pemmican that would provision the Saskatchewan and Athabasca brigades in the long reaches from Bas de la Rivière on Lake Winnipeg to the Methy Portage into the Athabasca country.

In these developments lay the beginning

¹² This aspect of the fur trade is discussed in Margaret Macleod and W. L. Morton, *Cuthbert Grant of Grantown: Warden of the Plains of Red River* (Toronto, 1963).

¹³ This thesis has been given its classic statement by Harold A. Innis in *The Fur Trade in Canada* (New Haven, Connecticut, 1930).

¹⁴ See Matthew Cocking's comment on the need to prevent "Confusion of Goods" among separate traders in one place, in W. Stewart Wallace, ed., *Documents Relating to the North West Company*, 45 (Toronto, 1934); also Alexander Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal . . . to the Frozen and Pacific Ocean*, 18 (Toronto, 1927).

of strain on the loose-jointed organization of the company, particularly in the relations between "wintering" and Montreal partners. In them lay the need to shorten the continental haul of furs to Montreal, either by shifting the entrepôt from Montreal to Hudson Bay, or by seeking a western outlet on the Pacific. In them also lay an ever increasing dependence on the labor of the Indians and the métis, a dependence that required the carrying of a rapidly growing number of métis families.

THE GREATER the strain, the greater was the need for monopoly and the need at last to take seriously the competition of the much smaller and less effective but enduring, stable, and slowly learning Hudson's Bay Company. The longer the canoe haul and the larger the labor force, the greater was the necessity of provisions from Red River. The clash between the two remaining fur organizations of the Northwest would seem to have been inevitable even had it not been precipitated by two external factors, namely, the War of 1812 and the Earl of Selkirk's passion for colonization.

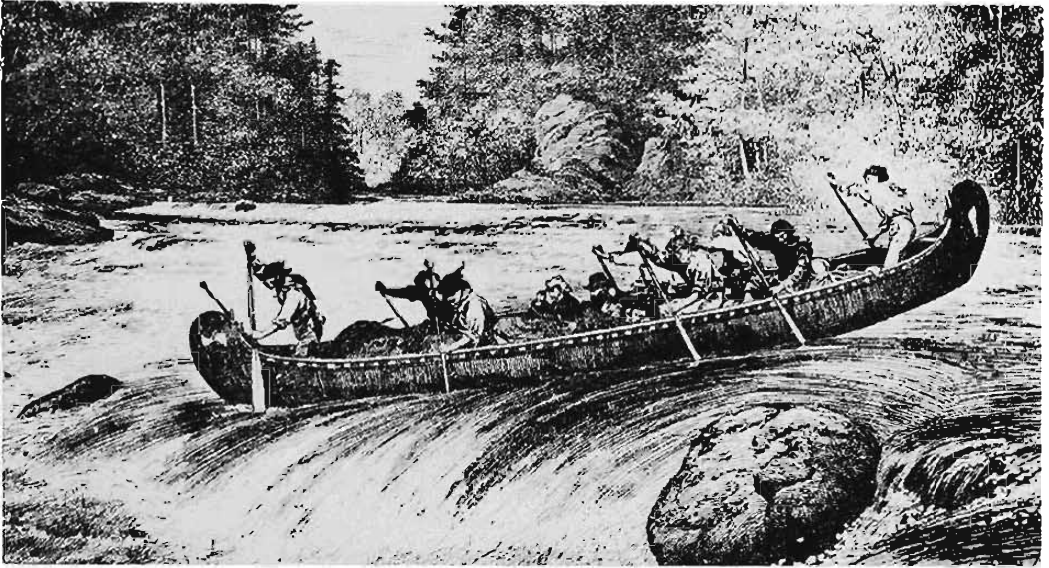
Both these factors put pressure on the North West Company at tender and vital points: the main supply area at Detroit-Michilimackinac, from which came corn for the Montreal canoe brigades; and the Red River, from which came pemmican for the canoes bound for the far Northwest. The Astor venture on the Pacific Coast was regarded by Canadians as part of the War of 1812, in that it challenged the formation of a western outlet and supply base at the mouth of the Columbia River.

Because of early British military successes, the alliance with the Indians, and the isolation of the Astorians, the War of 1812 was a means of alleviating the pressures on the Montreal and Columbia routes. There remained the pemmican base at Red River. As the Nor'Westers saw it, the character and the seriousness of Selkirk's part in the new aggressiveness of the Hudson's Bay Company might not by themselves have led to a

clash had it not coincided with the War of 1812. Nor'Westers had, after all, dealt successfully with competition before by cultivating the loyalty of their Indian and métis hunters with liquor and blandishments, and by the use of their bullies (*batailleurs*) to harass competitors. Despite their suspicion of Selkirk's purposes from the first, the Nor'Westers behaved with exemplary patience from 1811 to 1813. But by the spring of 1814, under the influence of the war temper, they had come to think strategically and to act drastically. By the spring of 1815 they knew they had lost the territorial gains of the war to the United States in Michigan and perhaps in the Columbia Valley. In the winter of 1814-15, because of the action of Miles Macdonnell, governor of Assiniboia, in first prohibiting and then limiting the export of pemmican from Red River, they became convinced that Selkirk's colony was an immediate and intolerable threat to the supplying of their northwestern posts and brigades. They resolved, therefore, to remove or destroy the colony. Thus the return of peace elsewhere saw the beginning of "war" on the Red River.

The struggle on the Red River in 1815 and 1816, and in the law courts of Canada from 1817 to 1821, reveals little that is new about the North West Company. It fought with all the resources it could command — commercial, primitive, and legal — against a rival who used all these in return and added to them a small army of mercenaries hired after their discharge from service in the late war. In every field the company at least held its own, and beyond doubt deserved to. It could not, however, overcome the inherent weaknesses of its own loose organization, of dependence on a labor force that was constantly growing in size and unruliness, and of the high costs of its extended transportation routes. The aroused Hudson's Bay Company, still a David to the North West Company's Goliath, needed only to keep on fighting to have the giant collapse of his own weight.

The final union of the rivals was at once



A fur trade canoe on the Mattawa River, Ontario, pictured by Frances Hopkins

a victory and a defeat for each. The Hudson's Bay Company was victorious in that its supply route by the bay triumphed over that by the St. Lawrence as did its charter over the partnership of the North West Company. It was defeated in that it won only when it had adopted in large part the techniques and methods of its rivals inland. The North West Company lost its name and legal entity, but not before it had forced on its great competitor the mode of operation and the labor force which it had developed and by which it had flourished. The united company was very much the old North West Company operating out of Hudson Bay.

THE NORTH WEST COMPANY was the first successful combination of European capital and business enterprise with Indian skills. As such, it holds a special place in the history of the North American fur trade and in the history of Canada. Its distinctive character arose from the fact that it came to grips with the unique conditions prevailing in Canada — conditions of climate, distance, and resources, which prevent a large proportion of the country's area from sustaining a pattern of economic and social life like that of Europe or the United States.

The company faced for the first time the fundamental question of how to maintain a western-oriented society in a severely northern, largely uninhabitable land. For much of Canada can be exploited only by extremes: by a primitive culture like that of the Eskimo, skilled in the special techniques of survival and content with merely maintaining life for a tiny population; or by a civilization with a technology so highly developed that it can overcome almost any obstacle of environment if the necessary expenditure is justified on grounds of private profit or state policy.

The effort to deal with this permanent northern frontier makes Canada what it is, and the influence of the effort can be traced all through Canadian history and contemporary society, most obviously in the comparative lack of both people and wealth in a country territorially so vast. The successful solution reached by the North West Company would seem to point toward the two channels through which a sophisticated culture and economy may exploit the North to its own best advantage and with the least detriment to the primitive culture of the people dwelling there. These channels are private monopoly or state development.

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From COMPETITION to UNION

K. G. DAVIES

THE STRUGGLE between the North West and Hudson's Bay companies from 1800 to 1821 can be seen as a clash of styles. On one side were the North Westers, the Cavaliers of the fur trade, flamboyant, extravagant, preoccupied with the "honor of the concern," dashing but defeated. On the other side stood the Hudson's Bay Company, the Roundheads: sober, persistent, concerned above all with their own rightness and winning the charge at the end of the day.

Any such stark antithesis demands qualification. The Roundheads beat the Cavaliers, not by being right but with better cavalry; and as the competition for the fur trade proceeded to climax, the Hudson's Bay Company threw some of its traditions overboard and fought the North Westers with their own weapons. From 1814 to 1820, the company recruited men, spent money, and incurred losses with uncharacteristic profusion; it gave Colin Robertson and Governor William Williams elbow room to show the North Westers that the drawback to North West methods was that both sides could use them; and Thomas Douglas, Earl of Selkirk, leading his private army to the capture of Fort William, struck a blow at the North West Company more outrageous, more "cavalier," than any suffered by his own side.

Nevertheless, blurred as it became, the

contrast of style is not devoid of substance. North West panache was real enough, and North West extravagance more than a myth. Selkirk, who did as much as anyone to impair it, acknowledged their *esprit de corps*.¹ But the "North West spirit" thrived on success and withered on humiliation. Lady Selkirk may have put her finger on the enemy's weak spot when she wrote to her husband after the capture of Fort William: "Everything in your expedition turns out for the best, and last of all the great armada, with all the warrants and constables, partners, clerks, Iroquois and guns and Congreve rockets, melts away and disappears, and a little canoe comes dropping in now and then, and one after another of the partners return to Montreal looking very foolish, while all the world are laughing at them."² The contrast of style, among other things, is between a company which, in Arthur S. Morton's words, "went down to defeat, and again to defeat," and yet survived; and a company that cracked under the pressure of counterattack.³

¹ Selkirk, *Sketch of the British Fur Trade in North America*, 16 (London, 1816).

² Quoted in John Morgan Gray, *Lord Selkirk of Red River*, 193 (London, 1963).

³ Arthur S. Morton, *A History of the Canadian West to 1870-71*, 613 (London and New York, 1939).

The stamina of the Hudson's Bay Company owed something to the conviction of the men who directed its campaigns that they were in the right. This had not always been so. Before 1810 the governor and the committee doubted, questioned, hesitated; after 1810 self-righteous indignation prevailed. Selkirk, friend of William Wilberforce, was perhaps more fully convinced of his own correctness than were his fellow shareholders. But no one, reading the correspondence between the Hudson's Bay Company and Earl Bathurst, the colonial secretary, from 1814 to 1820 can fail to notice the conviction of perfect propriety on the company's side and the resolution to oppose any hint that the troubles in the Indian territories might be the responsibility of both parties.⁴

HOW FAR does this contrast in styles reflect a contrast between a Canadian company and a British? It is tempting to see the contest in these terms, and it is not wholly wrong to do so. The North West interest was plainly more "Canadian" (whatever we take that to mean) than the still merely British Hudson's Bay Company. Hudson's Bay men in the field support this identification by generally referring to the opposition as "The

Canadians," and of course most of the rank-and-file in the North West Company were French Canadians or half-breeds. The North Westers liked to see themselves as successors to the *coureurs de bois* who had challenged the English in earlier times.⁵ Must we, then, endorse William McGillivray's lament upon the coalition of 1821: "Thus the Fur trade is forever lost to Canada!" and the verdict of a recent historian that in 1821 "Canada's first major industry had been stricken desperately if not mortally"?⁶

There is evidence to uphold this view. In 1850, to select a random date long after the contest was over, ownership of the issued stock of the Hudson's Bay Company was almost exclusively in the British Isles. Of 232 shareholders, only four had Canadian addresses.⁷ Under the successive deed polls regulating the company's structure, a substantial share of the profits was reserved for commissioned officers in the field, the successors of the wintering partners; but in 1850 a clear majority of those officers were from the British Isles, not from Canada. Of eighteen chief factors, no more than three had been born outside the United Kingdom.⁸ Rather more of the thirty-four chief traders originated in Canada or the United States; still, twice as many were British born.⁹ In 1850 management remained under London's control despite the setting up of local councils in the company's departments, largely because promotion to commissioned rank (and therefore to membership of these councils) was ultimately decided in London.

If the stock of the company that ran the fur trade in 1850 was in British hands, if the men who commanded in the field were British born, if the last word in management lay with London, it might seem indeed that the coalition and the Act of 1821 were a triumph for the United Kingdom and a defeat for Canada. But to prove this, we need to show that before 1821 the North West Company was itself a predominantly Canadian institution to which the interests of Canada could have been safely committed in the nineteenth century. This is not so easy.

⁴ This correspondence is in file A.8/1, Hudson's Bay Company Archives, at Beaver House, Great Trinity Lane, London, England.

⁵ [Simon McGillivray?], *A Narrative of Occurrences in the Indian Countries of North America*, 10 (London, 1817).

⁶ McGillivray's comment is in W. Stewart Wallace, ed., *Documents Relating to the North West Company*, 328 (Toronto, 1934); Marjorie Wilkins Campbell, *The North West Company*, 276 (Toronto, 1957).

⁷ File A.42/6, Hudson's Bay Company Archives, lists shareholders who received the dividend of 1850. See also A.10/8 and A.40/8.

⁸ P. S. Ogden and J. Rowand, born in Canada; W. Sinclair, born at Hudson Bay.

⁹ Chief traders born in the United Kingdom were: D. McTavish, E. Hopkins, J. McKenzie, J. Anderson (A), J. Anderson (B), J. Toit, R. Hardisty, W. Nourse, T. Corcoran, P. McKenzie, W. F. Tolmie, R. Finlayson, D. Manson, J. Bell, A. McKinlay, J. Kennedy, J. Black, R. Clouston. F. Ermatinger was born in Lisbon, A. C. Pelly in Pernambuco, and A. C. Anderson in India.

One of the most important problems, how much of the working capital of the North West Company came from Canada and how much from England, cannot for lack of evidence be discussed.¹⁰ What we do know is the origins of the North Westers themselves: most, unlike their canoemen, were Scots.¹¹ That they were known collectively as "The Canadians" of itself is no more significant than the fact that the Hudson's Bay Company was known as "The English Company"; both are misnomers in organizations that recruited so many Scotsmen. Lady Selkirk, though she put it rudely, was right to insist on "the distinction between the Canadians and the Scotch renegades."¹² Even in Montreal, despite the glittering social life of the Beaver Club, the North West Company was not Canada. Why, otherwise, did the North Westers find it almost as hard to get favorable verdicts in the Canadian courts as the Hudson's Bay Company? How, otherwise, could Robertson and Selkirk have recruited men in Montreal itself to oppose the North West Company?

If there were few native Canadians among the wintering partners, what the North West Company undoubtedly did, and what before 1821 the Hudson's Bay Company did not, was to create Canadians. Whereas for 150 years Hudson's Bay men, their tour of duty over, retired to the British Isles, many—probably most—of the North Westers stayed in the country upon retirement. Had the coalition of 1821 dried up this inflow of talent, Canada would indeed have been the loser. But it did not. In this, as in other respects, the Hudson's Bay Company after 1821 conformed to North West traditions. Of the chief factors of 1850, at least half, and probably more, retired to Red River, Vancouver, or other parts of North America; of the chief traders, very few returned to the British Isles.¹³

The North West Company, then, run by Scots, with powerful agents in London, and perhaps raising some of its capital in England, was never a wholly Canadian concern. And there is here an even larger question

than the national identity of the companies that successively dominated the fur trade. Before we conclude that the eclipse of the North West Company in 1821 was an unmitigated defeat for Canada and that the opposite result would have been an unmitigated blessing, even a conference of historians of the fur trade must face Selkirk's embarrassing question: "And what is this Fur Trade . . . ? A trade of which the gross returns never exceeded £300,000, and often not £200,000. A branch of commerce which gives occasion to the exportation of 40 or 50,000£ of British manufactures! A trade in which three ships are employed! This is the mighty object, for which not only the rights of property are to be invaded, but a territory of immense extent, possessing the greatest natural advantages, is to be condemned to perpetual sterility."¹⁴ This is not the whole story; without the fur trade, these sterile territories would have been unknown. But Selkirk deserves credit as well as blame for answering his own question twenty or thirty years too soon. Defeat for Montreal (and 1821 certainly meant that) was not necessarily defeat for Canada.

THE CONTRAST of styles can be more confidently discussed when we turn to the forms of organization of the rival companies. The North Westers were an unincorporated partnership or series of partnerships, the Hud-

¹⁰ See Harold A. Innis, "The North West Company," in *Canadian Historical Review*, 8:314 (December, 1927) for the interest of English firms in the North West Company. Edward Ellice's concern was clearly important but has so far escaped definition.

¹¹ Wallace, ed., *Documents*, 35, 425-505.

¹² Quoted in Gray, *Lord Selkirk*, 245.

¹³ Chief factors and chief traders of 1850, born outside Canada, who retired to Canada were: J. L. Lewes, D. Ross, J. Douglas, J. Ballenden, J. Hargrave, R. Miles, J. E. Harriott, R. McKenzie, J. Work, J. Tod, W. Nourse, T. Corcoran, H. McKenzie, J. Anderson (A), W. H. McNeill, R. Finlayson, J. Black, J. Bell, A. C. Anderson, A. McKinlay, J. Kennedy, R. Clouston, R. Hardisty, J. Swanston, and J. Gladman probably retired to Canada; two died while still in service; D. Manson retired to the United States.

¹⁴ Selkirk, *Sketch of the British Fur Trade*, 122.

son's Bay Company a conventional joint stock enterprise of a kind evolved in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Each form had special advantages. The North West machine at its best was wonderfully fitted to the fur trade. There was, above all, a close relationship between policy decisions and executive action, which the Hudson's Bay Company could not match. The annual meetings of the partners and agents at Fort William could produce a single plan for the whole region based on recent first-hand intelligence, whereas the decisions taken at Fenchurch Street were those of men who had never seen a portage and whose information was often out-of-date. The presence in the field of the North West wintering partners gave their concern such flexibility that the general plan could be responsibly modified to meet contingencies, while the Hudson's Bay men were inclined to work to rule. And, finally, the partnerships and the hopes of partnership afforded an incentive to endurance and enterprise not to be expected from salaried employees.

As the contest developed, the two styles of organization became less unlike. From 1806 the Hudson's Bay Company was experimenting with incentive schemes, so preparing the way for the deed poll of 1821. It also recruited men like Robertson and Williams, disposed to act first and explain afterwards. The North Westers' advantage in management was reduced. As the London and trans-Atlantic sides of Hudson's Bay Company business moved into closer harmony after 1810, so the two corresponding components of the North West Company—agents and winterers—moved further apart until the final, fatal split of 1820.

But while the Hudson's Bay Company could copy North West methods, its own organizational advantage was not so easily

imitated. Hudson's Bay shareholders, as investors in a joint stock, enjoyed (or thought they enjoyed) limited liability. The point has been made that the men who directed the campaign from 1810 onwards were not wholly dependent on the fur trade for a living; they could plan for and survive years of loss without hazarding more than a part of their private fortunes.¹⁵ It is true that the North Westers, with a greater personal involvement, learned and practiced an urgency in their transactions not always apparent in the affairs of the Hudson's Bay Company, but this stimulus became less decisive as the conflict developed. The need of Selkirk and his friends to be proved right was in the end as powerful as the economic incentive.

As a long-lived joint-stock company, run by respectable members of the London financial community, with perpetual succession and the right to sue and be sued corporately, the Hudson's Bay Company must have commanded better credit than the North Westers, little as we know of the latter's intimate financial history. Of many factors that settled the outcome of the struggle, not the least was the ability of the Hudson's Bay Company to increase its overdraft at the Bank of England from £23,500 in 1814 to £75,000 in 1820 and to run up its unpaid bills from less than £5,000 to more than £30,000.¹⁶ It is unlikely that the North Westers could match these reserves of credit.

But it was a close-run thing. As late as January 11, 1821, John Halkett (a member of the Hudson's Bay Company's committee and a brother-in-law of Selkirk) wrote "I doubt the scoundrels are too strong and rich for us."¹⁷ It does not do to over-rationalize a struggle in which personalities like Edward Ellice, Simon McGillivray, and Selkirk took leading parts. That the Hudson's Bay Company was going to fight was clear from 1810. But it is still astonishing that a firm that handled, at the end of the eighteenth century, only two fourteenths of the fur trade as against the North West Company's eleven fourteenths could hold on and win.¹⁸ For

¹⁵ Morton, *The Canadian West to 1870-71*, 613.

¹⁶ E. E. Rich, *The History of the Hudson's Bay Company 1670-1870*, 2:394 (London, 1959).

¹⁷ Quoted in E. E. Rich, ed., *Colin Robertson's Correspondence Book, 1817-22*, cv (London, 1939).

¹⁸ Rich, *Hudson's Bay Company*, 2:186.

1821 brought victory to the Hudson's Bay Company. The North Westers made good terms for themselves; at the time of the coalition, it was even claimed that they had won. But they had not. The year 1821 did not destroy the North West interest overnight for the arrangements then made left the North Westers with an identity. But 1821 created the conditions in which that identity was almost certain to be submerged, and after 1824, with the ending of the Montreal agency, the failure of the McGillivrays, and the retirement of former North West partners, the old interest withered.

COMPETITION can stimulate enterprise and thus be constructive, or it can be wasteful. The rivalry of 1810–21 was, on the whole, more wasteful than constructive. Who benefited? Both sides lost money and lives. Establishments were swollen beyond commercial needs. The Indians, who might be expected to have gained, were debauched by liquor and tyrannized. Nor was there much progress in exploration and discovery of new fur-bearing regions. The competition of the late eighteenth century had led to great things; so did the race for the Columbia River between the North Westers and the Americans. But the last rounds of the competition that ended in 1821 seem to have checked exploration rather than stimulated it. No one on either side achieved as much as Peter Skene Ogden in the calmer years of the 1820s.

Why then did competition continue? Why was there no compromise settlement? From 1803 onwards there had been discussions and negotiations between the rivals in the fur trade. None came to anything. Yet the fur trade was no stranger to compromise. Examples of both territorial partition and profit-sharing agreements can be found in the early nineteenth century. Thus on December 31, 1806, the agents of the North West Company signed a treaty with the agents of the Michilimackinac Company "to form a line of boundary between them as correct as may be."¹⁹ Articles were adopted by which

employees of one company would be taken over by the other, by which neither side was to receive the other's deserters, and by which the partners of both were bound individually as well as collectively to observe the agreement. A little later, on January 28, 1811, a treaty was made between the Montreal Michilimackinac Company and the American Fur Company for a coalition in which each preserved its identity, buying goods in England or the United States and continuing to sell its own furs.²⁰ The crux of the agreement was that profits of fur sales were to be equally divided between the two companies.

Either form of compromise could have been adapted to end the rivalry of the Hudson's Bay and North West companies. Both were mooted. Why were they not accepted? The argument for some kind of understanding goes back to the eighteenth century. As serious politics, it may be taken to begin in the mind and book of Sir Alexander Mackenzie.²¹ What was first discussed, and then negotiated, was a *modus vivendi* in which the Hudson's Bay Company would surrender its exclusive use of the bay route and thus enable others to exploit more easily the fur-bearing regions of Athabasca and the Columbia River.

Mackenzie's book was published in 1801, at the height of the competition between the North West and XY companies. Clearly, whichever of these rivals could first reach agreement with the Hudson's Bay Company would have a big advantage. It was, accordingly, in 1803–04 that the first of three sets of negotiations was begun. Edward Ellice then made on behalf of XY an offer to buy the Hudson's Bay Company outright for £103,000 in Exchequer bills.²² On his own evidence, the bid failed for technical rea-

¹⁹ Wallace, ed., *Documents*, 224.

²⁰ Wallace, ed., *Documents*, 239.

²¹ Alexander Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal on the River St. Laurence through the Continent of North America to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans*, 407–412 (London, 1801).

²² *Report from Select Committee on the Hudson's Bay Company*, 344 (1857).

sons, part of Hudson's Bay stock being in the hands of persons (minors or deceased) who were incapable of conveying an effective title to a purchaser without application to the court of chancery. This may have been so; but for a company which apart from its forts, goods, furs, and ships had £40,000 invested in gilt-edged securities, the offer was not attractive.

Meanwhile the North West Company was after the same prize, using a mixture of force and argument. In 1803 a North West ship sailed into Hudson Bay and a settlement was made on Charlton Island. From this position of strength, direct negotiations with the Hudson's Bay Company were opened with a letter from Duncan McGillivray, dated August 13, 1804.²³ Before answering, the Hudson's Bay Company spent several months in obtaining counsel's opinion on its charter, and only then decided that it had no choice but to negotiate. The alternative — to compete with men "who respect neither justice nor equity but commit open acts of violence" — would cost too much. Perhaps the company missed a chance by this delay: in the summer of 1804 both North West and XY wanted an alliance. As McGillivray and Thomas Forsyth put it, "at that period, each company wished to obtain a facility from the H. B. Co. to be used to the prejudice of the other." By the end of the year, however, the union of North West and XY "had totally changed the face of things."

ON JANUARY 30, 1805, McGillivray and Forsyth attended the Hudson's Bay Company's committee, and negotiations proper began; they lasted until May, were interrupted, resumed in November, and finally were broken off in February, 1806. The North Westers started by flatly declaring an intention to use the bay route "to effect a communication from York Factory to Wini-

paque," and asked for acquiescence. As inducement, and *ex gratia*, they offered to withdraw from Moose River and East Main, to give up Charlton Island, and to renounce communication with Hudson Bay except by the Winnipeg-York route. On this track, they would only indicate, not guarantee, abstention from trade. As a basis for agreement, the offer seems derisory, but the North Westers claimed that their concessions would be of great benefit to the Hudson's Bay Company, and when the committee demurred assured them blandly that their lack of appreciation proceeded from "want of local information."

Discussion focused on what rent the North West Company would pay for a piece of land at York on which to build the proposed transit post. This had to be referred back to Canada, and on July 6 the North West partners authorized an offer of £2,000 a year. Their last word reached the Hudson's Bay Company in a letter of November 27, 1805 — withdrawal from the bay area and payment of the rent for seven years.²⁴

The governor and committee do not appear to have opposed in principle the concession of the bay route. Their doubts (from which proceeded the rupture) were whether the North Westers could be trusted and whether the agreement would hold in the event of third-party competition: "If they [*a third party*] set a Cockboat afloat in the Bay, they [*the North Westers*] would claim an exemption from the annual payment." Finally, as the negotiations closed, it came out that the North West Company intended to bring furs out of Hudson Bay for shipment to markets other than Great Britain. The Hudson's Bay Company, by its charter, thought itself obliged to ship only to the United Kingdom and was not ready to grant a facility it did not itself enjoy.

In these exchanges, the comparative strength of the two sides emerges not only from the proposals but from the language used — the North Westers cocky, the Hudson's Bay Company protesting. The committee wrote that they expected better terms,

²³ Files A.1/219 and 220, Hudson's Bay Company Archives, include the papers in this negotiation. All quotations in this and the following five paragraphs are from them.

²⁴ Wallace, ed., *Documents*, 203.

they "who have hitherto been silent sufferers by the unwarranted treatment of the natives with whom the H. B. Company's servants trade & also of the Servants in their employ"; and later they protested that they "seem almost precluded from any alternative in their decision on the subject in question." Hudson's Bay Company morale was low — how low is suggested by a memorandum among the records of this transaction: "If the Treaty is broken off, the chances may be very great against the H. B. C. getting redress from Government, the spirit of which seems to be for Universal Liberty, and should the result be the laying open the Trade of the H. B. C. which in the temper of the times and the interest the N. W. C. will probably exert to promote the ruin of the H. B. C., or probably endeavour to get themselves incorporated into a body (which idea has certainly gone forth) under the specious pretext of pursuing a National Object in carrying on their Trade thro the Pacific Ocean, a favourite idea of Mr McKenzie in his Book dedicated to the King (and for which he was knighted), Quere, whether under all these risques, it may not be better to make an amicable Treaty, which probably would operate to the advantage of the Company in the end of the term, and their Competitors be disarmed from any further act of Hostility against the Company's charter."²⁵

This may not have been the view of the whole committee; but even as the expression of an individual opinion, there can be few more pessimistic documents in the company's archives. It seems probable that if the North Westers had made a better offer, with security for performance, as they could well have afforded to do, the Hudson's Bay Company would have come to terms. Why, then, given their manifest superiority, did not the North Westers simply force a passage through the bay? The answer seems to be that they needed the Hudson's Bay Company to close the bay route to third-party competition. Better to stick to the waterway which they knew how to defend than beat a path for others to follow. The stated purpose

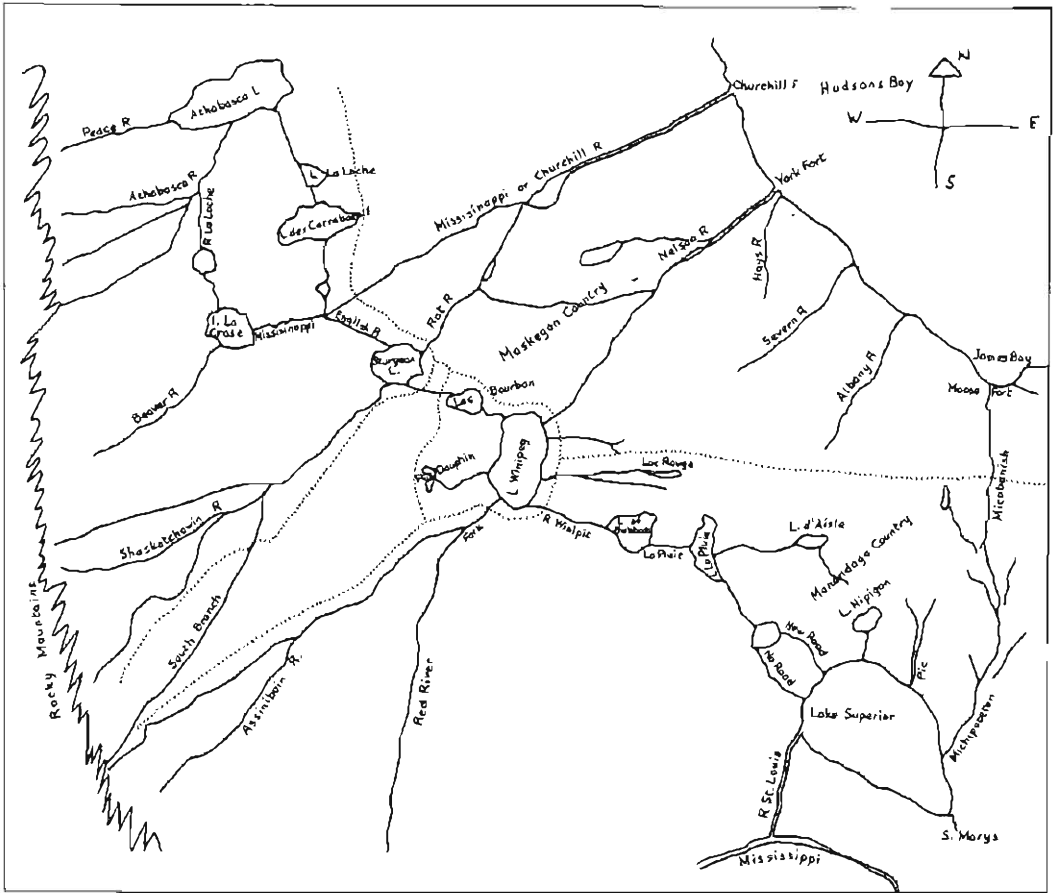
of their final proposals in November, 1865, was that "An Amicable arrangement of this kind will probably serve as an Expedient to prevent the Interference of others." As soon as it became clear that the Charlton Island settlement had failed to coerce the Hudson's Bay Company into this amicable arrangement, the island was abandoned.

THE NEXT attempt at compromise took place in 1811, and was conducted in a quite different spirit. In the intervening years the Hudson's Bay Company had acted to strengthen its organization, but as recently as 1809 the committee had seriously debated a plan to withdraw from the fur trade, and it is likely that the new spirit owed less to the reforms effected than to changes of personnel. Of the nine men who directed the company's affairs in 1805, only two were left to confront the North Westers in 1811; whereas of the nine who negotiated in 1811, seven were still there in 1816 and six in 1820. The general staff that would fight future battles was already in charge.

Selkirk's Red River grant was approved by the shareholders' meeting, or "general court," on May 30, 1811. Four days later, on June 3, McTavish, Fraser, and Company (Montreal agents), Inglis, Ellice, and Company (London agents), and Sir Alexander Mackenzie jointly presented a plan for partition of the fur country.²⁶ Their objects, they said, were to prevent such bloodshed as had occurred at Eagle Lake the previous year, and to reduce costs. The terms of the proposal can best be appreciated from the sketch annexed to the North Westers' letter. The Hudson's Bay Company was to be confined to a line near the fiftieth parallel running as far as Lake Winnipeg, then along the east side of the main water route, Bourbon Lake (now Cedar), Sturgeon Lake (now Namew), English River, and so north to

²⁵ File A.1/220, fos. 48d-49d, Hudson's Bay Company Archives.

²⁶ This and the next paragraph are based on materials in file A.10/1, fos. 95-108d, Hudson's Bay Company Archives. The map reproduced on page 173 is in fo. 96B.



The partition proposed in 1811 (shown by dotted line), from an original sketch map preserved in the archives of the Hudson's Bay Company

Lake Carribeau (now Reindeer). Beyond the waterway, it was to have a tract west and southwest of the Fort Dauphin Department, including the southern branch of the Saskatchewan River. It was not to go into Athabasca or beyond the Rockies. An earlier draft of these proposals, dated in Montreal, November 7, 1810, allotted the Red River area to the Hudson's Bay Company, but the map annexed to the letter of June 3, 1811, does not show this.²⁷ The omission, though unexplained, seems important. The North Westers concluded by claiming that the proposed concessions would mean a loss to them of £15,000 a year in furs, and they opened the way to any modification of their

scheme, provided Athabasca was reserved to them.

The Hudson's Bay Company reaction, unlike 1804, was prompt and firm. The detailed partition was brusquely rejected. Instead the company offered to keep out of Athabasca provided the partition was made at the height of land; beyond that line it reserved the right to trade where the North Westers had not yet established themselves, that is in the unoccupied lands beyond the Rockies. These demands were quite unacceptable, implying as they did acknowledgment of the company's totem — the charter. Flashes of North West fire followed. The North Westers replied that "though they would be willing to grant some concessions in order to save themselves from the expence

²⁷ Gordon Charles Davidson, *The North West Company*, 131, 131n. (Berkeley, California, 1918).

of a contest, they are otherwise as little solicitous as to the commencement or termination of it." Such language provoked, not the injured protests of "silent sufferers," but a firm expression of confidence that "the local advantages possessed by the Hudson's Bay Company, without calculating too highly on the measures already or on those about to be resorted to, will independent of any Treaty very soon procure a much larger share of the Fur Trade than the Hudson's Bay Company have possessed for some years." The contrast is plain. Had the North Westers offered in 1805 what they proposed in 1811, they could have had both partition and transit. In the latter year, the two companies were not yet equipollent in men, in volume of trade, or in territory traded over; but already the Hudson's Bay Company was behaving as if they were.

THE LAST confrontation before the contest entered its final phase was in December, 1815. It was preceded by the threat, though this time not the actuality, of an invasion of Hudson Bay.²⁸ There the resemblance to the happenings of 1803-06 ends. This negotiation took place, significantly, in Montreal, the war being carried to the North West camp. Of the three attempts at compromise it was least likely to succeed, for the Hudson's Bay Company deputed — of all people to represent them in this delicate matter — Lord Selkirk, who was on his way to the Red River Settlement to restore the fortunes of his colony, shattered (as he believed) by calculated North West intervention. Selkirk received his brief on August 30, 1815, before leaving England.²⁹ Partition was to be at the height of land: Canada south of the height and Athabasca were to be the only concessions. "The great road from Lake Superior to the Methy portage," the main route developed by the North Westers and their predecessors, was thus claimed for the Hudson's Bay Company; it was, however, to be made available to the opposition. The North Westers' own forts on this route would be leased to them at peppercorn

rents, but no furs were to be taken there. If the North West Company wanted transit rights through Port Nelson to Athabasca, it would have to pay for them. And the agreement was to be for a long period — twenty or thirty years.

Lord Selkirk arrived in Montreal in November, 1815, and the expected approach by the North Westers was made almost at once. Two plans were brought forward.³⁰ The first, for partition, Selkirk described as "merely a *rechauffée* of the propositions of 1811." The North Westers suggested approximately the same boundary as had been proposed in 1811, though the territory north of Lake Carribeau was defined as a neutral zone with no settlement, where the Indians would be free to take their furs to whom they liked. The novel feature was that all the departments from Lake Winnipeg to the Rockies, Saskatchewan, River la Biche, Fort Dauphin, Swan River, and Red River were to be traded jointly on the footing of an average of past years, with outfits and returns divided in that proportion.

Selkirk did not think this proposed partition worth discussing, whereupon the North Westers brought forward their alternative plan for a complete merger to begin with the outfit of 1816 and to last seven years. The entire trade of the Indian territories was to be run as a single concern, the Hudson's Bay Company supplying a third and the North Westers two thirds of the capital and goods. The combined profits were to be shared in the same proportion. The vital question, as Selkirk immediately saw, was management, which was to be under the Montreal agents of the North West Company, with a person or persons deputed by the agents to superintend trade in and out of Hudson Bay. Selkirk's reaction was that in seven years the

²⁸ File A.10/1, fos. 164-165d, 176, 201, 201d, Hudson's Bay Company Archives.

²⁹ File A.10/1, fos. 311-314d, Hudson's Bay Company Archives.

³⁰ For this negotiation, see file A.10/1, fos. 350-351, 367B, 367C and dorset. Note the misplaced letter on fos. 181-184d which Selkirk wrongly dated January 6, 1815. This should be 1816.

opposition would have everything in its hands.

Under pressure, the North Westers were ready to concede joint management by the Montreal agents and a chief governor "or other respectable and fit character" appointed by the Hudson's Bay Company, to reside at Montreal. Selkirk would have none of this, though he was not, even at this stage, against an accommodation in principle. "If it were not for the unavoidable difficulty about the management," he wrote, "I should think that one third of the profits of the whole Indian trade would be preferable, even to the exclusive possession of our own Territories." But he thought the Hudson's Bay Company's advantage should be greater, and he was worried that a merger might take away the limited liability of his fellow proprietors.

His own proposal, based on his brief, was rejected on the ground that it involved "acknowledgement of the validity of the charter," and the negotiation closed with expressions of foreboding on both sides. The North Westers concluded that they would have the advantage in an open contest because of the "energy and resource in self-defence" of partners whose whole fortunes were at stake, against the Hudson's Bay Company's directors, "to whom the Indian territory is a secondary object." Selkirk, on the other hand, thought that "in another year, they will hold a different language."

So the last attempt at compromise failed. It failed because of profound lack of trust, and because the Hudson's Bay Company demanded worship of its totem. With good will, joint management might have worked; it was, after all, accepted in 1821, even though soon abandoned. But good will had

been in short supply since the Pemmican War, the start of the "capturing business," and Colin Robertson's invasion of Montreal. Now, only a decision in the field could provide fresh conditions for a successful negotiation. As the abortive discussions of 1815 came to an end, the North Westers looked like men who were aware for the first time that they could lose. In declining Selkirk's offer to put the charter to arbitration, they wrote: "as the Hudson's Bay Company claim exclusive rights, if those were to be Arbitrated upon and decided in their favour, they would turn the North West Company out of the Trade; whereas on the other hand, if a decision should be given against the Hudson's Bay Company they would still as British Subjects remain entitled to equal rights with the other Company."³¹ Selkirk was pleased at what he took to be an admission of weakness. His own characteristic last word was that the negotiation had been worth while "as it has (I think) put them still more decidedly in the wrong."³²

ONE OTHER PROBLEM remained. The Hudson's Bay Company had an Achilles heel: its stock could be bought and sold, and with its stock went voting rights and therefore ultimate control over policy. Why did not the North Westers acquire enough Hudson's Bay stock to win control? It was the obvious thing to do, and after 1806 Mackenzie began to buy in conjunction with Selkirk, whom he mistakenly supposed to be his ally.³³ This attempt misfired, though Mackenzie remained a shareholder, attended general courts, and continued to believe that "Had the [*North West*] Company sacrificed £20,000 which might have secured a preponderance in the stock of the Hudson's Bay Company, it would have been money well spent."³⁴ The idea came up again in 1811 during the negotiations already mentioned. The North West partners at their July meeting voted £15,000 for the purchase of Hudson's Bay stock "with a view of establishing an Influence in the Committee of the said Company — in order to establish a Bound-

³¹ File A.10/1, fo. 367H, Hudson's Bay Company Archives.

³² File A.10/1, fo. 181, Hudson's Bay Company Archives.

³³ Rich, *Hudson's Bay Company*, 2:298.

³⁴ Quoted in Chester Martin's Introduction to E. E. Rich, ed., *Journal of Occurrences in the Athabasca Department by George Simpson*, xxii (London, 1938).

ary Line with them — in the Interior country.”³⁵

In explaining why this resolution could not be acted on, we are reminded once more how tiny the Hudson's Bay Company was — a point that is relevant to the Colonial Office attitude towards it. The stock, £10,500 in 1670, had been raised by two bonus issues and a modest paid-up issue to £103,500 in 1720, and there it stayed for the next hundred years. The number of shareholders was small: in 1808 there were 105 share accounts, and by 1815, following Selkirk's accumulation of stock, only seventy-seven. Transfers were few: only 184 were recorded from 1800 to 1820, many of them private deals in which, for example, the holding of a dead man was split among his heirs.³⁶ Public sales of the stock were rare, if indeed they can be said to have taken place at all in the modern sense. Though an active stock market existed in London in the early nineteenth century, Hudson's Bay prices were not quoted in *The Course of the Exchange* until 1820.³⁷ Such dealings as there were must have been by private treaty or through the company's secretary.

Mackenzie was probably not far wrong in his estimate that it would cost £20,000 to gain control of the Hudson's Bay Company during the period of competition. From 1808 to 1820 prices of transfers were generally recorded in the company's books. With certain interesting exceptions to be noted, the highest price was 82½, the lowest 58½. Prices of 60–70 were the most common.³⁸ The money the North Westers voted in 1811 would have bought, at a price of 70, £21,000 or £22,000 of Hudson's Bay stock, which, added to what they and their friends already owned, would very likely have given them control.

It was not, in practice, necessary to own 51 per cent. Each November a general court of the Hudson's Bay Company was held to elect a governor and committee for the next twelve months. The average number of shareholders attending from 1801 to 1813 was eleven, and this included the retiring di-

rectors and the candidates for the following year, usually the same people.³⁹ Proxies were allowed, but few shareholders bothered. Some were beyond bothering, for of seventy-seven share accounts in 1819, fifteen were in the names of the dead and others were being held in chancery pending settlement of claims. One shareholder in 1802 was a lunatic; another, King George III, was intermittently mad; ten or a dozen were women. None took an active part in the company's affairs. The special general court of May 30, 1811, at which the Red River grant was passed, one of the historic meetings in the company's history, attracted only twenty-four shareholders, proprietors of less than half the nominal capital. Thirteen of them voted for the grant, nine being the governor and committee who proposed it and one being Selkirk, the grantee himself. Six voted against the grant, though three of them were disqualified for not having held their stock long enough. Five abstained.⁴⁰

No great fortune, it seems, was needed to buy this dollhouse company. Why not the North Westers? Arthur S. Morton drew attention to the fact that Selkirk owned only a little over £4,000 of Hudson's Bay stock at the time of the Red River grant, but he did not pursue the question why Selkirk, having got his grant, at once quadrupled his holding.⁴¹ From June 19 to July 15, 1811, transfers totaling more than £15,000 were registered to him. The answer lies in the company's transfer book.

³⁵ Wallace, ed., *Documents*, 268. Arthur S. Morton has erroneously stated this sum as £1,500 (*The Canadian West to 1870–71*, 536).

³⁶ Files A.42/2–3; A.43/6–7, Hudson's Bay Company Archives.

³⁷ *The Course of the Exchange*, published twice weekly by authority of the Stock-Exchange committee, records prices of leading shares and securities. At the end of 1811 more than a hundred items are mentioned, which helps to put the London end of the Hudson's Bay Company into perspective.

³⁸ File A.43/6–7, Hudson's Bay Company Archives.

³⁹ File A.1/48–50, Hudson's Bay Company Archives.

⁴⁰ File A.1/50, fo. 33d, Hudson's Bay Company Archives.

⁴¹ Morton, *The Canadian West to 1870–71*, 537.

*An artist's
conception of rival
fur traders
soliciting business*



In the summer of 1811, North Westers, anticipating the partners' decision of July, were busy buying stock in their own names: John Inglis, Edward Ellice, John Fraser, Jr., and Simon McGillivray. In this bid for control, they were stopped, promptly and forever; and they were stopped by Selkirk himself who, whether he wanted to or not, must have bought up every bit of stock that anyone could be persuaded to part with. He bought that stock at 20–30 per cent above the price paid by anyone else. Among the twenty-eight transfers in which prices were recorded, during the year 1811, thirteen stand out, all purchases by Selkirk. In every case he bought at par, a level which Hudson's Bay stock had not attained for years and would not again reach until 1821. In 1811 no one else paid more than 80, some paid 70, a few paid 60.⁴² Selkirk simply outbid the opposition. The effect of his buying was not only to put an immediate check to North West purchases but to reduce to almost nothing what little activity in the

stock there had been in previous years. In 1812 there were only six transfers, in 1813 one, in 1814 three.

As an engine of attack, the Hudson's Bay Company in 1811 had still to prove itself. But henceforth its defenses were sound. With Selkirk and the governor and committee owning among them more than £40,000 of stock, and with so much of the remainder in the hands of persons who were apparently no more inclined to sell than they were to part with the family silver, continuity of management and purpose was assured. The moral pretensions of the company in London were never relaxed. The morality of their servants' actions in Canada, however, was suitably modified to meet the needs of competition. In the long run, this not only made the contest fiercer but also (and paradoxically) made a solution possible. By 1821 the Hudson's Bay Company had become an organization the North Westers could join. Peter Skene Ogden and Samuel Black would scarcely have found places in the company of 1800; by 1823 even they could be absorbed.

⁴² File A.43/7, Hudson's Bay Company Archives.

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Some American Characteristics of the AMERICAN FUR COMPANY

DAVID LAVENDER

WHEN JOHN JACOB ASTOR launched the American Fur Company in 1808 he supposed that he could achieve dominance over the Indian trade of the northern United States by emulating, in his own single person, the corporate practices of the North West Company of Canada. He was wrong. Today, helped by the lens of historical perspective, we can see, as Astor could not, that conditions south of the international border—those of geography, political climate, economic attitudes, settlement, and so on—were very different from conditions to the north. These purely American determinants, which often arose as irritations to Astor and his field manager Ramsay Crooks, soon forced the company to abandon the original Canadian patterns and develop characteristics of its own. Not all were admirable, but they were nevertheless representative of the American frontier milieu in which the firm operated.

The reasons for Astor's initial leanings toward Montreal are obvious. He had been visiting the city almost annually on fur-buying trips since at least 1788.¹ There he had learned to think of the Indian trade as a continent-wide enterprise. He knew of the North West Company's struggle with the

Hudson's Bay Company for control of the rich Athabasca country. He quite probably heard from the lips of one or another of the Montreal agents—Alexander Henry, for instance—something of the importance which the Nor'Westers attached to finding Pacific approaches to the area, in order that sea shipping might reduce the cost of supplying their western posts. He saw the competition between the Canadian behemoths intensify after 1804, when the union of the XY and North West companies enabled the "pedlars" from the St. Lawrence to resume their push across the continental divide with still greater vigor. Although in 1807 Astor may not have known the exact result of these adventures into what is now British Columbia, he almost certainly was aware of the trend.²

Astor was aware too that during these same years, 1805-06, Lewis and Clark had completed their transcontinental explorations and had made their preliminary reports to President Thomas Jefferson. Although the explorers found the portage from the upper Missouri to navigable waters on the Colum-

¹Kenneth Wiggins Porter, *John Jacob Astor: Business Man*, 1:66, 412 (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1931).

bia far more onerous than they had anticipated, Lewis insisted that easily handled merchandise—bales of fur, for example—could be readily transported across the divide on horseback. Moreover, he wrote Jefferson from St. Louis on September 23, 1806, that the valley of the upper Missouri “is richer in Beaver and otter than any country on earth.”³

By channels now unknown, echoes of that statement reached Astor and quickened the ideas already nibbling at the edges of his planning. Could he not imitate the North West Company’s thrust by sending a strong party along the route Lewis and Clark had found, develop posts throughout the mountains, and establish at the mouth of the Columbia a sea-supplied depot like the one the Nor’Westers contemplated?

He possessed resources equal to the plan—ample funds, competent agents in London who could purchase desirable trade goods, and contacts with the leading fur markets of the world, including Canton, China. Since about 1800 his own ships had been carrying ginseng, silver bullion, and choice furs to the Far East, returning with tea, silk, nankeens, and chinaware.⁴ One or

³Porter, *Astor*, 1:170. The Hudson’s Bay Company had a tremendous advantage in being able to bring supply ships into the interior by way of Hudson Bay. The importance of geography in the struggle between the companies is noted in several books. See, for example, Harold A. Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History*, 149–165, 263–279 (Toronto, 1956); E. E. Rich, *The History of the Hudson’s Bay Company 1670–1870*, 2:66–287 (London, 1959); Gordon Charles Davidson, *The North West Company* (Berkeley, California, 1918).

⁴Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1804–1806*, 7:334–337 (New York, 1905).

⁵For Astor’s early ventures as an entrepreneur in the fur and China trades, see Porter, *Astor*, 1:48–163.

⁶Porter, *Astor*, 1:164–168, 413–420.

⁷In August, 1808, Ramsay Crooks obtained such an exemption for his and Robert McClellan’s trade on the Missouri. Thomas Maitland Marshall, ed., *The Life and Papers of Frederick Bates*, 2:18 (St. Louis, 1926). Other examples may be found among the Frederick Bates Papers in the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis; for instance, George Hoffman to Bates, October 21, 1808.

more of these ships could easily alter course enough to land trade goods at the Columbia depot, pick up the beaver pelts assembled there, and then trade for sea otter skins along the northwest coast before continuing to Canton.

Early in 1808 he passed on to President Jefferson and to Mayor De Witt Clinton of New York City his thoughts about forming a company strong enough to effect these designs. He added that he also hoped to force a withdrawal of the British traders operating in United States territory south and west of the upper Great Lakes, around the headwaters of the Mississippi and westward toward the Missouri. Jefferson responded with his unofficial blessings and the legislature of New York State granted, without debate, a formal charter to the American Fur Company—the patriotic name of which was hardly an accident.⁵ But in spite of Astor’s high-sounding declarations, the company’s first gestures were cautious indeed.

ONE EARLY deterrent in Astor’s way was the Embargo Act of December 27, 1807, and the uncertainties it created about importing trade goods from England. The obstacle did not trouble him for long, however. Indians within the United States had to be supplied, and since the necessary merchandise was available only in the British Isles, import exemptions were being granted within a matter of months to American citizens, although Britons remained interdicted.⁶ Astor could be confident, therefore, of qualifying for similar privileges whenever he chose.

Far more worrisome to him than political barriers were his fears of murderous competition beyond the Rockies from the North West Company, whose ruthlessness he had recently seen in operation against the XY group. And though Jefferson had commended Astor’s plans in a general way, concrete help from the government was not likely to be forthcoming in the Oregon country, where national sovereignty had not yet been established. How, then, were the

dangers attendant upon all-out economic warfare to be averted?⁷

Two possibilities suggested themselves. Astor might either pay the North West Company to yield him a clear field or, that failing, persuade it to join him, rather than fight him, in developing his western adventure. As leverage for gaining the attention of the Montreal merchants he used the troubles in which they had become involved on the American side of the Great Lakes.

The union of the North West and XY companies in 1804 had left scores of clerks unemployed. Many of them had drifted south of the border to join the fierce competition already boiling among the many traders working out of Detroit and Michilimackinac. The commerce could not absorb them. The Napoleonic Wars were reducing the price of deer, muskrat, and raccoon pelts, and at the same time were ballooning the cost of shipping in necessary trade items from abroad. Meanwhile the United States government was deliberately harassing foreign traders — or so they believed — with licensing and customs regulations that brazenly abrogated the freedom of movement supposedly guaranteed them by Jay's Treaty.⁸ The bitterest pill came on August 26, 1805, when General James Wilkinson, governor of upper Louisiana, issued an edict barring foreigners from entering the trans-Mississippi West, although for years British fur traders had been pioneering commercial routes across the areas now comprising Iowa, western Minnesota, and the Dakotas. And finally, though the matter had not yet become serious, the American government itself was trying to undermine the long-established friendship of the British fur men and the Indians of the lake country by building a handful of trading factories along the edges of the frontier.⁹

In trying to wriggle out of this economic vise south of the border, the Canadian traders contested ruthlessly with one another, using increased amounts of alcohol to inveigle still more skins from the Indians, including pelts pledged to some other winterer as security for goods issued earlier on

credit. Instead of improving their situations, most of them dug deeper into debt, and soon they were not able to pay their Montreal suppliers. Late in 1806 those merchants who were also members of the North West Company tried to restore order by bringing the disorganized individuals into a union known as the Michilimackinac Company.¹⁰

Within little more than a year Jefferson's nonimportation decrees had heaped fresh trouble onto the winterers of the new company. A brigade of supply boats was fired on by United States customs officials at Niagara, and eight of the craft were impounded. Meanwhile growing unrest among the Indians of Tecumseh's confederation kept many natives from their hunting grounds.

⁷ Astor, appealing on July 27, 1813, to President James Madison for government aid in maintaining Astoria during wartime, insisted that he had presented his ideas for the Columbia adventure in person at a meeting attended by Thomas Jefferson, Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin, General Henry Dearborn, and Madison, who had been secretary of state at the time of the alleged conference. At this meeting, Astor continued, government help "was promised in the most Desired & explicit manner." Dorothy Bridgwater, ed., "John Jacob Astor Relative to His Settlement on the Columbia River," in *Yale University Library Gazette*, 24:61-64 (October, 1949). This was an extraordinary statement for Astor to have made to Madison, who reputedly attended the meeting, if no conference had in fact occurred. Astor, however, was capable of making astounding declarations under pressure, and since no other accounts of this pre-Astoria meeting exist, one is inclined to regard the "promise" of help as belated wishful thinking.

⁸ For the Canadian complaints, see William R. Manning, ed., *Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States: Canadian Relations, 1784-1860*, 1:571-596 (Washington, 1940); *American State Papers: Foreign Relations*, 3:152, 164.

⁹ Clarence E. Carter, ed., *The Territorial Papers of the United States*, 13:203 (Washington, 1948); Francis Paul Prucha, *American Indian Policy in the Formative Years: The Indian Trade and Intercourse Acts*, 86 (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1962).

¹⁰ For information on the Michilimackinac Company, see Donald Grant Creighton, *The Commercial Empire of the St. Lawrence, 1760-1850*, 166 (Toronto, 1937); Louise Phelps Kellogg, *The British Régime in Wisconsin and the Northwest*, 259-262, 265 (Madison, 1935); W. Stewart Wallace, ed., *Documents Relating to the North West Company, 224-229* (Toronto, 1934); Wayne Stevens, "Fur Trading Companies in the Northwest, 1760-1818," in *Mississippi Valley Historical Association, Proceedings*, 9:283-292 (Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 1918).

By the fall of 1808 conditions were so unstable that some of the disgusted traders did not even go to their usual stations for the winter.¹¹

AGAINST this background Astor, while visiting Montreal in September, 1808, made his first move to assert dominion over the fur trade of the northwestern United States. He offered the Montreal merchants \$550,000 for the troublesome Michilimackinac Company and said he would add another \$50,000 for a free hand in the still undeveloped Columbia country. The Montrealers asked \$700,000 and negotiations paused.¹²

During the next few years the Canadians blew alternately hot and cold toward Astor's flirtations, depending on the erratic course of the United States Congress in relaxing or tightening its various embargo acts.¹³ In the spring of 1810 Astor finally decided to press ahead to the Columbia without them. To this end he formed his famous Pacific Fur Company, using the North West Company as a model.

He issued a hundred shares of stock, the same number the North West Company had determined on after its amalgamation with the XY group. Half of the shares went to Astor, who was to act as the company's importing agent for goods and its exporter of furs. The four Montreal firms that carried

on similar functions for the North West Company also held approximately half of that company's stock. In the case of both organizations the remaining half was divided among the wintering partners. There were, at first, only eight such partners in the Pacific Fur Company, half of them Canadians whom Astor had enticed away from the North West Company. Among them those eight men held thirty-five shares. The remaining fifteen shares were reserved for partners whom Astor might appoint in the future. A council of the Pacific Fur Company field partners was to be held at Astoria each year, much as the wintering partners of the North West Company met annually at Fort William on Lake Superior. As was true in the North West Company, precautions were taken to prevent the eastern agent, Astor in this case, from arbitrarily overriding any unanimous desire of the winterers. Since the cast of the company was thus definitely Canadian, it was appropriate that Astor did not attach to it the name of his recently chartered American Fur Company — although obviously he set up the Pacific Fur Company not for that reason but rather to keep his Pacific partners from exerting any claim on the American Fur Company when and if he chose to activate that still quiescent trust.¹⁴

The activation soon developed, but in a limited way. Two of the four Montreal firms comprising the Michilimackinac Company sold out their interest to the other two. The purchasers, Forsyth, Richardson and Company and McTavish, McGillivrays, and Company, renamed their white elephant the Montreal-Michilimackinac Company. Beset by fresh embargo troubles the new firm soon yielded to Astor and with the American Fur Company formed an organization called the South West Company, whose sphere of operations extended from the Great Lakes westward past the Mississippi — but not very far past. Article 14 of the contract establishing the new firm specifically excluded territory beyond the upper Missouri. Thus Astor would remain a competitor of the

¹¹ Manning, ed., *Canadian Relations, 1784-1860*, 1:601-605, 800: "Memorial of the Merchants of Montreal," in *Michigan Pioneer Collections*, 25:250-258 (Lansing, 1896). Among those who sat out the uncertain year in Montreal was Robert Dickson, a leading figure among the Michilimackinac winterers. Louis A. Tohill, "Robert Dickson, British Fur Trader on the Upper Mississippi," in *North Dakota Historical Quarterly*, 3:37 (October, 1928).

¹² Bridgwater, ed., in *Yale Library Gazette*, 24:62.

¹³ David Lavender, *The Fist in the Wilderness*, 110-127, 147-150 (New York, 1964).

¹⁴ For the organization of the North West Company, see Wallace, ed., *Documents*, 1; Davidson, *North West Company*, 13. On the Pacific Fur Company, see Wilson P. Hunt's manuscript notebook in the Missouri Historical Society. That Astor considered the Pacific Fur Company part of a broader plan is indicated by his calling the Far West group by the name "American Furr Company" in correspondence about commercial relations with the Russians in Sitka. Porter, *Astor*, 1:459.

Canadians on the Columbia, but would be their partner in the East.¹⁵

Surviving records say very little about the relationship between the new South West Company and its winterers. The field traders seem not to have had a voting voice and apparently they traded entirely on their own risk, bound only by contracts—and debts—to buy from the South West Company and return their furs to the same organization. In any event, whatever the arrangement, the new organization followed a Canadian pattern that had been established long before the American Fur Company entered the field.

THE WAR OF 1812 prevented normal evolution. On October 16, 1813, the Pacific Fur Company passed into the hands of the Nor'Westers.¹⁶ Thus we can scarcely even conjecture what new American features might have developed in its operations if it had remained under Astor's control during the period when William H. Ashley's mountain men began thrusting westward in the 1820s. Almost surely, however, there would have been modifications.

Eastward, conditions were reversed: after the war Astor acquired the South West Company from his Canadian partners. A very questionable half truth suggests that the Canadians yielded because Astor persuaded the United States Congress to pass, on April 29, 1816, an act which barred all foreigners from the American Indian trade, unless those foreigners received special exemptions from the president—a power later delegated to the Indian agents and certain territorial officers.¹⁷ Actually, the exclusion act needed no lobbying by Astor or anyone else to assure its passage. The entire West, which had long been suspicious of British fur traders, was more than ever convinced after the war that pacification of the Indians could not succeed until Canadian fur men had been barred from the country.¹⁸ The exclusion act attempted this. Astor and his American competitors, notably David Stone of New Hampshire and Detroit, were

thereupon faced with the problem of securing exemptions so that they could continue employing French-Canadian voyageurs. Only French Canadians could endure the rigors of the trade—or so Ramsay Crooks insisted, using arguments being repeated almost exactly today by California lemon growers pleading for the admission of *braceros* from Mexico.¹⁹

In 1816 the arguments prevailed and all American trading firms, even those as far away as St. Louis, were allowed to bring over the border the French Canadians they needed. There is no evidence that in this particular matter Astor received any favors from the government that were not accorded equally to his American competitors.²⁰

The exclusion of Canadian traders from the United States (as distinct from boatmen) probably did discourage Astor's Montreal partners in the South West Company. But other troubles were bothering them far more. Their resources had been strained by the low prices and high costs resulting from the Napoleonic Wars and from the growing

¹⁵ Terms of the agreement are in Porter, *Astor*, 1:461–469. In addition to a hoped-for freedom from embargo restrictions, the Canadians gained, by their association with Astor, entry to the Chinese markets from which purely Canadian concerns were excluded by the monopolistic charter of the East India Company.

¹⁶ T. C. Elliott, "Sale of Astoria, 1813," in *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, 33:43–50 (March, 1932).

¹⁷ Porter, *Astor*, 2:694, 696.

¹⁸ Instances of the suspicions are scattered throughout the second volume of *American State Papers: Indian Affairs*; see, for example, pages 1–9. See also Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., "The Fur Trade in Wisconsin 1815–1817," in *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 19:376–379 (Madison, 1910).

¹⁹ Crooks to Astor, April 5 [?], 1817, in Mackinac Letter Book No. 1. Photostatic copies of three Mackinac Letter Books are among the American Fur Company Papers in the Wisconsin Historical Society. The original of Letter Book No. 1 is in the Missouri Historical Society; the other two are in the Robert Stuart House, Mackinac Island. The author used the Wisconsin copies.

²⁰ Crooks to Astor, May 25, 1818, in Mackinac Letter Book No. 1; Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., "The Fur-Trade in Wisconsin 1812–1825," in *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 20:36 (Madison, 1911). A fuller discussion is in Lavender, *Fist in the Wilderness*, 228–237, 455. For a somewhat different stand, see Porter, *Astor*, 2:694–697, 702–704.

intensity of their competition with the Hudson's Bay Company. As one particularly ferocious phase of that struggle, a group of North West Company métis on June 19, 1816, massacred Governor Robert Semple and nineteen settlers from Lord Selkirk's agricultural colony at Red River. The cold eye of the home government was now upon the entire conduct of the fur trade, and under the circumstances the South West Company probably seemed to represent a niggling little worry that could well be dispensed with. Accounts that overlook this background while expatiating on Astor's wily machinations in obtaining full control of the company are guilty of distortion.

The purchase was consummated early in 1817 for about \$100,000, and at last, nine years after its chartering, the American Fur Company was operating as a self-contained unit.²¹ Immediately conditions below the border began impressing upon it certain forms and policies different from those of its Canadian models.

THE CHANGES were not all-pervading, however. Astor, or more properly John Jacob Astor and Son, a firm established in 1818 to include young William Backhouse Astor, followed a familiar pattern as importing and selling agent for the American

²¹ Crooks to Astor, April 5 [?], 1817, Mackinac Letter Book No. 1; Crooks to Astor, February 7, 1818 (photostatic copy), American Fur Company Letters I, in the New York Public Library. See also Porter, *Astor*, 2:699.

²² Letters dated April and May, 1817, in Mackinac Letter Book No. 1; Porter, *Astor*, 2:718, 735, 744, 762.

²³ Rich, *Hudson's Bay Company*, 2:405.

Fur Company. Ramsay Crooks became liaison man between John Jacob Astor and the traders in the field. The Canadian custom of dividing the trading country into departments was followed to some extent. In the early years the chief department was Michilimackinac, where Robert Stuart was in charge; James Abbott supervised Detroit. When the American Fur Company at last moved into St. Louis in 1822 the first manager there was James Abbott's brother Samuel, then Stone, Bostwick and Company, and, in 1827, Pierre Chouteau, Jr.²²

Not until we consider Crooks' arrangements with his company's winterers do the differences between the Canadian and American firms become pronounced. This in turn demands, for understanding, a survey of the markedly different economic attitudes north and south of the international border.

Unrestrained competition between the North West and Hudson's Bay companies — free enterprise, one might say — had brought deplorable evils to the trade. Monopoly, Parliament was informed, was far preferable.²³ Even geography fostered monopoly north of the border. Traffic to the Canadian Indian country advanced through two constricted thoroughfares, both of which were closed much of each year by winter — Hudson Bay and the St. Lawrence River. Traffic thus was easy to control, and this in turn encouraged combinations and eventual monopoly. Great trusts appeared in each section, outgrew their own areas, clashed, and finally, under a royal charter of March, 1821, united on a still broader scale.

Conditions in the United States, on the



other hand, encouraged fragmentation rather than union, no matter how earnestly Astor, influenced by his Canadian associations, might desire otherwise. Three major routes to the interior were available, each with variants, and many were open the entire year. One was by way of the Hudson River and the Mohawk Valley, and its potentials were quickened by the Erie Canal, authorized in 1817, the same year that the American Fur Company attained control of the South West Company. Another was the government-built, heavily traveled National Road across the Allegheny Mountains. Most significantly, there was the Mississippi.

Steamboats quickly multiplied the traffic using the waterways. The snorting new craft reached St. Louis in 1817, Lakes Erie and Huron in 1819, and the site of today's Twin Cities in 1823. This high fluidity of commerce helped disgruntled fur traders elude the "system" of any would-be monopolist and find other sources of goods. Only where a single trade artery dominated a large region, as in the case of the Missouri River, did any department of the American Fur Company approach economic dominance—a dominance which was diluted again in the Rocky Mountains. There several suppliers, including brigades of the Hudson's Bay Company, were able to converge on the rendezvous of the mountain men from various directions.

Canals, steamboats, the National Road, and a milder climate than in the North brought settlers as well as goods into the West—and into relatively close contact with the Indians. Even where agriculture was not an attraction, the beginnings of settlement existed at the military forts, which drew sutlers, soldiers' wives, and camp followers to Sault Ste. Marie, Green Bay, Chicago, Prairie du Chien, Fort Snelling, and to the Missouri River near today's Omaha. The Indians, then, could go to frontier stores for their goods rather than deal only, as once they had to, with duly licensed, company-governed fur traders. And, finally, the United States government

itself helped preclude monopolistic fur trading by establishing here and there along the frontier trading factories which were supported by public funds and did not have to show a profit to stay in existence.

Lastly, American economic philosophy was by nature opposed to monopoly. For one example, after the Revolution the Continental Congress made a tentative start toward chartering monopolistic land companies in Ohio but was soon forced by frontier protest to abandon the practice. Tentative suggestions that the government bring order to the fur trade, somewhat as the English had, by chartering a single huge company, got nowhere.²⁴ Even Ramsay Crooks was aware of the feeling and warned Pierre Chouteau in 1834, shortly after the Western Department had split away from the original American Fur Company, that "your business so much resembles a monopoly that there will always be strong jealousies against you."²⁵

Uniform trade conditions north of the border meant uniform practices in dealing with the winterers. After the coalition of the firms, the new Hudson's Bay Company, under the deed poll of March 26, 1821, took over the field practices developed first by the North West Company.²⁶ Clerks were stimulated by the prospect of becoming shareholding partners who voted in company councils. No such arrangement existed in the South. No winterer owned shares. (Except for the Astors, only Crooks, Stuart, and Benjamin Clapp, as agents, held stock in the American Fur Company.) No winterer could vote about any company policy. And each made his own arrangements about buying goods and selling furs through the

²⁴ Roy Robbins, *Our Landed Heritage: The Public Domain, 1776-1936*, 11-13 (Princeton, New Jersey, 1942); *American State Papers: Indian Affairs*, 2:64, 65-67; Katherine Coman, "Government Factories: An Attempt to Control Competition in the Fur Trade," in *American Economic Association, Bulletin*, 4th series, no. 2, p. 374-384 (April, 1911).

²⁵ Crooks to Chouteau, February 23, 1834, Chouteau Collection, in the Missouri Historical Society.

²⁶ Rich, *Hudson's Bay Company*, 2:406.

company as best he could, according to the conditions surrounding him.

Local traders who were strongly established bought their supplies from the company at a standard markup, as though the parent firm were nothing more than a wholesale distributor, and conducted their business entirely on their own risk, even dealing with company competitors if they so chose. If competition was particularly bitter, however, and winterers feared they could not show a profit for a year's work, the company paid them flat salaries rather than let some rival take over the area. The company's own preference was a profit-sharing arrangement whereby the winterer paid half the cost of the goods plus transportation and handling

²⁷ Porter, *Astor*, 2.825; Laveader, *Fist in the Wilderness*, 459. Russell Farnham, one of the best and most loyal of the company's traders, received \$1,000 a year when competition grew harsh in Iowa in 1822-23. William Morrison, who opposed the Hudson's Bay Company in the Rainy Lake country, received \$1,400 a year. Crooks to S. Abbott, December 19, 1822; Crooks to Morrison, November 24, 1821, in Mackinac Letter Book No. 2.

commission, and half the cost of boats, food, and wages for voyageurs during the year, the company advancing the other half. At the end of the year all furs (and maple sugar and lead) were turned over to the company, and profits or losses were shared on the same fifty-fifty scale. This course gave incentive to the winterer, helped protect the company from heavy losses, and at the same time let Astor share fully in unexpectedly good returns for any one year.²⁷

Competition of course was the greatest source of loss, and the company did its best to achieve a monopoly. In 1822 Astor, Crooks, and Senator Thomas Hart Benton succeeded in having Congress eliminate the government trading factories. Crooks drove Stone out of Michilimackinac by enticing away Stone's winterers. When Stone re-established himself in St. Louis as Stone, Bostwick and Company, the Astor firm met the threat by employing Stone and Bostwick as agents, only to jettison them when better opportunities appeared with Bernard Pratte and Company, the eventual Western De-

*A scene in the store
of a nineteenth-century
fur trading post*



partment. Unable to crush the upstart Columbia Fur Company, the Western Department and the American Fur Company together absorbed that tough-fibered group and turned it into the famed Upper Missouri Outfit. But they never did get rid of hordes of opportunistic small timers — William Wallace in Indiana, William Farnsworth and Daniel Whitney at Green Bay, James Lockwood and Michael Dousman (for a time) at Prairie du Chien, Vance Campbell in Iowa, the firm of Valois and Le Clerc on the Missouri and so on — the most violent of whom were the company's own disgruntled employees. Thus, though many Americans damned the company as a monopoly, the effectiveness of its control did not approach the true dominance enjoyed by the Hudson's Bay Company north of the border, where conditions were very different.²⁸

ANOTHER distinctive characteristic of the company was its lawlessness — not a flagrant disregard of fundamental moral codes, but the kind of arrogance that ignores regulations which appear to the regulated as ill-judged or inconvenient. This was a common frontier trait. Westward-moving squatters and speculators were notorious, for example, in the way they defied government edicts concerning land appropriation. Western mountain men, even those unassociated with the American Fur Company, paid no attention whatsoever to prohibitions against trapping on Indian lands. It was perhaps reprehensible, but not extraordinary, that in 1818 both David Stone and Ramsay Crooks, competitors at the time, used similar illegal devices for countering an unexpected stiffening in the exclusion act against foreign traders. The employment of foreign boatmen was, by contrast, still permissible. Astor's and Stone's foreign winterers were therefore listed as boatmen and the agent at Mackinac was told that the outfits were really in charge of certain American youths recently hired as apprentices. The agent accepted the declaration, but the American

Fur Company ledgers still preserved in Ottawa show clearly, by a listing of salaries, that the so-called boatmen really retained command, contrary to the law.²⁹

Liquor, which would draw skins from Indians when nothing else could, was smuggled into the Indian country in dismaying quantities, both by the company and by independents, under the pretense that it was intended as solace for the boatmen. Indian agents rash enough to interfere were instantly sued for trespass, as warning for other officials to be wary.³⁰ Violations of edicts that tried to confine the trade to designated locations were equally widespread.

The company itself did not in general authorize and sometimes did not even know about the misconduct of its traders. Yet its own arrangements with its winterers encouraged sharp trading, and when trouble resulted the company had to come to the help of the traders or lose their confidence. The result was a continuing and bitter antipathy between the company and the Indian agents and army officers charged with enforcing the laws. Where true monopoly existed in the North, by contrast, the chief factors of the Hudson's Bay Company, who had no need to try to beat out anyone, became arms of the government, responsible for the administration of justice.³¹

Fundamentally, the problem sprang from the rapid spread of settlement south of the

²⁸ Coman, in *American Economic Association, Bulletin*, 368–388; Crooks to S. Abbott, October 25, 1821; Crooks to Stuart, April 8, 1822; Crooks to Astor, April 23, 1822, in *Mackinac Letter Book No. 2*. Porter, *Astor*, 2:741–745; Lavender, *Fist in the Wilderness*, 380. For the small traders named, see the index in the latter.

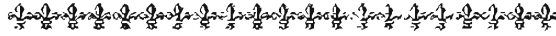
²⁹ David Lavender, *Westward Vision: The Story of the Oregon Trail*, 121–128 (New York, 1963); Lavender, *Fist in the Wilderness*, 283; [William] J. Snelling, "Geographical Sketch of Oregon Territory," in *New England Magazine*, 2:326 (April, 1832); *American Fur Company Ledgers, 1817–1834* (microfilm copy), Huntington Library, San Marino, California. The originals are in the Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa.

³⁰ Two noteworthy affairs, involving John Tipton and Lawrence Taljaferro, are summarized in Lavender, *Fist in the Wilderness*, 355, 371.

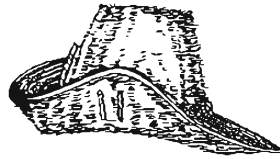
³¹ Rich, *Hudson's Bay Company*, 2:404.

border. The United States government, although committed to fostering this expansion, also tried to protect the Indians by such paternalistic methods as establishing trading factories, Indian agents, and army policemen—devices unheard of north of the border, where settlement spread slowly. In meeting these pressures of government

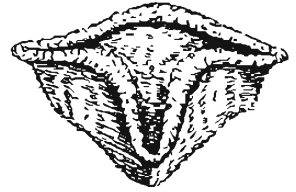
and advancing civilization the company altered its internal structure and practices as circumstances required. It did not, however, originate. Astor was an adapter, not an innovator. Thus, if inventiveness is a truly Yankee trait, then the American Fur Company was not fully American. Otherwise it was typically a product of its times.



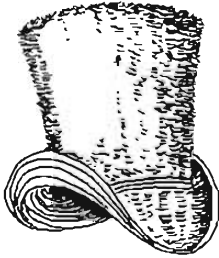
*Variations
of the
Beaver Hat*



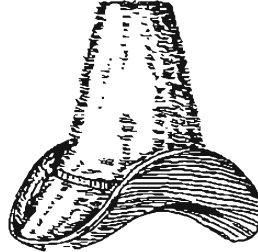
*A clerical hat
(Eighteenth century)*



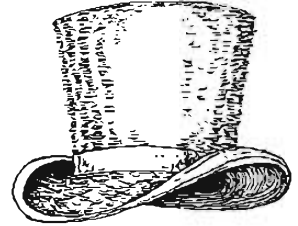
*The continental
cocked hat
(1776)*



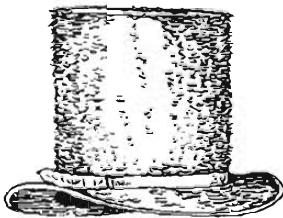
*The Wellington
(1812)*



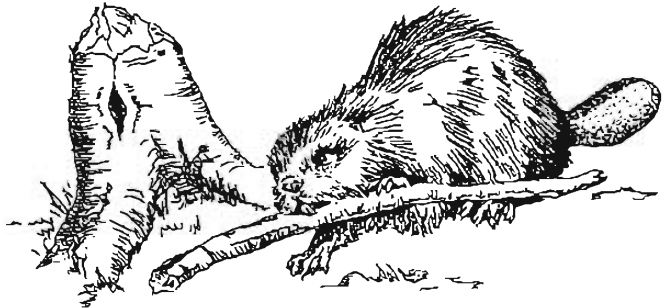
*The Paris beau
(1815)*

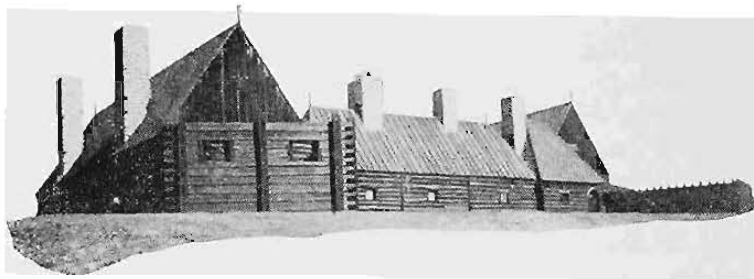


*The D'orsay
(1820)*



*The regent
(1825)*





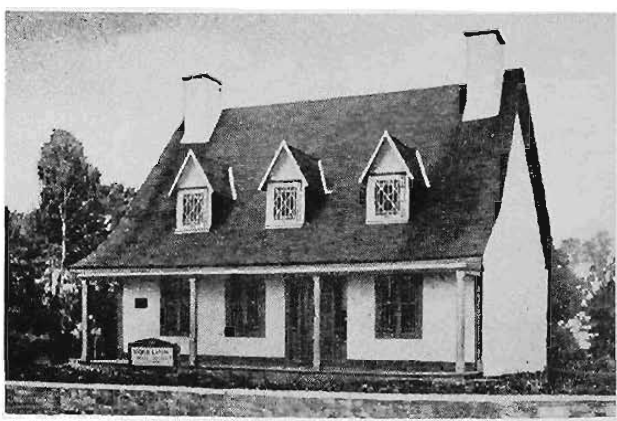
Fur Trade Sites: CANADA

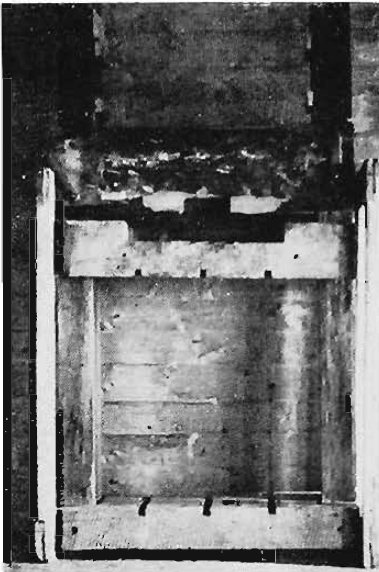
J. D. HERBERT

Mr. Herbert is the director of the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature in Winnipeg. His illustrated talk, entitled "Canadian Historic Sites of the Fur Trade," was presented at the North American Fur Trade Conference on November 2, 1965. The brief explanatory text which accompanies this photographic essay is adapted from Mr. Herbert's talk. The sites are confined to those where structural remains still exist or where significant excavations have taken place.

IT IS OCCASIONALLY forgotten that the fur trade began much earlier than we may think and that it had its beginnings on the extreme east of this continent. Port Royal (above) was established by Pierre Du Gua de Monts in 1605 on the Minas Basin off the Bay of Fundy. Destroyed by the British in 1613, its remains were discovered and its restoration was begun in 1938.

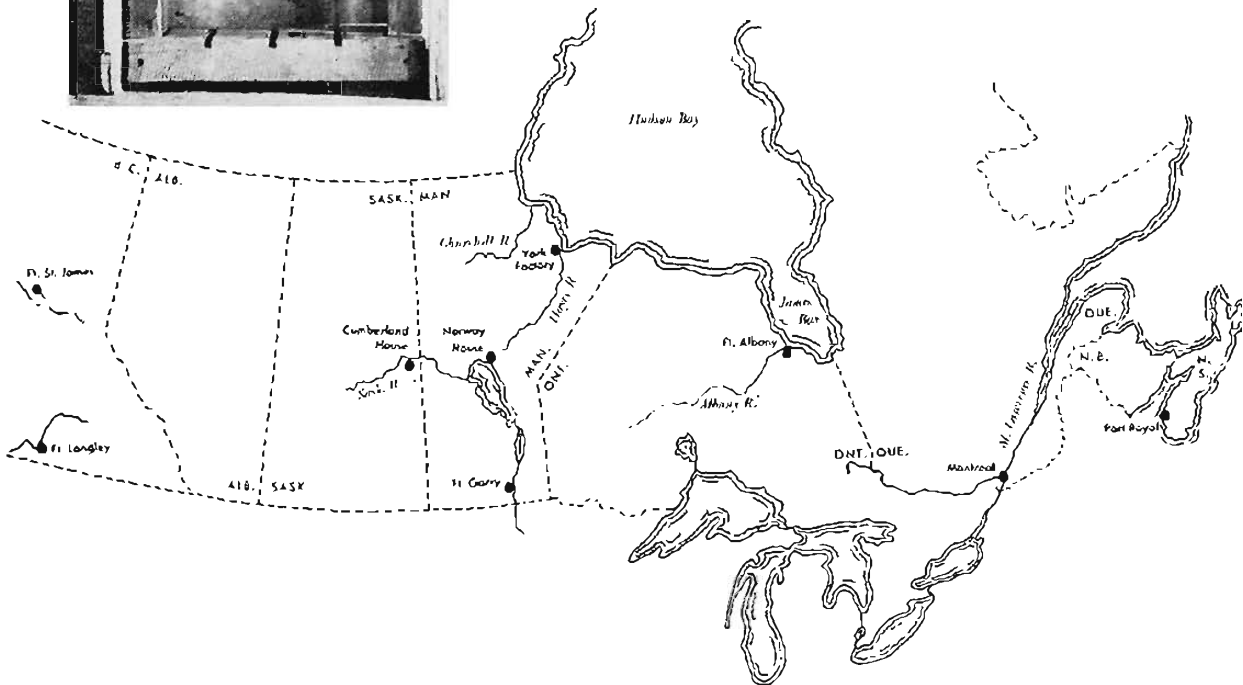
Le Manoir Lachine (lower right), in the general vicinity of Montreal on Lac St. Louis, is associated with Sieur de la Salle and was constructed about 1670. It may well be the oldest house in Canada. To the north and west, along the Albany River in Ontario is the site of the Hudson's Bay Company's Fort Albany (lower left). The old store pictured here was built approximately a hundred years ago. It has recently been demolished.

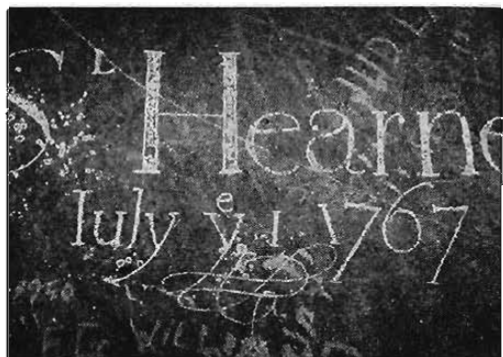




YORK FACTORY stands on the bank of the Hayes River in Manitoba where it empties into the western side of Hudson Bay. The warehouse (above) is the only building remaining. Although it still belongs to the Hudson's Bay Company, it has been abandoned for a decade and is rapidly deteriorating through vandalism and neglect.

At the left is a fur press used until fairly recent years at York Factory—surely the latest of its kind in North America. It is made of solid English oak timbers and uses neither a screw nor a lever, the weight of the wood being sufficient to compress the skins.

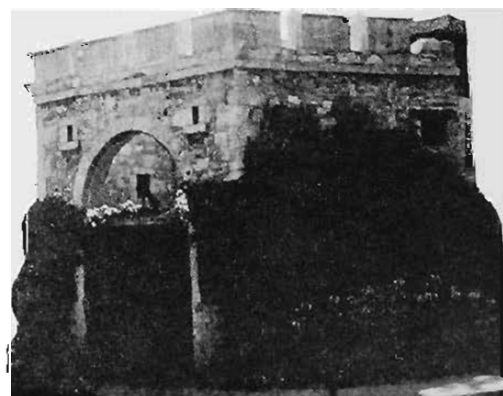
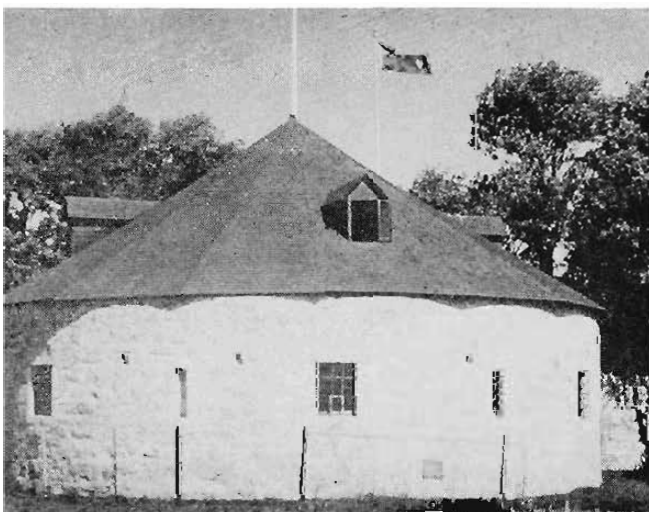


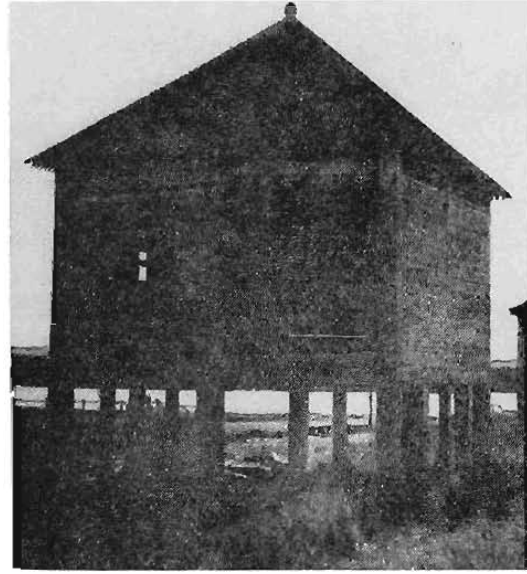
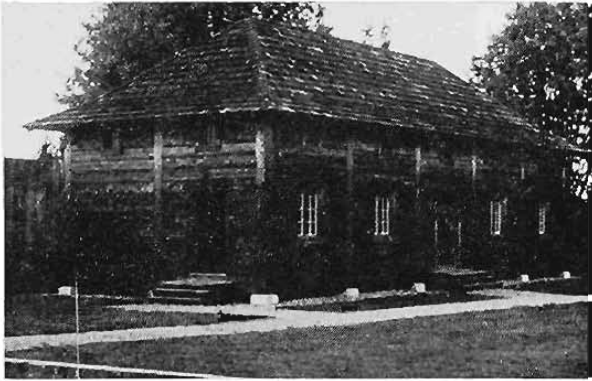


PRINCE OF WALES FORT (upper left) was established in the 1730s by the Hudson's Bay Company. Situated on the north side of the mouth of the Churchill River, this stone stronghold had forty-foot walls which defied French attempts to demolish it in 1781. This Manitoba fort is a national historic park, administered by the Canadian government, and has been partially restored. Up the Churchill about two miles is Sloop's Cove where in 1767 Samuel Hearne chiseled his name on this rock (top right). Inland and south at Playgreen Lake and the Jack River stands Norway House (center), erected about 1825 and owned by the Hudson's Bay Company. The most complete fur trade fort



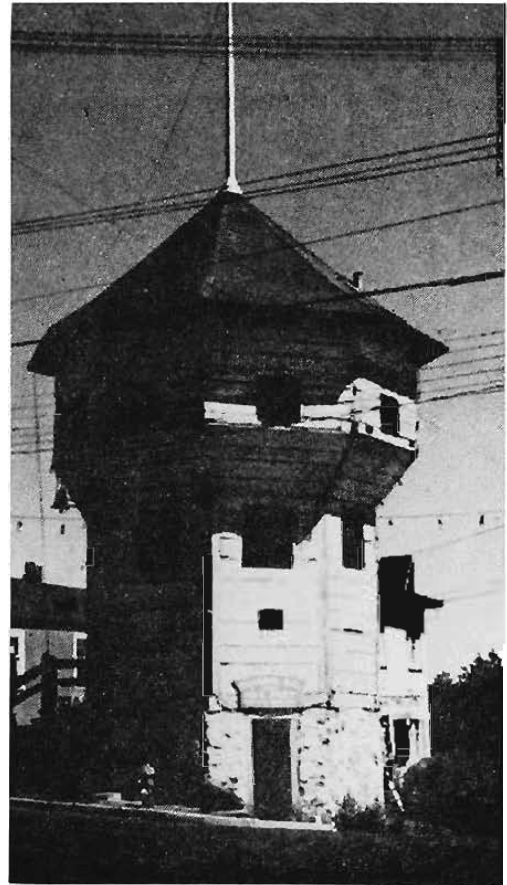
remaining in Canada is Lower Fort Garry (lower left), constructed during the 1830s and 1840s. A national historic park since 1951, it is the pride of the National Parks Branch. This photograph is of the southwest bastion which looks as it did when first built. All that is left of Upper Fort Garry is a stone gate (lower right), today belonging to the city of Winnipeg. Now in the heart of the downtown area, this fort was erected in 1835 near the junction of the Red and Assiniboine rivers.





WESTWARD in Saskatchewan, in the midst of a more modern establishment, stands the old stone magazine at Cumberland House (upper left). Its exact age is unknown, but it is reputedly over a hundred years old. Much farther west, in British Columbia, is Fort Langley, built on the left bank of the Fraser River in 1827. This view (center) shows one of the buildings which has been reconstructed by the National Parks Branch.

At Stuart Lake, farther north in the same province, Simon Fraser erected a post in 1807 which came to be known as Fort St. James. This picture (upper right) is of a fish cache, possibly the only one of its kind in Canada, which points up the fact that the inland posts of this area survived on the annual salmon catch. The last photograph in this east-to-west look at Canada's fur trade sites is the bastion at Nanaimo on Vancouver Island (right) which, strictly speaking, had nothing to do with the trade. Although it was built in 1852 by the Hudson's Bay Company, it was designed to protect a town established to develop coal mines for the British Royal Navy. The structure was moved from its original site a short distance away in 1891.





Fur Trade Sites: The PLAINS and the ROCKIES



MERRILL J. MATTES

Mr. Mattes is a historian with the National Park Service in its office of resource planning in San Francisco. The illustrations on the following pages are from those used with his paper on "Landmarks, Posts, and Rendezvous: The Plains and the Rockies."

FUR TRADE SITES understandably tend to be elusive, debatable, and, at best, fragile and frequently unrecognizable. This picture essay begins with St. Louis, which has a better claim to recognition as the gateway to the West than any other community. The warehouse of Manuel Lisa (insert, above) stood where the Gateway Arch (top left) now rises to commemorate the epic of westward expansion.

Up the Missouri River near Arrow Rock, Missouri, is the lonely grave of William H. Ashley (lower right), one of the giants of the fur trade. Farther along, toward Independence, Missouri, before the river turns north to St. Joseph, stands Fort Osage (1808-19). Built on a site chosen by William Clark, the old factory operated by William Sibley, the blockhouse, and the captain's quarters have been carefully restored by Jackson County (lower left).

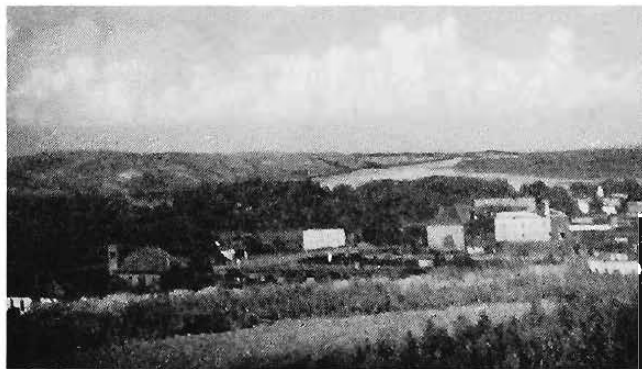




SARPY'S POST at Bellevue, Nebraska, was the beginning of that state's continuous settlement. The interior of the post store as restored by the Nebraska Historical Society is shown in a diorama (above).

North along the Missouri near the town of Fort Pierre, South Dakota, is a concentration of sites, including the hill (upper right) where the 1742 lead plate of the Vérendrye expedition was found.

Among several Hidatsa and Mandan village sites near the mouth of the Knife River

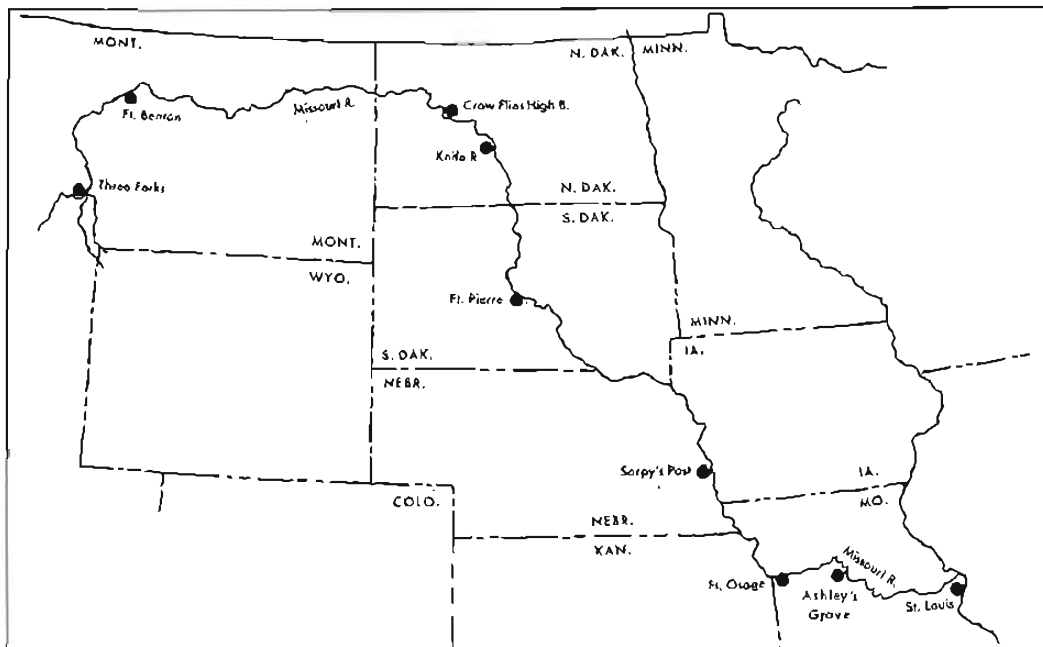
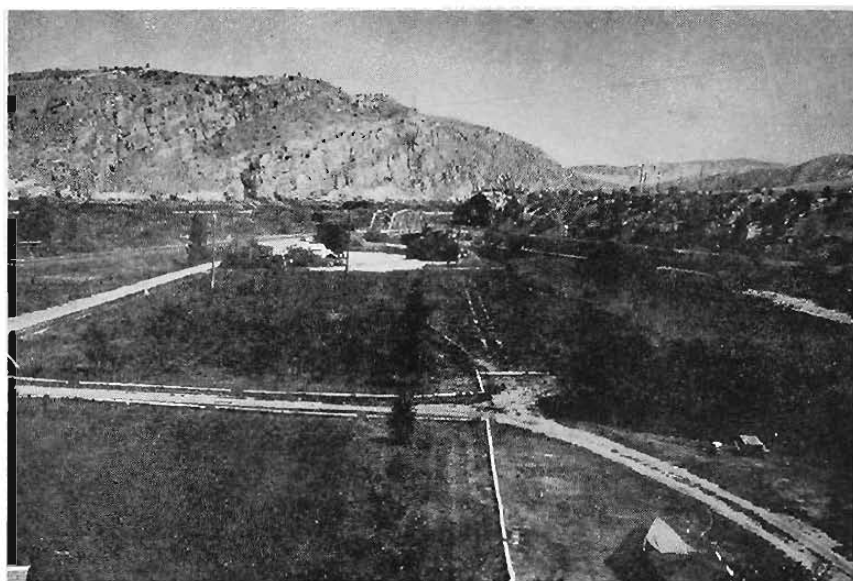


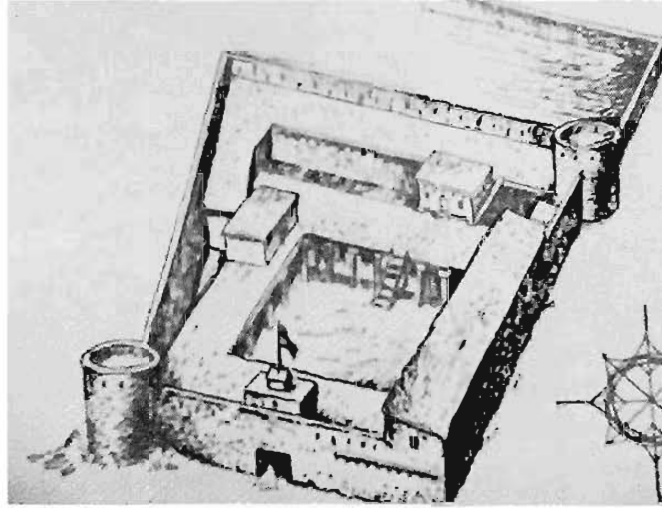
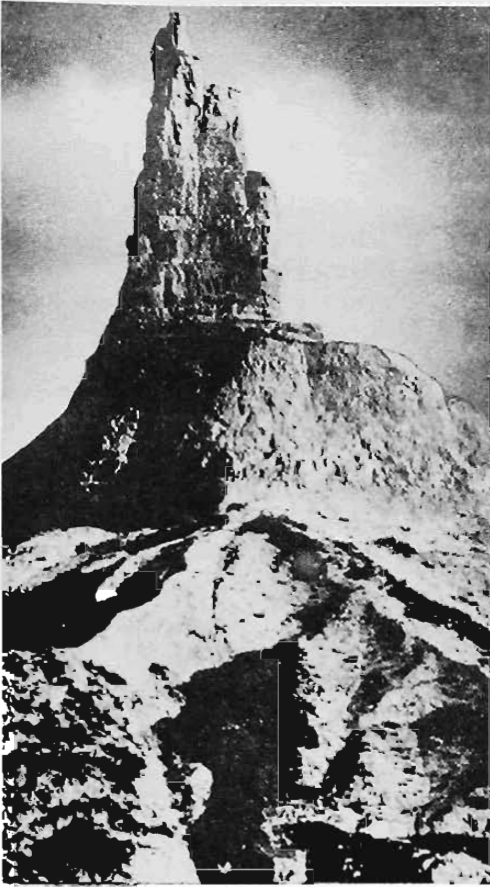
in North Dakota is the one where Toussaint Charbonneau and Sacagawea lived (left center). Some landmarks have disappeared through natural action, like Fort Mandan, built by Lewis and Clark, which is now somewhere in the Missouri. Many others, among them the American Fur Company's Fort Berthold, have been inundated by dam and reservoir construction. Comparative photographs taken from Crow Flies High Butte in 1950 (right center) and 1965 (bottom) show how a dam can obliterate the features of a historic landscape.





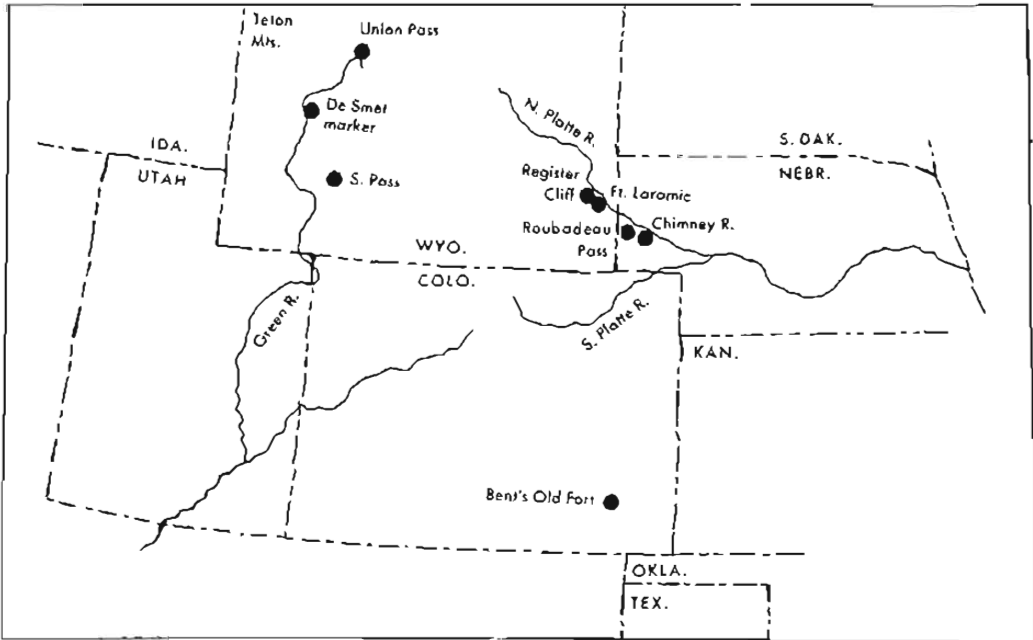
FORT BENTON, Montana, founded by the American Fur Company in 1846, is a marvelous survival of an old steamboat town. The picture at left shows the adobe remains of the original post. Three Forks (below) in the same state is a landmark of the Lewis and Clark expedition and also the site of a Missouri Fur Company fort established in 1810 by Andrew Henry and Pierre Menard.

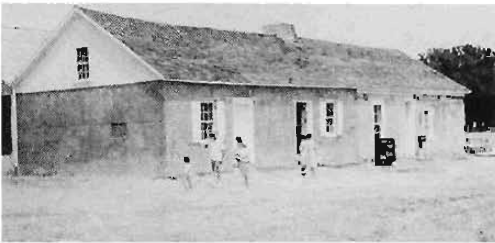




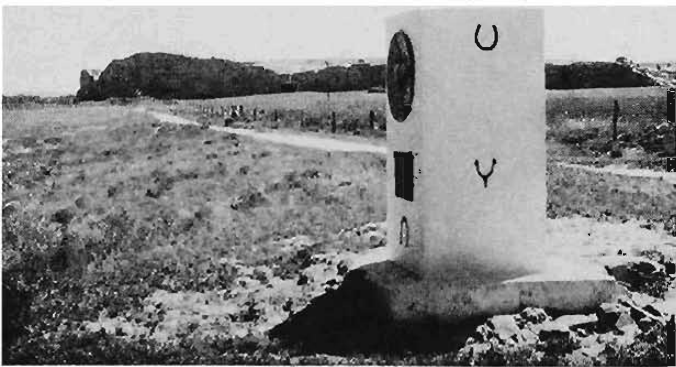
WHILE the Missouri River was the first great highway of fur trade advance, the Platte River route carried the largest volume of traffic between St. Louis and the mountain rendezvous points. Most famous, perhaps, of its landmarks is Chimney Rock (left) in extreme western Nebraska on the south side of the North Platte River.

South on the Santa Fe Trail in Colorado is Bent's Old Fort, a national historic site. An archaeological salvage operation conducted in the past three years has revealed structural features. From these and from the known architectural design (above) a reconstruction is tentatively planned.





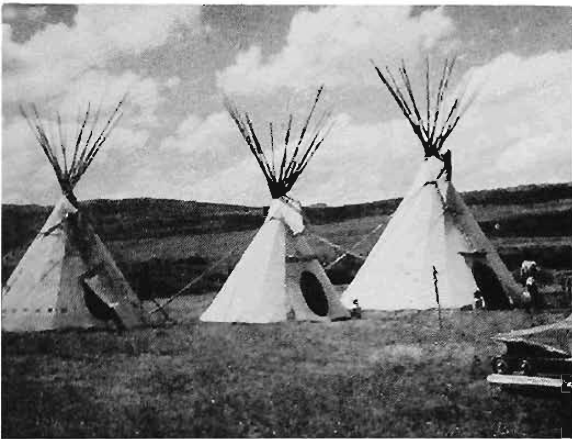
THE RETURNING ASTORIANS (above) are depicted in one of many fur trade paintings in the Oregon Trail Museum at Scotts Bluff, Nebraska. Named for one of Ashley's lieutenants, the place has been a national monument since 1919. A few miles to the west is Roubadeau Pass (top left) where in 1849 Joseph Robidoux, Jr.—the name has acquired many spellings—operated a blacksmith shop and trading post.



Fort Laramie, Wyoming, most famous of all the Platte River posts, was pivotal to the entire fur trade of the Plains and the Rockies. The adobe sutler's store of 1849 (center left) represents the transition to military control. Ten miles west is Register Cliff (lower left), the location of Seth E. Ward's trading post.

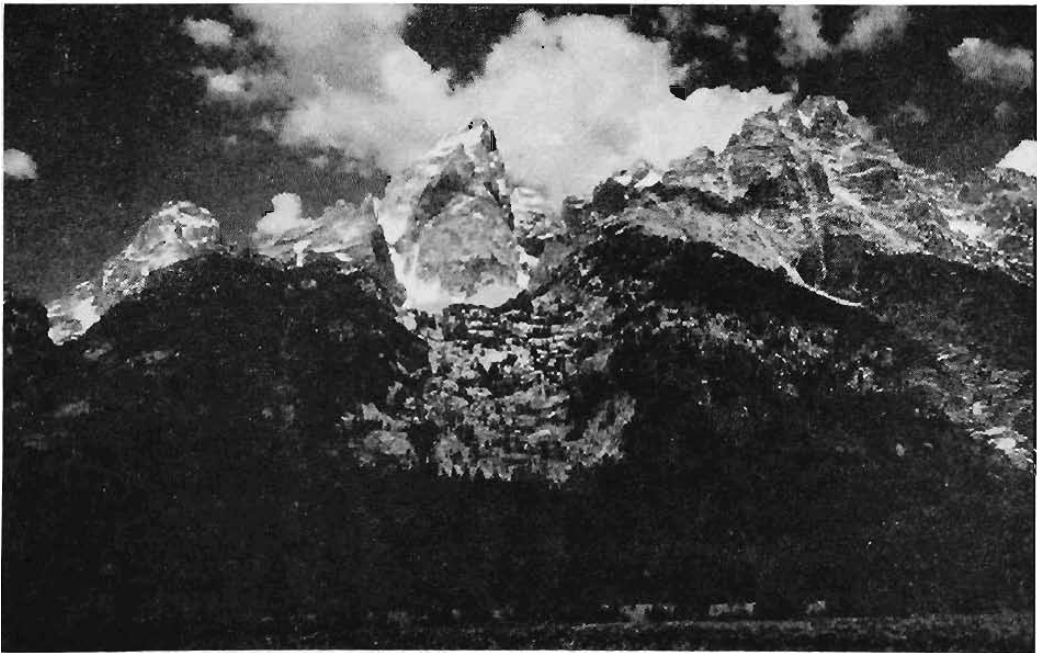
Crossing the continental divide in Wyoming is South Pass (below). First discovered by Robert Stuart, it was found again by Ashley's men.





ACROSS the continental divide to the west, near Pinedale and Daniel, Wyoming, a small shrine to Father Pierre-Jean De Smet (above) overlooks the Green River Valley. The famed Jesuit missionary visited the last rendezvous there in 1840. At the headwaters of the Green River is Union Pass (left), a crucial point in the fortunes of the Astorian expedition of 1812.

In many ways the fur trade is ideally commemorated in the museum at Moose, headquarters for Grand Teton National Park. The mountain range (below) was named by French-Canadian trappers in 1811.



Mr. Washburn is chairman of the department of American studies at the Smithsonian Institution and editor of *The Indian and the White Man*, published in 1964 as one of the Documents in American Civilization Series.

Symbol, Utility, and Aesthetics in the INDIAN FUR TRADE

WILCOMB E. WASHBURN

THE TERM "trade" is a deceptively simple word to describe a complex process. When Europeans first met Indians, the exchange of goods that took place bore almost no relation to the economic process with which we are familiar. The Indian tended to give generously of his material goods and his services without apparent demand for return, although he welcomed and expected such a return. The words of Christopher Columbus are significant testimony to this phenomenon: "They are so ingenuous and free with all they have, that no one would believe it who has not seen it; of anything that they possess, if it be asked of them, they never say no . . . and they are content with whatever trifle be given them."¹

Moreover, the Indian had no particular economic need for the products first offered by the European — items like beads, mirrors, bells, and caps — but received them gratefully for their decorative, aesthetic, magical, curiosity, or amusement "value." When he learned what pleased the European, the Indian generously offered his "products" — such as gold ornaments — in measure that astounded the European who thought in economic terms. This process continued, in some degree, until the Indian adopted white economic values and placed

on what he "gave" a price appropriate to the system of his European trading associate.

The subordination of the exchange of goods to noneconomic purposes in Indian society is demonstrated by the enormous significance of gifts. The bestowing of presents was used, for example, to establish rank and prestige, as well as to mark important occasions in the life of an individual. The ceremonial exchange of favors played an important part in intertribal diplomacy, where presents symbolized specific messages. While the exchange of such gifts can be interpreted cynically, such an explanation fails to perceive the many noneconomic purposes that the system encompassed. The term "Indian giver" implies this cynical Western reaction to Indian giving, while ignoring the cultural context of the act.

The important role of gifts in Indian-white relations has been analyzed by Wilbur R. Jacobs in *Diplomacy and Indian Gifts*. Numerous objects were made to "speak" as words, and such phrases as "bury the hatchet" and "smoke the pipe of peace" suggest the fundamental impact of these Indian practices. Jacobs, quoting Sir William John-

¹Quoted in Samuel Eliot Morison, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea: A Life of Christopher Columbus*, 1:303 (Boston, 1942).



Catlin's portrait of Rotten Foot

son, goes so far as to attribute Pontiac's War in large measure to the "lack of presents from both the French and the English."²

IN INDIAN CULTURE the "object" possessed an extensive symbolic meaning that it lacked in European or American culture. The thing, whether a wampum belt, a calumet, or a hatchet, contained a message far beyond its material utility. George Catlin's portraits of leading Indian figures record the use of such objects to express dignity

² Wilbur R. Jacobs, *Diplomacy and Indian Gifts: Anglo-French Rivalry Along the Ohio and Northwest Frontiers, 1748-1763*, 181 (Stanford, California, 1950).

³ Arthur Woodward, "The Metal Tomahawk: Its Evolution and Distribution in North America," in *Fort Ticonderoga Museum Bulletin*, January, 1946, p. 2-42; Harold L. Peterson, *American Indian Tomahawks*, 33-39 (Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, *Contributions*, vol. 19—New York, 1965); George A. West, *Tobacco, Pipes and Smoking Customs of the American Indians*, 245, 267, 317-325 (Milwaukee Public Museum, *Bulletin*, vol. 17—Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1934).

and status. The pipe tomahawk of Rotten Foot, a noted Wichita warrior, is a symbol of status as well as an item of utility. Since white culture was strongly oriented to the material aspect of things, it is no surprise that misinterpretations of the object were prevalent on both sides and continue to weaken ethnohistorical analysis.

Let us consider for a moment one of the principal items used in the Indian fur trade. The pipe tomahawk is an object which allows us to study the problems both of symbolic value and of European adaptability to the requirements of Indian "demand." We are ignorant of who created this instrument, where he did so, and under what motives and conditions. We do know, however, that such tomahawks appear to have originated about the beginning of the eighteenth century, and that the pattern of their distribution favored the northeastern section of the United States. We also know, from written sources as well as from archaeological and other evidence, that they were tremendously popular.³

The pipe tomahawk might never have been developed at all and might never have played a role in relations with the Indians but for a historical accident. Perhaps an ingenious trader or blacksmith put two ideas (and objects) together in one form and created the revolution that followed. He may have been consciously combining utility and symbol, or perhaps utility and utility, or perhaps even symbol and symbol. Did he start with aesthetic intent also? Was the first pipe tomahawk a presentation piece with an inscribed message? We do not know.

If the development of the pipe tomahawk is a historical accident and not the result of the inevitable sweep of economic forces, then there is no reason it could not have been developed earlier. Nor is there any reason why other objects or techniques could not have been devised to serve the purposes of the European nations engaged in the "trade."

Was there not a general poverty of imagination on the part of the European trader as

a result of which he often failed to perceive the true demand of the Indian? Was this not merely another example of the blindness that led early explorers to overlook the real riches of fur that they actually found in favor of the imagined riches of gold that they hoped to find? The prevalent mercantilistic assumptions under which the first trading ventures were organized, combined with European ignorance of Indian values, caused further distortion of the terms of trade, as we would understand those terms today.⁴

The existence of an unfulfilled demand is suggested by instances of Indians converting practical, utilitarian objects into decorative items. Thomas McCliesh, the chief of York Fort of the Hudson's Bay Company, wrote in 1728: "Concerning buying the Indians' old kettles, they always convert them in making fine handcuffs and pouches which is of greater value with them than twice the price of the kettle."⁵ One not infrequently finds in the early literature other examples of Indians converting utilitarian objects received from the whites into items of decoration.

THE USE of silver objects in the trade is another subject concerning which our understanding is incomplete. The term "silver trinkets," used in a comparatively recent study of the subject, reflects the rather condescending way in which such objects have been viewed.⁶ "Trinkets" is, of course, a perfectly appropriate term from the European point of view, but it masks the symbolic, religious, political, and aesthetic values that these things possessed for the red man. The word "ornament" is better but still fails to capture the full Indian meaning.

It is known that an immense quantity of crosses and brooches (valued at the sum of £4,000 in the four years from 1797 to 1801) were made by Montreal silversmiths for the fur traders James and Andrew McGill. An impressive number of silver pieces (worth £2,800) were made by three Philadelphia craftsmen in the 1760s for the

Pennsylvania trade and for presentation purposes.⁷ One of the research problems in this field is to determine how many of these silver objects were used in the exchange relationship of the trade, and how many were dispensed as gifts, favors, or political symbols.

An even greater problem, however, is the question of why such silver works were not used in the trade until the eighteenth century. Certainly the ability to produce them existed a hundred years earlier. Certainly the demand for them on the part of the Indians always existed — at least in latent form. Seventeenth-century observers noted that the Indians often wore ornaments of copper or brass and were exceedingly proud of them. Indeed, ornaments in these materials were made not only by the Indians, but by Europeans for the Indians.

⁴ For a discussion of the noneconomic role of the fur trade as an instrument of national policy, see Paul C. Phillips, *The Fur Trade*, 2:563–573 (Norman, Oklahoma, 1961). The relationship between the decline of the fur trade and the decline of mercantilism is a subject that deserves further study. It is possible that the trade, because of its nonutilitarian ramifications, required such a framework of governmental purpose.

⁵ Kenneth C. Davies, A. M. Johnson, and Richard Glover, eds., *Letters from Hudson Bay, 1703–40*, 134 (London, 1965).

⁶ Ramsay Traquair, "Montreal and the Indian Trade Silver," in *Canadian Historical Review*, 19:1–8 (March, 1938). On trade silver see also William M. Beauchamp, *Metallic Ornaments of the New York Indians*, 10 (New York State Museum, *Bulletins*, no. 73 — Albany, 1903); Arthur C. Parker, "The Origin of Iroquois Silversmithing," in *American Anthropologist*, new series, 12:349 (July–September, 1910); Marius Barbeau, "Indian Trade Silver," in Royal Society of Canada, *Transactions*, series 3, vol. 34, section 2, p. 30, 36 (1940); Barbeau, "Indian-Trade Silver," in *The Beaver*, December, 1942, p. 10–14; George I. Quimby, Jr., "Notes on Indian Trade Silver Ornaments in Michigan," in Michigan Academy of Science, Arts and Letters, *Papers*, 22:15 (1937); and "European Trade Articles as Chronological Indicators for the Archaeology of the Historic Period in Michigan," in *Papers*, 24:29 (1938); Robert C. Alberts, "Trade Silver and Indian Silver Work in the Great Lakes Region," in *Wisconsin Archeologist*, new series, 34:1–121 (March, 1953).

⁷ Traquair, in *Canadian Historical Review*, 19:7; Harold E. Gillingham, *Indian Ornaments made by Philadelphia Silversmiths*, 25 (New York, 1936).

According to archaeological and documentary evidence, the production of such ornaments by Europeans in the early period was small. That silver objects were made as early as the 1680s, however, is indicated by two Indian badges, or medallic passports, in the Virginia Historical Society. An act of the General Assembly of Virginia of March 1661/62 provided for the manufacture of silver or copper plates engraved with the names of appropriate Indian towns to be given to all the nearby "kings" under English domination. After Bacon's Rebellion in 1677, a handsome silver medallion was prepared in England for the loyal Queen of Pamunkey and presented with appropriate ceremonies.⁸

Yet the practice of giving or trading silver objects did not really become "big business" until the late eighteenth century. Why? I suspect that a general lack of imagination on the part of Europeans is chiefly responsible. I suspect too that a few imaginative individuals eventually caught up, two centuries late, with the potential demand. Another factor may have been the increasing rivalry between the French and English, which created competition at that time in the production of attractive trade goods. Whatever the sequence of events, by 1829 an American official observed that Indian medals were not only "tokens of Friendship," but "badges of power to them, and trophies of renown."⁹

⁸ Virginia Historical Society, *An Occasion Bulletin*, no. 11, p. 79 (October, 1965).

⁹ Quoted by Francis Paul Prucha, "Early Indian Peace Medals," in *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 45:280 (Summer, 1962).

¹⁰ Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, 1:273 (New York, 1902). See also LeRoy R. Hafen, ed., *The Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West*, 1:75-81 (Glendale, California, 1965).

¹¹ Ewers, "The Indian Trade of the Upper Missouri before Lewis and Clark: An Interpretation," in Missouri Historical Society, *Bulletin*, 10:431n. (July, 1954). See also Ewers, ed., *Adventures of Zenas Leonard, Fur Trader*, xiii (Norman, Oklahoma, 1959); Morgan, ed., *The West of William H. Ashley*, xxix, xlv, 94, 106, 108, 118, 145, 149, 168 (Denver, Colorado, 1964).

¹² Ewers, ed., *Zenas Leonard*, viii-xii.

ANOTHER vital aspect that must be probed more deeply before we can fully understand the fur trade is the setting or conditions under which the exchange took place. Here, as in the case of the pipe tomahawk, we have a historical example which throws significant light on the trade. I refer to the "trappers' rendezvous" which developed in the western United States in the period of the 1820s and 1830s. The invention of the trappers' spring rendezvous was attributed to General William H. Ashley by Hiram M. Chittenden in his study of the American fur trade.¹⁰ John C. Ewers has suggested that it is more probably an "adaptation of the pre-existing Shoshoni trading rendezvous, at the same season of the year and in the same region, to the advantage of white trappers." Ewers' contention is vigorously denied by Dale L. Morgan, who reasserts the priority of Ashley in initiating the custom.¹¹

Whatever the origins of the rendezvous, its method was a new one. It was not the manner in which the fur trade had been carried on previously, either in this area or in other parts of the continent. As a technique it succeeded, whereas previous attempts of the fur trader had run into persistent opposition and frustration from the Indian inhabitants. Certainly the shift from the territory of the Blackfoot to that of the friendly Crow and Shoshoni had a significant influence on the success which came to the Rocky Mountain Fur Company.¹² But may not the conditions under which the trade took place have been an influence more significant than we are prepared to realize? The rendezvous removed the trade from a purely commercial, military, or economic context to one more nearly resembling a social occasion, where an atmosphere of good will, equality, and good cheer predominated over economic considerations. The resulting synthesis was revolutionary in its implications. The furs still got to St. Louis. The trade goods still got to the Indian. But the emotional release for both white and Indian, the jubilant excesses, the liquor, the women, and the meeting in a context of equality re-

deemed a process which might otherwise have been merely a cold exchange of material goods.

The rendezvous was the ideal form by which the individualism of the American fur trade could succeed without the need for the elaborate controls which the Hudson's Bay Company, for example, imposed on its servants. Without this social outlet individual trappers might have outraged Indian nations and American national policy alike; instead they were renewed and revived in the rude "pleasure dome" of the rendezvous.

It is a curious coincidence that the United States Indian factory system expired about the same time that the private trappers' rendezvous was born. The reasons for the demise of the factory system are many and diverse, but I would suggest that it was organized on such an explicitly economic basis that it could not achieve even its economic purpose, to say nothing of its potential for noneconomic purposes.¹³ The reluctance or inability to utilize gifts, credit, or alcohol, and the failure of responsible officials to travel to the Indian country or to enter into the types of quasi-Indian cultural situations which distinguished other fur trade operations combined to prevent the over-all cultural adjustment necessary to win success in even the narrowest economic sense. I suspect also that more imagination and plentiful supplies of items of symbolic significance — whether as gifts or trade items — might well have won for the government houses, which were backed by the prestige and power of the United States itself, a success equal to or superior to that achieved by the private companies.

The close personal relations between responsible officials and Indians that developed in Canada may well have provided a more suitable philosophical and practical context for later relations with the Indians than was achieved farther south. As Harold A. Innis has pointed out, the "fur trade demanded a long apprenticeship on the part of its personnel in dealing with Indians."¹⁴ This frequently involved the most intimate

relationships of sex and family, creating bonds and sentiments which largely neutralized the impediments of ignorance and greed. One thinks of James Isham, the Hudson's Bay Company factor of the eighteenth century, the "Grand Old Man" of the fur trade, who influenced a generation of factors to the practice of kindness toward the Indians.¹⁵ The success of the Johnsons in New York owed much to a similar personal involvement with the Indians with whom they dealt. The significance of the personal relationship was, I am afraid, never fully understood by high-ranking administrators, and national and economic values suffered as a result.

The North American fur trade was much more than the simple exchange of economic values. It was a way of life for individuals and for nations, differing for the individuals and nations involved. It cannot be studied in isolation as an economic phenomenon. It must be studied in terms of the cultural totality in which it was involved and approached through all the strands of meaning which explicate a society and its actions.

¹³ See Ora Brooks Peake, *A History of the United States Indian Factory System, 1795-1822*, 204-256 (Denver, Colorado, 1954).

¹⁴ Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada*, 40 (New Haven, Connecticut, 1962).

¹⁵ E. E. Rich and A. M. Johnson, eds., *James Isham's Observations on Hudson's Bay, 1743*, cii (London and Toronto, 1949).



ERMINÉ

Mr. Witthoft has been associated as an archaeologist with the Pennsylvania State Museum in Harrisburg and has published a number of reports in American Antiquity and other archaeological journals.

Archaeology as a Key to the Colonial Fur Trade

JOHN WITTHOFT

ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDY of the fur trade in eastern North America has been to a large extent object-centered. There are several reasons for this. The early Colonial fur trade was carried on at coastal ports and white settlements and did not involve any permanent business establishments. The trader resident among the Indians and the established fur trading post were features of the later westward expansion, not of the early trade. Such shoreline trading sites as did exist have largely been destroyed by the erosion and land subsidence which has been almost universal along the Atlantic Coast. The white trader, therefore, has left little trace, either among documentary sources or in the ground. He must be followed through the occurrence of his trade goods in Indian sites.

European goods are useful in dating aboriginal sites, yet in almost every case, dates for specific types of European-made objects have to be derived from archaeological contexts, since the literature and other sources of Europe contain little information on ordinary manufactured products.¹ Craft se-

crecy and general illiteracy combined to obscure the history of crafts, and most of the trade goods from the sixteenth, seventeenth, and early eighteenth centuries must be analyzed and dated by the techniques of pre-history. This is done by finding them in sites which can be dated, and then dating other sites by finding in them items which have already been dated by excavation. Such a process would be very faulty if it were applied in a chain-like fashion, but it can be markedly valid when archaeologists deal with large samples from many areas and with interlocked networks of sites.

The gunflint industry, for example, went through a succession of technological stages. European literature and manuscript sources provide little information, practically all of it later than 1780. Most of what we know about early gunflints has come out of American soil, and our dates for steps in the evolution of the fire flint depend upon site contexts in North America.

Glass beads are the most useful gauge for dating American Indian sites of the Colonial period. They occur in abundance and were subject to rapid changes in technology. There are many distinct types — more than a thousand in North America — and their styles show a pattern of cyclical recurrence, with only minor differences to distinguish

¹ Dutch and English white pottery pipes are a notable exception, but even in this case we lack documentary material from earlier times, and few European pipes came into Indian possession before 1650.

the beads of one decade from those of their recurrence five or more decades later.² But given correct identification, they permit very precise dating. Moreover, bead types seem to be international in their distribution, and their dates appear valid on a world-wide basis. Systematic studies of the trade bead types of North America, Africa, Asia, India, and South America will no doubt lead in time to new insights concerning European glass manufacture and world commerce in this era.

Context data for trade goods has been derived from sites of Indian towns, from the association of types in Indian grave lots, from occurrences in documented house sites of early settlers, and from artifacts found on the sites of military operations. Military camps of short duration and houses which were burned at a known time have provided critical samples, but all sites have yielded valuable source material for the history of European technology. Craft objects which are intermixed without regard to date in the superficial layers of European sites may be found delicately separated by decade in the sites of Colonial America.

A striking example of the usefulness of such archaeological data is a recent breakthrough in the history of American pewter. Scholars had long been puzzled over the problem of distinguishing the work of Francis Basset I of New York, who worked between 1730 and 1755, from that of his son, Francis Basset II, who worked from 1754 to 1777. Valuable inferences on technological and stylistic changes in pewter making awaited identification of the work of the two men. However, it had been impossible to say which touch mark was used by the father and which by the son.

The answer came from the site of Old Kuskuskies at West Pittsburgh, Lawrence County, Pennsylvania, a Wyandot town of 1747-51. This band of Indians had killed some French traders on the Sandusky in 1747 and had fled east to the British-dominated area. The site is tightly documented and dated, and the objects found there are

all consistent with the dates. The Wyandot had attended a conference in Albany, New York, in 1742.

Among the various objects inclosed in a crude coffin with the skeleton of a child were two bronze medals of George II and Caroline, which we believe were minted in 1738, and two pewter porringers with handles in an early eighteenth-century British style. They were carefully cleaned, and a legible Francis Basset touch was found preserved in the corroded metal of one of them. Because of the date of the site, this mark had to be that of the father; therefore all Basset pieces with this mark are his, and all those with the other Basset mark are by his son. A problem which had been considered insoluble was thus cleared up.

THE EARLIEST fur trade was carried on by unrecorded fishermen and coastwise travelers, who protected their monopoly by a conspiracy of silence. We do not know whether this traffic began in 1498 or before 1400. Even archaeological evidence is remarkably sparse. Perhaps the major trade goods were perishable materials such as woolen fabrics; hemp (marijuana) may also have been an important commodity.

Indian sites of this stage are extremely difficult to identify and interpret. Each village normally includes a single piece of European brass, usually a delicately made and finely joined tubular bead. What trade goods exist are concentrated in a few of the graves. A Seneca village in the Genesee Valley is the best studied site of this stage. It yielded one brass bead, and less than 1 per cent of the graves contained European goods. The trade objects are quite different from those of any later stage. They are not goods made for the Indian trade, nor are they the ordinary domestic objects of Europe; they reflect the ways of the sea.

Among parts stripped from ships are bolts,

²A systematic study of glass bead types is not yet available. However, Kenneth E. Kidd of Trent University, Ontario, has such a monograph in preparation.

metal rings from rigging, and metal tips from belaying pins. Broad, thin knives appear to have been specialized tools of the fisherman. Spiral brass earrings, worn in the left ears of Indian burials, represent a direct transference of the ancient sailor's caste mark; this was the seaman's charm against bad eyesight. Strings of glass beads, especially in blue, probably came from sailors who wore them as a protection against the evil eye. Thin-walled tubular beads with large openings, spherical blue beads of a widespread type, and faience beads formed upon a sub-spherical clay core are characteristic. Brass kettles were cut up into ornaments and knives; even bails and tabs which held the bails were used. Steel axes were so precious that they were sawed with slabs of sandstone into narrow chisel-like blades, and their eyes were ground into adz blades. Sawed-up axes, some of the bead types, large knives, and ship fittings are considered diagnostic of this earliest stage.

The sites with objects from the earliest trade have been tentatively dated at about 1550 on the basis of seriation with later sites. The St. Lawrence Valley, the Maritime Provinces, and Newfoundland should yield more precise information on this stage, since early trade and fishing are believed to have been centered there, but little work has been done in that area. Sixteenth-century sites of the Gulf drainage basin are even less known. In the coastal plains and piedmont of the Southeast, major Indian villages which probably date from the late 1500s have not yet produced European objects.

Trade goods from the late sixteenth century are almost as little known as those of the first stage. Village sites are thinly scattered with brass and iron scrap, so that any token excavation produces a brass bead,

² This has been designated the Blue Rock green type.

⁴ Chevron beads also characterize the early Spanish period in Florida, and we suspect that they were among the earliest trade beads in the Northeast. They have not chanced to turn up among the small samples available in sites from the first stage in the fur trade.

a steel knife fragment, or debris from the native reworking of European metal. Glass beads seem to be absent from living areas; most are found with infant burials.

The most distinctive and numerous object is an oval glass bead, opaque and ranging from faded white to jade green to blue in color. It is found only in this horizon.³ Chevron beads are more numerous than in later sites. Although found in small percentages as late as 1640, they are abundant only in sites earlier than 1600. Flush-eye beads are also diagnostic of sites from the second stage of the trade. Both chevron and flush-eye types are closely related to Islamic mosaic glass.⁴ Steel table knives and steel axes are present but not abundant, and brass was known, but kettles were still cut up rather than used as cooking utensils. A few steel axes were sawed into smaller tools.

THE 1590s brought a revolution in the fur trade, with a vast increase in European contacts and reorganization of aboriginal power centers. The Hurons, Iroquois, Susquehanna, Powhatan, and Cherokee became the great middlemen in the fur trade, trapping, buying, and looting beaver from the continental interior and carrying it to nearly depopulated coasts for rendezvous with sailing ships. Very few European objects traveled west of these five native political groups; most trade goods stayed in their towns. Intertribal wars began for control of the trade and for access to interior beaver hunting lands.

The third stage, beginning somewhat before 1600 and extending into the 1620s, coincided with the first successful French, British, and Dutch colonies but probably had little connection with them. Many trade objects which are well known from the Indian sites have never been found where white settlements existed nor in the port towns. A conspicuous example may be noted at Jamestown, where despite the abundance of glass trade beads in contemporary Indian sites, practically none have been found in the excavations at the settlement. On the

other hand, the pottery tableware and clay pipes so conspicuous at Jamestown are barely present in nearby Indian villages. Curiously, some of the pewter objects found in seventeenth-century Indian sites have no parallels in either the Colonial settlements or in the collections of Europe.

There is an abundance of data from Iroquois and Susquehanna sites of this stage. The first brass kettles appear in graves. The Seneca had ceased to use stone ax blades, being entirely supplied with steel ones, whereas half of the Susquehanna ax, adz, and hoe blades were of stone, half of steel. Steel knives had entirely replaced flint. Many arrowheads were cut from brass, but flint tips predominated. A few lead bullets and shot occur, but no firearm fragments have yet been found. Shell wampum of the type used in treaty belts appears for the first time, along with earlier types of shell beads. Hoof-handle brass spoons, tiny brass pipes (made for use with hemp³), sabers, bottle glass, and fragments of European white clay pipes are found occasionally. Cannel coal and catlinite beads indicate contacts with the Ohio, as do potsherds from the Fort Ancient cultures.

Glass beads occur in profusion and variety. They are concentrated in graves but are also broadcast throughout the village sites. The majority of the beads are of a type or series of types which we have called "early blue."⁴ This bead type is found as a tiny minority in sites from the first and second stages of the trade and in sites as late as 1650; it may have been in existence at the time of the earliest trade, but it is overwhelmingly abundant just before and after 1600. It is a small, spherical to oval, sky blue bead of weak glass, filled with capillary bubble holes and strains parallel to the hole. It weathers and etches very badly in alkaline soil, and it is normally so weak and damaged that it is not recovered from sites dug over by the pot hunter. Many examples have longitudinal stripes in white. Despite the long period over which this type appears, it is a good, sensitive dating device. When it

is predominant — even in a small sample — the date is close to 1600.

Practically all of the other bead types of this stage are spherical or subspherical, with almost no cylindrical or tubular examples. All have dull surfaces, none of them being coated with transparent clear glass, as are the beads of the next stage.

The five Indian confederacies which controlled the fur trade along the eastern margin of the continent sat like robber barons upon the trading paths, the hunting grounds to the west, and the coastal trading points. Little beaver was traded from any other tribes at the ports, few trade goods passed beyond the confederacies, and many interior tribes were exterminated or decimated by raids for fur. The scant trade goods that do appear in the interior provide a terminal date for major protohistoric cultures there.

Apparently only the early blue — the commonest and cheapest bead type — was passed on into the interior by the native fur trade.⁵ The only other European goods known from western sites of this age are brass cones and outline figures of salamanders and catfish, made of sheet brass and found in infants' graves with early blue beads. Identical brass figures of water dogs (mud puppies) and fish are otherwise known only in Siouxan sites of the central Roanoke Valley, suggesting that there were trade contacts with peoples of the Carolina piedmont over the great trading path between Virginia and the Ohio. The presence

³ Examples found in Florida have been described as "Estaufa blue"; collectors erroneously call it "Jamestown blue."

⁴ The only glass beads which I know of from the Keyser complex of western Virginia, the Clover complex of the West Virginia panhandle, the Monongahela Woodland of southwestern Pennsylvania, and the Madisonville complex of central Ohio are the early blue type. Unfortunately these sites have received little respectable excavation and have been torn apart by collectors. Few of the beads have been saved or preserved, because they are usually found in so strained and eroded a state that they are shattered in the ground or in the fingers of the collector. The early blue bead may be widespread and unrecorded in many other areas, since archaeological pot hunting has had so notorious a history in the Midwest.

of early blue beads in some numbers, with the absence of other types, places the death date for the Fort Ancient cultures very shortly after 1600.

THE FOURTH STAGE, marked by the first appearance of firearms in northeastern sites, is usually merged into sites with a longer occupation and can only be segregated through study of grave-lot association. However, one Seneca site near Rochester Junction, New York, was occupied for just the proper interval to define this stage. It is believed to date from about 1630.

The guns are mainly primitive or transitional flintlock mechanisms: snaphaunces, dog locks, and Jacobean locks. The sudden abundance of firearms, coincident with the early period of invention in firelock mechanisms, speaks eloquently about the economic importance of the fur trade. Rochester Junction was far better armed than Jamestown. Susquehanna communities of the same age are equally well supplied with guns, marking the beginning of a new era in Indian warfare.

Beads of this stage are distinctive. Most of them are small spherical and seed beads in a wide variety of colors, most of them monochrome. They are coated with a thin layer of crystal clear glass, giving them a brilliance unequaled in any other stage. Beads shaped like a grain of maize and made of brilliant transparent yellow and green crown glass, and seed beads of the same glass are common, but they are generally deeply corroded, with an opaque white chalky surface. Large spherical dull black beads with spirals and guilloches enameled in yellow or white are another distinctive type limited to this stage.

Sites of 1640-60 are sharply delimited as a stage among the Seneca, but the Susquehanna towns had a longer time range, and there the fifth stage can be separated only through the analysis of grave lots. Guns were abundant, arrowheads scarcely present; native pottery was obsolescent, brass kettles in normal use. Seal-handle spoons, apostle-

handle knives, rapiers, daggers, plate armor, specialized carpenter's and other craft tools, and the first Dutch pottery pipes appear. Wampum belts occur as grave offerings, and wampum beads are more abundant than at any other time. Extended burials begin to occur, reflecting changes in sleeping posture that came with the use of woolen clothing and bedding. Objects made of tin plate are noted for the first time — doubtless from the shops of Saxony.

Glass beads are found in huge quantities. Most of them are cylindrical, the size and shape of belt wampum, in a variety of colors and stripings. A few polychrome spherical beads of the "Venetian" type occur, and the only necklaces made up entirely of this type come from sites of this age. The most spectacular bead type of all, a chevron bead the size of a pullet egg, is found only at this stage, but it is mainly represented by broken fragments scattered on village sites.

The sixth and last stage in great native wealth, and the stage of complete decadence in native crafts in the Northeast, was from 1660 to 1700. Except for beads, trade goods are eccentric; we even have a French pewter chamber pot from a Susquehanna grave, a refinement which could scarcely have been found in Baltimore or New York at this time. Long pewter pipes with animal and human figures perched on the front rim of the bowl are ordinary; no European records or parallels are known.

Glass beads are monotonous and without interest; practically every one is a pea-sized and pea-shaped mass of monochrome dull black glass or Indian-red glass, with a few green equivalents. Seed beads of the same glasses are common but have usually been lost in digging graves of this period. Practically no beads of any other type are found.

Discs cut from broken delft plates are found in Indian sites of this age. Similar discs from Colonial white sites, such as Brunswick Town, North Carolina, are interpreted as checkers. Since there are no European dishes in the Indian sites of the same age, the discs probably were gaming pieces

made in white settlements. Bottles occur for the first time in abundance in the Susquehanna sites. Some are Rhenish stoneware jugs, others are square glass case bottles. However, every site produces a few unique items, unknown in the surviving collections of Europe and not previously found in the course of excavation. A few decanters of Venetian glass, odd pieces of pewter, and some peculiar steel tools and weapons represent types not otherwise known.

MAJOR EVENTS in the Northeast had run their course long before 1700. The Huron tribe had been destroyed by the Iroquois in 1648. Thus the Huron sites provide us with a good cutoff date for certain types of trade goods. After 1648, the Iroquois dominated the northern trade routes over the French River to the west, and held the Missisauga, the Amikwa, and the Chippewa subject as canoemen in the trade across the northern rivers and lakes. War with the Susquehanna for control of more southerly routes to the interior was intensified.

The Iroquois nearly exterminated the Susquehanna in 1675, thus providing us with another secure cutoff date for several kinds of trade goods. The Seneca, dominant in the Iroquois confederacy, were next doomed. In 1687 a French army of voyageurs, adventurers, and Christian Indians under the Marquis de Denonville fell upon the Seneca country. They burned every Seneca community and killed many of the people. The towns burned by Denonville have been identified in the ground and are our major anchor point for seriations within the historic Seneca sites. From 1675 until the close of the American Revolution, Seneca remnants were engaged in bitter warfare with the Cherokee and Catawba of the Carolinas and with the Miami of western Ohio. But the no man's land had become so broad that conclusive victories were impossible, and only raids for murder could be accomplished.

Beaver was the great fur in early Colonial commerce. Two features account for its value. The first was Indian labor: Indians

plucked out the guard hairs, which made the pelt differ from shorn beaver in that the stiff long hairs had been completely removed rather than cut off at the level of the soft underfur. Tanning and plucking beaver meant many days of work by Indian women, and women had much to say in the negotiations of the trade.

Even more important was the existence of a unique market. American beaver was not used in Europe at this time but went to the fur auctions in Moscow, from which it was transhipped to unidentified Oriental markets. American beaver was in little demand among hatters in the early period, since European beaver—until its extinction—was the preferred material for felting into hats.

Pennsylvania Indians traveling to coastal ports in 1675 received a rude awakening on the eve of their death at Seneca and Cayuga hands. Beaver was suddenly worth much less. The Oriental market had collapsed, and the only remaining demand was from hatters, who bought American beaver as a poor substitute for the beaver of Europe. The great age of American Indian wealth had ended forever.

After 1700 guns were rarely placed in graves, and all trade goods were less abundant. Sites are smaller, and total populations were vastly reduced. The most distinctive bead types of this stage are large, translucent, spherical or polyhedral forms which were made by spinning a band of molten glass upon a spindle or wire. Some are spheres of milk glass, opalescent, white from air bubbles whipped into the molten glass. Others were faceted by strokes of a flat or floral-carved paddle. A variety of tubular and wampum-shaped beads occurs in bright colors; they often show striations from having been drawn through a die before they were cut into segments. Die-drawing of beads was apparently a new technique in the glass industry of the early 1700s.

Quartz beads are a scant but characteristic feature in sites of this age. They were made in India and were cut from rock crys-

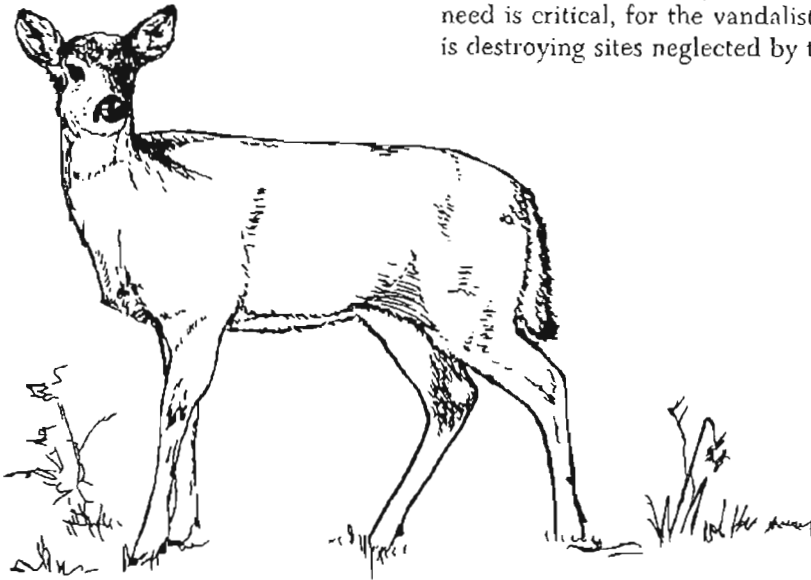
tal, sard, and carnelian. Bottle fragments are abundant. Pots or buckets of tin plate had largely replaced the more expensive brass kettles. Small triangles of blue and white agate glass (faked agate), sawed to shape and perforated at one corner, were worn suspended from a hole in the septum of the nose. Minnesota catlinite, worked into beads, pendants, and calumets, also occurs in some abundance for the first time.

Eastern sites of the Seneca, Delawares, Conoy, Shawnee, and others contain beads from the 1700-50 interval intermixed with all the bead types of 1630-90. In cemeteries of the earlier sites from 25 to 90 per cent of the graves have been looted, but only beads and wampum have been removed. Some were disturbed when the bodies were still partly articulated, for bones are scattered on the grave bottom, not mixed into the fill. Thus the grave cover had been intact enough so that the whole burial could be removed without dissecting away the soil. Often a leaf-mold lens in the depression at the top of the grave fill indicates that it was looted before the site was first plowed. Thus the evidence is clear that as their prosperity declined the eastern tribes were reduced to the expedient of digging the graves of their grandfathers for wampum.



TO THE ARCHAEOLOGISTS sifting the soil of Indian graves and village sites, the fur trade appears with two distinct facets. Its history is part of the development of European technology and commerce; it is also a chapter in the story of American Indian cultures. Our studies of the successive stages in the growth of the fur trade and of the object contents of each contribute to both areas of knowledge. The European framework is that of technical advance, economic expansion, and the evolution of craft guild, shop factory, and factory. The Indian context is that of technological decay, social disintegration, and dependency.

In our growing picture of the Indian and white history of Colonial and Federal times, more emphasis is being placed on the archaeology of Indian sites. Those from the earliest stage call for greater study, and many areas, such as the Deep South and the Canadian Seaboard, have scarcely been touched. The need is critical, for the vandalistic collector is destroying sites neglected by the student.



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The Growth and Economic Significance of the AMERICAN FUR TRADE, 1790-1890

JAMES L. CLAYTON

ALTHOUGH there are excellent works on almost every aspect of the American fur trade, an over-all statistical study has never been compiled. Consequently, while most of the virile adventures of fur trade history have been told in vivid detail, several fundamental questions of considerable significance have been left unanswered. Foremost among these questions are: To what extent, if any, was the fur trade related economically to the westward movement? Did the fur trade ever have real economic importance, either nationally or by region? Was the center of its operations always in the Far West? Was the beaver actually the leading fur, or did it only appear to be? Finally, were the famous trading companies we know so much about more important than the thousands of independent traders who left few if any records? The answers to these and similar questions can be approached only through statistical methods.¹

THE USE of the word "fur" in such a study needs careful definition at the outset. As employed here the term includes all animal peltries of commercial significance used as material in lining or trimming articles of wearing apparel, or for constructing entire garments. Heretofore, certain somewhat

exotic species of fur bearers, such as the fur seal, and some very common but not exotic furs, such as the raccoon, have been excluded from many fur trade studies for reasons that are not entirely clear.

American fur traders usually divided their pelts into four categories: furs, skins, robes, and hides. Under "furs" were grouped all of the fur-bearing rodents (including the fiber-producing beaver), felines, canines, weasels, and marsupials. "Skins" almost always meant those of deer, bear, or raccoon, but might include a few elk, moose, and, later, antelope. A "robe" always referred to

¹ This study is arbitrarily limited to the United States during the century 1790-1890 because substantial fur trade data of a statistical nature already exists for the Colonial period — see Murry G. Lawson, *Fur: A Study in English Mercantilism, 1700-1775* (Toronto, 1943) — and because the frontier had virtually disappeared by 1890. By "United States" is meant not only the territory within its jurisdiction but also the territorial waters and furs taken on the high seas by hunters flying the Stars and Stripes. The writer has chosen the path of conformity rather than accuracy in using "United States" and "America" synonymously — a practice for which he owes an apology to Canadian and Mexican readers. Finally, a note of gratitude to several persons who have made helpful comments on this paper: Dale L. Morgan, Oscar O. Winther, Douglass C. North, Paul W. Gates, David M. Ellis, John E. Sunder, and some whose names are not known to the writer.

one side of a winter-killed buffalo cow or of a young bull dressed with the fur on, and a "hide" was the full pelt of a summer-killed buffalo cow, dressed without the hair, or of a short-haired bull. These definitions will be followed throughout this paper. When the term "furs" alone is used, it is meant to include skins also, where appropriate.

To acquire reliable data on the growth of the American fur trade for the period 1790 to 1890, when the buffalo herds were gone, the frontier was settled, and urbanism was well advanced, it would normally be neces-

sary to determine the number, kind, and value of all pelts gathered throughout the United States for every year in question. This is impossible. Such data exists neither for the country as a whole nor for any given region within it. There are accurate production records for a few of the larger companies during a limited number of years, but such data alone is too scanty to show production flows by region.²

Fortunately there are other ways of measuring the growth of the fur trade. All available data indicates that before the Civil War the bulk of American furs were exported rather than consumed at home. Records of the leading fur companies clearly testify to this. They are substantiated by the census returns of 1840, the only year in which the trade was surveyed, and by a statement of the leading fur merchant in London. For the decades following the Civil War, supporting data is less voluminous but no contrary evidence is apparent, and the pattern of exports remained unchanged. Export figures, therefore, are the most reliable indicators of the growth of the American fur trade during the nineteenth century.³

During the whole of this period the majority of furs shipped abroad went to Great Britain. Figures compiled before 1822 are not always reliable, but from that date until 1890 Great Britain received 74 per cent by value of all United States fur exports. A record was also kept of both the number and kind of furs shipped from the United States to Great Britain; consequently, the trends of the trade for that period can be determined with reasonable accuracy. Henry Poland compiled a list of fur importations into Great Britain by species and origin for every year from 1763 to 1891. This record is the best starting point for any extended analysis of the fur trade of North America.⁴

Historians have been reluctant to use Poland's data, possibly because the sources cannot be verified. When corroborated by available records of the major American fur companies and by data from government sources, however, Poland's figures can be

² Among a dozen depositories, the most complete American Fur Company production statistics seen by the writer are in the company records at the New-York Historical Society. All American Fur Company papers cited in this article are in this collection.

³ See especially "Furs and Skins," American Fur Company Papers; "Packing Book, 1830-33," and "Fur Sales at New York City, 1859-64," Chouteau Collection in the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis. Returns of the 1840 census show that furs and skins worth \$1,065,896 were gathered in the United States that year; the secretary of the treasury reported that furs and skins exported for the year beginning October 1, 1839, were valued at \$1,237,789. In 1842 *Niles Weekly Register* said the value of furs and skins gathered in that year was \$760,214. Exports for the year beginning October 1, 1841, amounted to \$598,000. These figures, although not absolutely reliable, tend to substantiate available company records. *United States Census, 1840, Statistics of the United States*, 408; 26 Congress, 2 session, *House Executive Documents*, no. 122, p. 252 (serial 386); 27 Congress, 3 session, *House Documents*, no. 220, p. 10, 46 (serial 425); *Niles Weekly Register*, 63:27 (1842). C. M. Lampson, London's leading fur merchant of the time, maintained that the whole of the American fur crop eventually found its way to the London market. Lampson to Ramsay Crooks, December 1, 1845, American Fur Company Papers. For a thorough bibliography on the economics of the post-Civil War fur trade, see Ernest Thomas Seton, *Life-Histories of Northern Animals: An Account of the Mammals of Manitoba*, 2:1203-1220 (New York, 1909).

⁴ Poland, *Fur-Bearing Animals in Nature and Commerce*, xxvii-xxx (London, 1892). Figures on fur exports may be found in the annual treasury reports, published as *House Executive Documents* and also bound separately after 1817 as *Annual Reports of the Secretary of the Treasury*. These figures have been compiled for the years prior to 1884 in 48 Congress, 1 session, *House Miscellaneous Documents*, no. 49, part 2, p. 32, 130 (serial 2236). They are lacking for the years 1792-95. Herein they are cited as Secretary of the Treasury, *Annual Reports*, except where a specific report is quoted.

most valuable for showing trends over a fairly long period. For example, his general accuracy can be checked by valuing each species of fur bearer according to the prices offered by the American Fur Company for number 1 prime skins, less 20 per cent for nonprime skins. The writer did this for all years from 1820 to 1850, except six for which price data is unavailable. Poland's figures were found to be within 10 per cent of the value of fur exports to Great Britain as listed in the annual reports of the secretary of the treasury. Again, one may also check Poland's tabulations for the major fur bearers during the years 1831-43 against those given in John MacGregor's *Commercial Statistics* (1850). Although the data often differs widely for any given year, the trends are invariably the same.⁶

Prior to 1822, Poland's data is not very useful. His figures are rounded and appear to be estimates rather than tabulations, and before the 1820s many British companies were gathering furs within the United States and their returns cannot be separated from Poland's figures. For this period, therefore, one must rely on United States export tabulations alone.

Judging from the annual reports of the secretary of the treasury, the American fur trade grew rapidly during the latter part of the 1790s, fell off somewhat at the turn of the century, and then almost doubled its production until it was cut short by the embargo of 1808. Thereafter it languished until the close of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, only to rise again with renewed vigor as Europeans, long deprived of luxuries, began buying furs in large quantities. Unfortunately, there seems to be no way of breaking down the trade on a fur-by-fur basis for these early years. All authorities agree, however, that the beaver was of commanding importance.

Beginning in the 1820s the American fur trade entered a period of sustained growth which was not to abate until the Great Depression of the 1930s. According to Poland, the total number of furs and skins exported

from the United States to Great Britain increased substantially in every decade from 1820 to 1890. His data is substantiated by the annual reports of the secretary of the treasury, which show that the value of fur exports to Great Britain increased in every decade. Together, these figures indicate that the American fur trade underwent considerable growth from 1820 to 1860 instead of declining, as many have supposed. More important, they show that a further fivefold increase in exports occurred between 1860 and 1890. Paradoxically, this later period of greatest expansion has received the least attention from historians.

NOT ALL of the furs exported increased in quantity during this period, and some actually declined. According to Poland, of the twelve varieties shipped to Great Britain prior to the Civil War, there was a substantial and steady increase in muskrat, raccoon, fox, and mink, and a moderate increase in deer, otter, and wolf. The number of fisher and bear pelts rose in the 1830s but diminished thereafter. Only two furs decreased consistently: beaver and marten. Poland's figures clearly indicate a general pattern of growth during the years 1820-60, not simply a large increase in one or two furs.

These trends are substantiated by the available records of the major companies engaged in the trade before the Civil War. The American Fur Company — by far the largest and most important trading concern in the United States at that time — kept accurate lists of all furs received from its outfits. These are available in summary form for the years 1829-31 and in complete detail for 1834-45. The Chouteau companies of St. Louis kept a partial record of the furs and skins marketed, and this information is also available for the years 1831, 1835-39,

⁶ Poland's figures may have come from Hudson's Bay Company records, from trade information available when he compiled his work, or from His Majesty's Custom and Excise. Alice M. Johnson of the Hudson's Bay Record Society, London, to the author, June 26, 1962; R. W. Hyman of the British Museum, London, to the author, June 25, 1962.

and 1860–61. This data represents a sizable percentage of the United States fur returns from the late 1820s to the early 1860s.⁶

To illustrate, from 1829 to 1831 the American Fur Company harvested annually an average of 708,000 furs, mostly muskrat, raccoon, deer, and beaver. These figures include the harvest from both the Far West and the Great Lakes region. A decade later, from 1835 to 1842, the American Fur Company, having yielded its territory west of the Missouri River to the Chouteaus, averaged 589,000 robes, furs, and skins annually. These returns, however, were for the Great Lakes region alone. Add to this approximately 214,000 furs that were marketed yearly by the American Fur Company for the various Chouteau companies. These furs were included in the earlier figure, and if they are taken into account the total is 803,000 compared with 708,000 for the 1829–31 period. This is an impressive increase in light of the fact that by 1835–42 the fur trading area had been considerably reduced by settlement.

The growth of the American fur trade from 1820 to 1860 can also be shown by the value of furs harvested. This method of measurement affords a number of insights not apparent if the trade is gauged by numbers only. Figures for the average annual

value of furs and skins exported from this country are available in the United States Treasury reports for all but four years since 1790. Although they are probably not absolutely accurate for any single year prior to the 1820s, they show conclusively that except for the period of the embargo and the War of 1812 the value of exports was steadily growing from 1796 to 1890. It is apparent that the rate of growth from the 1820s to the 1890s, measured by value of exports, is somewhat less than when measured by the numbers of furs and skins shipped to Great Britain. This difference is easily explained. The furs which constituted the bulk of the export trade depreciated in value; if an increase in price occurred, it lagged considerably behind the proportionate increase in numbers. The average annual price of muskrat skins in the 1850s, for example, was only nine cents; hence, although the number of muskrats exported to England increased by 8,930,000 during the decade, the value added was only \$80,280.⁷ Also, those furs that increased most rapidly in numbers were generally the least valuable.

Thus far we have said nothing about the growth of the trade in relation to the domestic market. What evidence we have—and it is admittedly scanty—suggests that no single pelt was of greater importance during the second (and possibly the third) quarter of the nineteenth century in the domestic market than the buffalo robe.⁸ In every year for which we have reliable records of peltries sold by the Chouteaus, robes were from two to three times more valuable in the aggregate than any other pelt. By the early 1860s, robes represented almost 90 per cent by value of all pelts marketed by that company. Buffalo robes were second in aggregate value in the returns of the American Fur Company from 1835 to 1842.

Beyond a crude estimate, the number of robes marketed in the United States during any decade is undeterminable. For the 1820s, receipts at New Orleans are probably the best indicator of robes harvested. From 1822 to 1830 an annual average of 8,689

⁶ See 22 Congress, 1 session, *Senate Documents*, vol. 2, no. 90, p. 78 (serial 213); "Furs and Skins, 1834–42," and "Receiving Books," vol. 3–6, American Fur Company Papers; "Packing Book, 1830–33," Chouteau Collection.

⁷ Figures on muskrat skins are calculated from a table in Anne Bezanson, Robert D. Gray, and Miriam Hussey, *Wholesale Prices in Philadelphia, 1784–1861*, 2:150 (Philadelphia, 1938). Bezanson's price data is based on the average monthly price of number 1 prime muskrat at Philadelphia, second only to New York City as a fur marketing center in the United States. World prices were set at London and Leipzig.

⁸ The most useful studies of the economic aspects of the buffalo robe trade are Frank Gilbert Roe, *The North American Buffalo* (Toronto, 1951); William T. Hornaday, "The Extirpation of the American Bison," in Smithsonian Institution, *Annual Report*, part 2, p. 367 (Washington, 1889); Seton, *Life-Histories of Northern Animals*, 1:247–303; Martin S. Garretson, *The American Bison* (New York, 1938).

packs or approximately 104,000 robes was deposited for reshipment to New York City. During the 1830s this figure fell to 3,140 packs or about 37,600 robes per year, but by that time many western robes were beginning to be shipped via more northerly routes to eastern and midwestern markets. Available data for St. Louis receipts during the 1830s indicates that about 90,000 robes per year were sent down the Missouri River, and this increased to 100,000 per year during the 1850s and 1860s.⁹ Beyond this, one cannot be specific. The domestic trade in furs was probably never as important, however, as the export trade.

AS TO the nature of the American fur trade, it is abundantly clear that it may be divided economically into three major eras characterized by the dominant fur of the time. From 1790 to the 1820s this was, of course, the beaver. Through the 1860s the raccoon was most important, and from the 1870s to the 1890s the fur seal predominated.

The era of the beaver is the best understood and on it there is little new information to offer. The trade in beaver reached its apogee during the first decade of the nineteenth century. These ten years saw pelts estimated at \$160,000 sent to Great Britain annually. Following the War of 1812, production fell markedly. According to Poland the number of beaver skins imported into Great Britain from the United States plummeted from about 56,000 annually between 1818 and 1822 to less than 7,000 yearly from 1823 to 1827. Because before 1822 beaver exports had represented more value than all other furs combined, the removal of this bulwark brought a decline in the trade as a whole. In 1825, however, the price of beaver began to rise rapidly and by 1830 it had almost doubled. This increase naturally led to more vigorous and extensive trapping, particularly in the Far West, and in 1828 exports were rising again. Receipts of furs at New Orleans, for example, show a steady increase from 24,000 pelts in 1827 to over 96,000 pelts in 1833.¹⁰

From 1828 to 1833 the fur trade grew vigorously and during this period almost all of the companies expanded operations. Exports rose steadily from \$442,000 in 1827 to \$842,000 in 1833, the latter figure the highest for any year since the War of 1812. The price of beaver averaged \$5.99 per pound in Philadelphia during these years and was higher than for any comparable time between 1784 and 1861.¹¹ This five-year period is sometimes considered the heyday of the American fur trade. If one compares it only with the years immediately preceding and considers beaver alone, such an interpretation is partially justified. It is more correct, however, to view the late 1820s and early 1830s as the last vigorous gasp of a dying era, whose glory was perched perilously on high prices and romantic exploits rather than upon solid production.

In 1834 the substantial control of the trade by the American Fur Company was broken when John Jacob Astor sold out to his partners, Ramsay Crooks, Pierre Chouteau, Jr., and others. Before that year the firm had probably controlled about three fourths of the export market, but thereafter the company, together with its exclusive agents, was to be content with about half the market. By the late 1830s new concerns had moved into areas previously controlled by the American Fur Company, and unusually bitter competition was the result. This was notably the case in the Ohio Valley—a prolific fur-producing region—where the firms of George and William Ewing pressed the older company especially hard. As a direct consequence of this renewed competi-

⁹ See Roe, *The North American Buffalo*, 489-520; Hornaday, in Smithsonian Institution, *Annual Report*, part 2, p. 502; Merrill Burlingame, "The Buffalo in Trade and Commerce," in *North Dakota Historical Quarterly*, 3:262-291 (July, 1929).

¹⁰ Poland, *Fur-Bearing Animals*, xxvii-xxx; Bezanson, Gray, and Hussey, *Wholesale Prices in Philadelphia, 1784-1861*, 2:7; Isaac Lippincott, *A Century and a Half of Fur Trade at St. Louis*, 233-239 (Washington University, *Studies*, vol. 3—St. Louis, 1915).

¹¹ Calculated from a table in Bezanson, Gray, and Hussey, *Wholesale Prices in Philadelphia, 1784-1861*, 2:7.

tion, the quantity and value of fur exports doubled after 1838, and in 1840 they were larger than for any previous year in the century.¹²

Contrary to some accounts, figures indicate that the depression of 1837–39 had little effect on the American fur trade. The value of exports remained stable from 1836 to 1838; thereafter it rose sharply until 1841. Prices were set by the London auctions, and European demand held steady until May, 1841, when the market collapsed, as it did periodically. By 1843 exports had experienced the severest decline since the 1820s. Beaver dropped to \$2.62 per pound, the lowest price since 1809, and muskrat fell to the lowest figure since the American Revolution, except for a short period in 1838–39. Even with this disastrous situation, however, the average annual value of exported furs from 1840 through 1845 was higher than for any peak year since the War of 1812.¹³

The key to this incongruous situation is not hard to find. During the mid-1830s the ubiquitous and unpretentious raccoon quietly replaced the august beaver as the

dominant fur in the American trade. Raccoon exports to England during the 1830s more than doubled over the previous decade, rising to above 2,500,000, with a value estimated at \$1,431,000.¹⁴ Moreover, unlike beaver, substantial numbers of raccoon pelts were retained in the United States for use as hats, coats, and trim. Unfortunately there is no way of measuring the extent of this domestic trade, although it was undoubtedly large.

This shift not only marked the end of an epoch but also the end of a process as old as the trade itself. From the very beginning of the North American fur trade, the beaver had been the most sought-after fur bearer. Strangely enough, it was popular not for its pelt but for its fiber, the short, downy gray felt at the base of the guard hairs. This fiber was pounded, mashed, stiffened, and rolled into hats by experts in Europe. In the 1830s wool, silk, and other materials came into use for hats. Strictly speaking, therefore, the period before the 1830s should be called the fiber trade and not the fur trade, because the "fine fur" bearers played only a minor role in comparison with the beaver.

THE PLACE of the raccoon as a fur bearer is not generally recognized. It was trapped in significant numbers only to the north of the Ohio River, and that area received little attention from writers on the fur trade after the raccoon became important. Outside the Great Lakes region the raccoon was of no significance. Only a few were found in Canada and the Far West. Within the Ohio Valley, the raccoon was trapped primarily in Indiana, Ohio, and Illinois, but it was found in considerable numbers throughout the region. The finest pelts came from the Kankakee and White River basins in Indiana and were darker in color than those taken elsewhere, some being almost completely black. Those taken to the east of this region were nearly as good, but raccoons from south of the Ohio had short, thin pelts and were not marketable.¹⁵

Several factors were responsible for the

¹² 22 Congress, 1 session, *Senate Documents*, vol. 2, no. 90, p. 78; Secretary of the Treasury, *Annual Reports*. The Detroit Department of the American Fur Company harvested 132,000 furs in 1838, and increased competition raised this figure to 727,000 by 1840; see "Furs and Skins," in American Fur Company Papers.

¹³ Bezanson, Gray, and Hussey, *Wholesale Prices in Philadelphia, 1784–1861*, 2:7, 150; Secretary of the Treasury, *Annual Reports*; Anne Bezanson et al., *Wholesale Prices in Philadelphia, 1852–1896*, 269 (Philadelphia, 1954); Poland, *Fur-Bearing Animals*, xxx–xxvii.

¹⁴ Seton believed that not more than half of the raccoons killed were marketed in London. *Life-Histories of Northern Animals*, 2:1017.

¹⁵ Of the 561,000 raccoons gathered by the American Fur Company in 1835–42, almost 500,000 came from the Ohio Valley. On the natural habitat of the raccoon, see Seton, *Life-Histories of Northern Animals*, 2:1013; John James Audubon, *Quadrupeds of North America*, volume 2, under "raccoon" (New York, 1849). On the raccoon trade, see Bert Anson, "The Fur Traders in Northern Indiana: 1796–1850," Ph.D. thesis, University of Indiana, 1943; Anne Ratterman, "The Struggle for Monopoly of the Fur Trade," Master's thesis, University of Minnesota, 1927. References to the basins of the Kankakee and White rivers in Indiana are numerous in the American Fur Company Papers.

increased significance of the raccoon trade. In 1837 the Russians lowered their fur tariff, and raccoon skins were particularly sought after by Russian Jews and Poles, who demanded coonskin caps à la Davy Crockett. The czar interdicted their use in 1846, but in the meantime demand for the heavy, long-haired, densely furred pelts had risen in Germany, where they were used not only for hats but for trimming coats and were preferred to the lighter, less bulky furs in use today. During these years almost all raccoon pelts were sent first to London, where C. M. Lampson and Company controlled (and stabilized) the market, re-exporting in turn to eastern Europe.¹⁶

At the same time a uniquely favorable situation in America aided the expansion of raccoon production. In 1825, at the request of the Osage Indians, the federal government began to pay individual Indian debts to fur traders out of tribal funds. The philosophy behind this practice was simple: The government was vitally interested in Indian land cessions to meet the needs of an expanding population. Since the good will of a trader was often crucial to the successful conclusion of a treaty, United States authorities saw no evil in speeding the negotiations by providing for the satisfaction of traders' claims. This practice—perhaps innocuous at first—grew gradually but steadily until by the late 1830s about \$200,000 was secured annually by traders from Indian treaties, and in 1842 such claims amounted to over \$2,000,000. The bulk of this money was paid to individuals in the Great Lakes region—the heartland of raccoon production.¹⁷

This powerful government subsidy, most of which was doled out during the depression years of 1837–42, gave several companies and many individual traders a new lease on life and invigorated the region's fur industry. A small operator with a capital investment of only \$1,000 might receive more than that amount in claims paid, while large corporations fared even better. From 1835 to 1838, for example, the American Fur

Company received over two thirds the value of its stock in government money and paid dividends totaling 50 per cent. Although payments to other firms are not so well documented, it is known that the Ewings of Indiana continued their fur trading operations long after these had ceased to be profitable, solely as an excuse for submitting further claims.¹⁸ Thus, when the demand for raccoon increased, conditions for meeting it were unusually propitious.

The price of raccoon varied widely after the late 1830s. Before that a pelt was worth about fifty cents; thereafter sometimes as much as \$1.25. About two thirds of the raccoon crop of the American Fur Company was graded number 1 prime, and about a third of this was labeled "Indian Handled."¹⁹ Such pelts were more carefully cured, usually softened by chewing, and were consequently worth more. Every effort was made to expedite handling because the raccoon pelt deteriorated faster than most other furs.

Despite the Russian interdiction of 1846, the raccoon continued to dominate the American fur trade until after the Civil War. According to Henry Poland, over 4,000,000 pelts were exported to England during the 1840s, almost double the number sent in the 1830s, and the two decades which followed

¹⁶ See especially the correspondence between Ramsay Crooks and C. M. Lampson in the American Fur Company Papers, and the Crooks-Ewing correspondence in the George W. and William G. Ewing Papers, Indiana State Library, Indianapolis.

¹⁷ See Charles Kappler, *Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties*, 2:220 (Washington, D.C., 1904); 23 Congress, 1 session, *House Reports*, no. 474, vol. 4, p. 95–128 (serial 263); 31 Congress, 1 session, *House Reports of Committees*, vol. 3, no. 489 (serial 585). Debt claims are provided for in many of the treaties in Kappler, *Indian Affairs*, volume 2. Claims payments to traders and companies may be found in the index to the "Special Files," a series of unclassified folders in the Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Archives.

¹⁸ See Ramsay Crooks to Wildes and Company, July 30, 1836; John Whetten to William Brewster, February 20, 1837; Crooks to Brewster, May 18, 1839; all in American Fur Company Papers; 23 Congress, 1 session, *House Reports*, no. 474, p. 95–128.

¹⁹ "Furs and Skins," in American Fur Company Papers.

accounted for over 9,000,000. Other furs such as muskrat were produced in greater quantities, but their total value was still considerably less than that of raccoon. Although we do not have reliable price data on all the furs in the trade, it is incontestable that until the 1870s the raccoon continued to be America's most important fur export.²⁰

IF POLAND'S FIGURES are reliable for showing trends before the Civil War, we may fairly assume that they continued to be, and we may use them for the same purpose in the years that followed the conflict. Exports to Great Britain indicate that three furs showed remarkable growth after the Civil War: mink, skunk, and fur seal. During the 1860s approximately 32,000 mink were exported annually to Great Britain; by the end of the eighties this figure had risen almost tenfold. Behind this increase in mink exports was a rise in price from about \$2.50 per pelt in 1860 to \$4.00 in 1873.²¹ This increase — dictated by fashion

— led to the domestication of mink and the establishment of mink ranches in the United States during the mid-1870s. Beginning in 1876, however, the price of mink declined rapidly and did not rise again until the twentieth century.

The growth of the skunk fur industry was about half as fast as that of mink. During the 1860s annual exports of skunk to Great Britain amounted to about 100,000 pelts; by the eighties this figure had tripled. Worth not more than 25 cents in 1860, the value of a skunk pelt rose to \$1.00 by 1870 and remained about there until the 1890s.²²

It was the fur seal, however, which clearly dominated the American trade from the 1870s to the 1890s. No other fur was even half so important in aggregate value.²³ Indeed, the seal was by all odds the most important pelt economically in the American fur trade until the twentieth century.

During the early part of the nineteenth century, hundreds of thousands of seal pelts were taken from the South Pacific. These were usually marketed in China and Russia, but owing to indiscriminate slaughter the seal rookeries in that area were soon depleted. During the early and mid-nineteenth century, agents of the Russian government had also been harvesting about 20,000 fur seals annually from the Bering Sea, but because the pelts were poorly cured, demand for them was insignificant.²⁴

With the purchase of Alaska by the United States in 1867, however, the number of fur seals exported from American jurisdictions increased almost immediately to over 100,000 a year. We have accurate and reasonably complete data on the fur seal industry after that date. The United States government in 1870 awarded a twenty-year lease of the seal fisheries on the Pribilof Islands to the Alaska Commercial Company, which was allowed to harvest 100,000 mature bachelor seals annually, paying in return a yearly rent of \$55,000, and \$2.62 in taxes on each pelt taken. From 1870 to 1890 the company harvested over 1,800,000 fur seals at an estimated profit of \$18,754,000.²⁵

²⁰ Poland, *Fur-Bearing Animals*, xxx-xxxii; Bezan-son, Gray, and Hussey, *Wholesale Prices in Philadelphia, 1784-1861*, 2:150. See also Bezan-son *et al.*, *Wholesale Prices in Philadelphia, 1852-1896*, 17, 101, 203, 206, 269, 302.

²¹ Poland, *Fur-Bearing Animals*, xxx-xxxii; Bezan-son *et al.*, *Wholesale Prices in Philadelphia, 1852-1896*, 302.

²² Poland, *Fur-Bearing Animals*, xxx-xxxii; Bezan-son *et al.*, *Wholesale Prices in Philadelphia, 1852-1896*, 302.

²³ This is based on Poland's returns and Bezan-son's prices for beaver, muskrat, mink, skunk, rac-coon, and deerskins. For other furs, estimates for scattered years were used.

²⁴ For the most complete study of the fur seal industry, see United States State Department, *Fur Seal Arbitration: Proceedings* (Washington, 1895). Volumes 2, 3, and 9 are especially valuable, specifi-cally, 2:264-267, 9:529-534. The best authority on the subject is Henry W. Elliott. See especially his "The Fur Seal Industry of the Pribilof Islands, Alaska," in George Goode, *The Fisheries and Fish-ery Industries of the United States*, 2:321 (Wash-ington, 1887); and his report in 54 Congress, 1 session, *House Documents*, vol. 54, no. 175 (serial 3421).

²⁵ *Appendix to the Case of the United States be-fore the Tribunal of Arbitration*, 1:104 (Washington, 1892). This is bound with *Fur Seal Arbitration*, vol. 2. See also 63 Congress, 2 session, *House Reports (Public)*, vol. 2, no. 500, part 1, p. 1.

During this period the industry was developed under careful management and in co-operation with C. M. Lampson and Company of London, consignee for nearly all Alaska sealskins. Improvements in dyeing, constancy of supply, and considerable advertising encouraged expansion in the market and a consequent rise in price from \$5.26 per pelt in 1870 to a high of \$35.47 for superior lots in 1890. The skins were shipped first to the west coast of the United States and thence to London. After being sold there they were dyed and dressed, and then about 75 per cent of the total crop was re-exported to the United States. When they entered, an import tax of 20 per cent ad valorem was levied. Thereafter the pelts were dressed again, cut, and finally sold for trimming on coats, sleigh robes, and other popular items. What had begun on the misty rookeries as a fatty fur worth a few dollars was finally sold for about \$70.²⁶

In 1890 a new twenty-year lease was granted to another concern, but the era of the fur seal was virtually over. Although between 1890 and 1910 only 343,356 seals were harvested on the islands, and in 1893 a treaty was signed limiting the wasteful practice of pelagic sealing, by 1910 a mere 133,000 fur seals remained.²⁷

The aggregate value of pelts taken from 1870 to 1891 was \$29,788,582. In addition to this, the United States government had received \$4,894,323 in taxes and \$1,100,000 in rent under the lease with the Alaska Commercial Company. Not to be neglected is more than \$3,000,000 in tariff revenue from the dressed skins shipped back from London for final processing and sale in the United States.²⁸ All told, almost \$40,000,000 was added to the United States economy by the fur seal industry during these two decades, or about eight times the total returns for beaver before the Civil War.

LOOKING BACK to 1790, one is particularly struck by two major organizational changes in the American fur trade during its first century which correspond closely

with the growth pattern just discussed. From the 1790s to the War of 1812 there were no powerful fur trading monopolies in the United States.²⁹ The sea otter trade was handled by a number of small merchants in Boston, seals were sought by an entirely different group, and beavers were taken by literally hundreds of individuals. Competition was fairly open and exports were heavy, amounting to well over \$800,000 annually during the peak years 1804-07. During the 1820s and 1830s, however, when large and powerful concerns such as the American Fur Company, the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, and the Chouteau companies sent hundreds of men great distances into the wilderness in search of pelts, exports fell. Indeed, only in one year (1833) did fur exports exceed \$800,000 during the two decades. These figures give the impression that large companies and monopolistic practices tended to retard rather than expand production.

This impression is strengthened by the history of subsequent decades. By the early 1840s most of the large and famous companies either were leaving the scene or were restricting their activities and taking proportionately fewer furs than before. Replacing them was a host of farmers, lumbermen, and other permanent settlers who began trapping in their spare time. Again exports increased markedly, rising to over \$1,000,000 annually in 1840, 1845, 1846, and from 1857 to 1861. This change is made graphic by comparing the number of furs sent down the Missouri River to St. Louis by the "mountain men" (most of whom worked for some concern) with those sent by farmers and other part-time trappers of a later day. During the era of the mountain men, seldom were more than 3,000 packs of furs sent via the Missouri to St. Louis. From 1879-88 an

²⁶ For a summary of this subject, see *Fur Seal Arbitration*, 2:187-218.

²⁷ 63 Congress, 2 session, *House Reports (Public)*, vol. 2, no. 500, part 1, p. 2.

²⁸ *Fur Seal Arbitration*, 3:540-547.

²⁹ See Paul C. Phillips, *The Fur Trade*, 2:54, 57, 99, 100, 137, 152 (Norman, Oklahoma, 1961).

average of 19,000 packs arrived. There may have been some difference in the size of the packs for these two periods, but it is unlikely that a sixfold difference existed. It seems certain therefore that the ubiquitous part-time trapper — the unheralded “egg-money man” — was of considerably more economic importance than the famous mountain man.³⁰

The second major organizational change in the trade relates to the pattern of marketing. In 1870 there were less than two hundred furriers in the United States. They employed 2,900 people and had a gross product of \$8,900,000. By the end of the century, however, the number of furriers had grown fivefold. They then employed over 27,000 workers and had a capital investment of \$30,000,000 and a gross product of over \$55,000,000. The basic reason for this spurt in activity was a rapid increase in the number of persons in the United States able to buy luxuries. This enhanced demand was stimulated by increased advertising.

During those thirty years the United States had begun importing more furs than it exported, thus meeting to a large extent the needs of the wealthier group within its rising population and at the same time beginning to challenge the traditional European fur processing centers of London and Leipzig. By 1900 over \$12,000,000 in duty-free and dutiable skins were entering the United States market — three times the quantity exported. Most of these came partly processed from Great Britain and Germany. By the end of World War I this shift was completed and the United States was the world's leading marketer of furs.³¹

As one might expect, New York State had almost as many furriers as all other

states combined. Three other Middle Atlantic states — Connecticut, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania — together almost equaled New York, an indication that the fur industry of the United States was a highly concentrated one. In the Midwest Chicago, St. Paul, and Detroit were the most important fur-processing centers, and in the Far West only San Francisco had a fur industry worth talking about.³²

THE ABOVE data on the growth of the fur trade, its three distinct eras of production, and its shifting organizational patterns suggest a number of conclusions:

First, the American fur trade was never very important economically, even in its palmiest days. This is true for the Colonial period and for the present century as well. Regardless of continued growth, the fur trade as a business simply did not amount to much, any time, anywhere. Despite the romanticism in which it has been wrapped for many years, despite the number of books about it which continue to appear, it was actually of no importance to the economy of the United States as a whole, and nearly the same is true of its regional significance.

Second, it is incorrect to speak, as some have done, of the “decline of the American fur trade” for any extended period during the nineteenth century. Except for the 1820s and 1880s, fur exports increased, often substantially, in every decade. As one type of pelt fell off in importance, it was simply replaced by another. Nor did the American fur trade decline in relative economic significance, for all during the century it represented approximately 1 per cent of total exports.

Third, the popular idea that the coming of civilization automatically caused the fur trade to decline must be discarded. It not only grew with increased settlement, but on at least one occasion its principal base of operations actually shifted toward the center of population and away from the frontier. The beaver, bear, fur seal, and buffalo declined with the westward movement, but

³⁰ Lippincott, *A Century and a Half of Fur Trade*, 233–239; 51 Congress, 1 session, *House Executive Documents*, no. 6, part 2, p. 391 (serial 2738).

³¹ *United States Census*, 1870 Compendium, p. 802; 1900, *Manufactures*, part 1, p. 8, 218–223, 537; Secretary of the Treasury, *Annual Reports*. See also Harold A. Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada*, 386–392 (Toronto, 1956).

³² *United States Census*, 1890, *Manufactures*, part 1, p. 334–639.

the smaller animals such as the raccoon, mink, and muskrat seemed to thrive as settlement increased. In short, the inevitable thrust of civilization actually stimulated the vigor of the fur trade and enhanced its relative importance.

Fourth, it is clear that the American fur business was not primarily a far-western phenomenon. From 1790 to the War of 1812 the center of the trade lay east of the Mississippi River and north of the Ohio. Not until after the War of 1812 did it shift to the Missouri River basin and the Rocky Mountains. In the years between 1815 and 1830 most of the beavers trapped in the United States were taken in the Far West, but as beavers began to decline during the 1830s and 1840s, the brief heyday of the western fur trade drew to a close.³³

No other fur took the place of the beaver in that region, although the harvest of buffalo robes increased modestly until after the Civil War. This conclusion is substantiated by the returns received at New Orleans and St. Louis, by available company records, and, more important, by John E. Sunder in the only thorough account of the fur trade of the Far West for this period.³⁴ The Great Lakes region was, in fact, economically more important in the American fur trade than any other. By 1840 the United States Census Bureau estimated the value of fur returns for that year from the Great Lakes region at \$515,000. The Far West, on the other hand, yielded only \$373,000 in furs and skins. In 1841 the Detroit Department of the American Fur Company alone produced \$377,200 in furs and skins.³⁵ This represented about 40 per cent of the total United States fur exports of that year, and the company was but one of several outfits trading in the Great Lakes region. An important reason, of course, is the fact that the habitat of the raccoon was confined to that area.

As the Great Lakes region eclipsed the Far West, it was in turn overshadowed by the Bering Sea and its islands. The value of raccoon exports almost doubled from the 1860s to the 1880s and domestic consump-

tion may also have doubled, but during the 1870s the raccoon was overwhelmed in importance by the fur seal, whose aggregate value in that decade was almost five times greater than raccoon exports. For the whole period under discussion it is quite possible that the fur seal added twice as much value to the United States economy as any other wild animal sought for its skin.

Fifth, and finally, the above evidence lends support to the contention that the fur trade as such did not play a very important role in our dynamic westward expansion. It is true that some trappers eventually became guides for government and emigrant expeditions, but their contributions were minor. There is no correlation between the health of the fur trade and population shifts. Nor, as we have seen, is there consistency in direction of movement. The number of persons involved was insignificant and the value of the trade, even locally, not very impressive. This is not to say that the American fur trade had no importance as a vehicle of westward expansion, but that its importance must be sought in areas other than economics.

³³ Hiram M. Chittenden states that a "fair" estimate of the value of beavers trapped in the Far West from 1815 to 1830 at \$4 per pelt would be about \$1,500,000. *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, 1:7 (New York, 1902). During these years the value of beaver exports to England, if computed at the same price, would have been about \$2,000,000 according to Poland's figures. Since most pelts went to England, it would appear that the Far West was the major source of beaver during these years.

³⁴ See William F. Switzler, "Report on the Internal Commerce of the United States," part 2, in Bureau of Statistics, *Treasury Documents*, no. 1039b, p. 191 (Washington, D.C., 1888); "Packing Book, 1830-1833," and "Fur Sales, 1859-1864," in Chouteau Collection; "Furs and Skins, 1859-1864," in American Fur Company Papers; John E. Sunder, *The Fur Trade on the Upper Missouri, 1840-1865*, 16, 79, 104, 159, 201, 216-220 (Norman, Oklahoma, 1965). From 1844-53, fur arrivals at St. Louis varied from 1,000 to 3,000, the average being about the same for the end of the period as for the beginning. See Lippincott, *A Century and a Half of Fur Trade*, 233-239.

³⁵ *United States Census, 1840, Statistics*, p. 408; "Detroit Department," in Miscellaneous File, American Fur Company Papers.



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