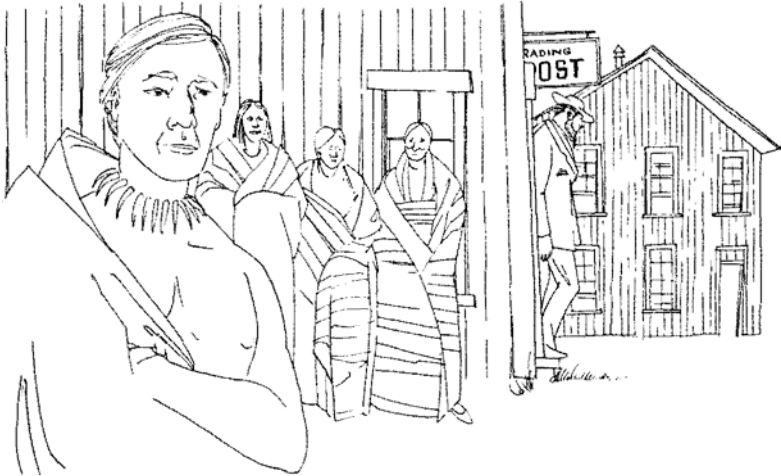


CHAPTER 3



A Struggle for the Indian Trade

THE DISCOVERY OF AMERICA set in motion great events. For one thing, it added millions of square miles of land to the territorial resources which Europeans could use. For another, it provided a new source of potential income for the European economy. A golden opportunity was at hand, and the nations of Europe responded by staking out colonial empires. As the wealth of the New World poured in, it brought about a 400-year boom and transformed European institutions.

Rivalry for empire brought nations into conflict over the globe. It reached North Dakota when fur traders of three nationalities struggled to control the Upper Missouri country. First the British, coming from Hudson Bay and Montreal, dominated trade with the Knife River villages. Then the Spanish, working out of St. Louis, tried to dislodge the British, but distance and the hostility of Indians along the Missouri

caused them to fail. After the Louisiana Purchase, Lewis and Clark claimed the Upper Missouri for the United States, and Americans from St. Louis began to seek trade there. They encountered the same obstacles which had stopped the Spanish, however, and with the War of 1812, they withdrew from North Dakota, leaving it still in British hands.

THE ARRIVAL OF BRITISH TRADERS

When the British captured Montreal in 1760, the French abandoned their posts in the Indian country and the Indians were compelled to carry all of their furs to Hudson Bay. Before long, however, British traders from both the Bay and Montreal began to venture into the region west of Lake Superior, and by 1780 they had forts on the Assiniboine River. In 1793 the Hudson's Bay Company built Brandon House on the Assiniboine two miles above its junction with the Souris. The following year, the North West Company, an enterprise of Montreal merchants and Scottish traders, built Fort La Souris nearby.

The forts traded mainly with the Assiniboins, Plains Chippewas, and Crees, but they also sent merchandise to the Mandan and Hidatsa villages on the Missouri River at the mouth of the Knife. "This trade," wrote "Big John" McDonnell of Fort La Souris, "was carried on by the men taking upon credit a certain number of skins, as suited their circumstances, at the price of the post and paying at their return."

In the 1790's, René Jusseume, later an interpreter for Lewis and Clark, was the principal trader with the Knife River villages. His expedition of 1794 illustrates the business. That October, he and six hired men packed five horses at Fort La Souris with merchandise, powder, and guns and set out on the 250-mile journey to the Missouri. Keeping a watchful eye for the Sioux, they arrived safely at the river in eleven days and were welcomed by the Mandans.

Jusseume divided his merchandise. He gave part of it to one Menard to trade with the Mandans, while he himself took the rest to a Hidatsa village four or five miles away. He put his men to work building a small fort between the Mandan and Hidatsa villages, the first trading post on North Dakota soil. The following April, Jusseume carried his peltries back to Fort La

Souris, leaving four men to work on the fort. They Were to run up the British flag, the symbol of sovereignty, every Sunday.

SPANISH EXPEDITIONS FROM ST. LOUIS

The activities of Jusseume and his fellow traders alarmed Spanish authorities at New Orleans and St. Louis. France had ceded Louisiana to Spain in 1763, and in 1764 some New Orleans merchants founded St. Louis. Soon St. Louis traders were ascending the Missouri, opening trade with tribes farther and farther upstream. In 1790, one of them, Jacques d'Eglise, reached the Mandans and observed the activities of British traders from the Assiniboine forts. This in itself was disturbing, but foreigners were threatening Spanish lands at other points, too: Americans along the Mississippi, Americans and British in Oregon, and Russians in California.

To check the intruders on the Upper Missouri, Jacques Clamorgan and other St. Louis merchants organized the Commercial Company for the Discovery of the Nations of the Upper Missouri (commonly called the Missouri Company) in the spring of 1794. It was to open trade with the Mandans, stop British trade among them, and find a way to the Pacific Ocean. The Spanish governor at New Orleans offered two thousand dollars (later raised to three thousand) to the first Spanish subject to reach the Pacific by way of the Missouri.¹

The company sent three expeditions to the Upper Missouri in 1794-1795, choosing Jean Baptiste Truteau to lead the first. He was instructed to build a fort among the Mandans and to determine the distance to the Rocky Mountains. Truteau, a schoolteacher in St. Louis, had lived with the Yankton Dakotas and spoke their language. He set out from St. Louis on June 7, 1794, with eight men and a large pirogue loaded with twenty thousand pesos' worth of trade goods. He had to pass many Indians living along the Missouri, a difficult undertaking, for none of them wanted traders to visit tribes beyond them, preferring instead to trade with their friends themselves and thereby make a profit.

¹ Abraham P. Nasatir, "[Jacques d'Eglise on the Upper Missouri, 1791-1795](#)," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XIV (June 1927), 47-71; Abraham P. Nasatir, "[Anglo-Spanish Rivalry on the Upper Missouri](#)," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XVI (December 1929), 359-382, and XVI (March 1930), 507-528.

They also wanted to keep their enemies from obtaining guns and ammunition.

By taking care not to fire their weapons, Truteau's men passed the Omahas (near present-day Omaha) unnoticed, but in central South Dakota a hunting party of Teton and Yankton Dakotas stopped them. "They took from me," wrote Truteau in his journal, "powder, balls, cloth, white blanket, hatchet, pickax, vermilion, knives, etc. without giving me time to count their hides, yet less to settle on a price."² With the help of some old acquaintances among the Yanktons, Truteau finally escaped with his pirogue and some of the merchandise. He spent the winter with the Omahas and Poncas and in the spring of 1795 went upstream to the Arikara villages at the mouth of the Grand River. He could not, however, reach the Mandans to forbid the British trade.

The Poncas pillaged the second Missouri Company expedition, which had been sent out to help Truteau in April, 1795. That August, the company organized a third expedition: James Mackay, with thirty-three men, four pirogues, and fifty thousand pesos' worth of merchandise, started up the Missouri. He was to build forts to protect Spanish trade from the British and after that was done to press on to the Pacific Ocean. But the Omahas waylaid him that fall.

In the spring of 1796, Mackay sent young John Evans and a small party to the Mandans. Evans, a Welshman, had come to America to find the Welsh Indians, the supposed descendants of a legendary Prince Madoc who was believed to have discovered America in A.D. 1170. Evans had learned about the Mandans at St. Louis, and because of stories that they were white, he thought they might be the people he sought. So he had joined Mackay's party.

On June 8, 1796, Evans started up the Missouri from the Omaha village. As he went, he made a careful map, a copy of which Thomas Jefferson was later to send to Lewis and Clark as the latter prepared for their famous journey. At first the Arikaras would not permit Evans to pass, but after a few weeks they let him go on with a small outfit of trade goods. He

² "[Journal of Jean Baptiste Truteau on the Upper Missouri, 'Première Partie,' June 7, 1794-March 26, 1795,](#)" [American Historical Review](#), XIX (January 1914), 299-333; "[Trudeau's Journal,](#)" [South Dakota Department of History Collections](#), VII (1914), 403-474, especially 422, 450.

reached the Mandans on September 23 and was kindly received. Evans presented the chiefs with medals and flags in the name of the Spanish king, took the British traders' property away from them and gave them Mackay's proclamation forbidding their trade, and ran up the Spanish flag.

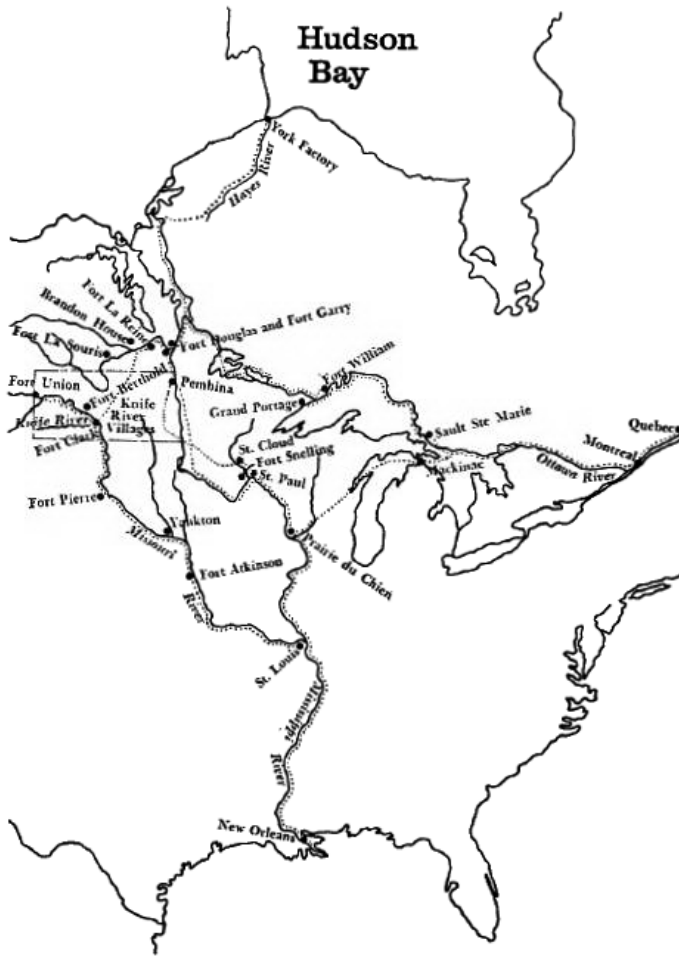
The British needed horses, corn, and buffalo robes from the Knife River villages. Though affable at first, they were soon talking about taking possession of the Missouri by force. Evans had few trade goods, however, and when he stopped the British trade, the hostility of the Indians forced him back down the Missouri. He reached St. Louis on July 15, 1797.³

Never again did Spanish traders ascend the river as far as North Dakota, although they continued to trade on the Upper Missouri until Louisiana was transferred to the United States in 1803 (Spain had retroceded Louisiana to France in 1800, but France did not take possession until just before she transferred the territory to the United States). The Indians along the Missouri disliked high Spanish prices; they could buy more cheaply from the British, who came from Mackinac and Prairie du Chien to the Minnesota River and were their friends. Accordingly, they regularly plundered Spanish traders and did not pay their debts. The Spanish would not fight back, so the Missouri tribes came to believe, according to Meriwether Lewis, that "the white men [Spanish] are like dogs, the more you beat them and plunder them, the more goods they will bring you and the cheaper they will sell them."

The Knife River villages, moreover, were too remote for the traders of St. Louis and the sovereignty of the Spanish king. Distance and the tribes along the river highway made it too difficult to carry the necessary goods to North Dakota. So the British from the Assiniboine River forts dominated trade with the Mandans and Hidatsas, while other British traders, spreading westward from Prairie du Chien on the Upper Mississippi, monopolized the trade of the Minnesota-Iowa country and even that of the Omahas and Poncas. All encouraged their customers to plunder the Spanish.⁴

³ David Williams, "[John Evans' Strange Journey, Part II, Following the Trail](#)," *American Historical Review*, LIV (April 1949), 512-520, 528.

⁴ Meriwether Lewis has an excellent description of the trade under the Spanish in Reuben Gold Thwaites (ed.), *Original Journals of the*



EARLY TRADE ROUTES TO NORTH DAKOTA

Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1804- 1806 (8 vols.; New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1904-1905), [VII](#), 369-388. For estimates of the value of the trade, see [VI](#), 82-83, 89-91.

TRADE WITH THE ASSINIBOINE FORTS

Trade between the British forts on the Assiniboine and the Mandan and Hidatsa villages on the Missouri continued from the 1780's until after the War of 1812. It was carried on by free traders, by the Cree and Assiniboine Indians, and by employees of the Hudson's Bay and North West companies. The fur companies were not interested at first, but later they entered the trade for a time.

The operation was a simple one. In late fall, free traders would buy small outfits (merchandise worth from forty to sixty beaver pelts) on credit at Fort La Souris or Brandon House. Then a group of seven to ten of them would travel overland, some on horseback, some on foot, to the villages on the Missouri. They carried their trade goods on pack horses or, in winter, on dog sleds (two dogs to a sled), buying the dogs, half-wolf, from the Assiniboins.

The overland trip was fraught with danger and hardship. Sioux might be lying in wait to plunder and kill them at Dogden Butte, a sheltered spot with wooded ravines and springs in northeastern McLean County. Or some of the Assiniboins, jealous of white competition in a trade they considered their own, might attack them. Storms and bitter cold also menaced their lives. The trail, about 250 miles long, followed the Souris, cut across to the Turtle Mountains, then struck for Dogden Butte, and reached the Missouri near the mouth of the Knife. Ordinarily the traders, traveling as rapidly as they could, covered the distance in ten to fifteen days, killing buffalo on the trail for themselves and their dogs; one party carried roasted ears of corn.

At the villages they stayed in the Indians' lodges, for which hospitality they presented their hosts with gifts. Some settled there permanently, took Indian wives (fair and graceful women), and raised families. The traders exchanged their goods—guns, powder, ball, strouds, capotes, and ironware—for furs, mostly wolf and fox pelts, with only a few beaver. They also bought corn, horses, buffalo robes, and occasionally a female captive. In 1804, Lewis and Clark estimated that Indians annually bought goods worth \$3,300 at St. Louis prices and paid for them with articles worth \$10,500 at St. Louis. The difference shows the high cost of transportation and the middleman's profits in a risky enterprise.

THE LEWIS AND CLARK EXPEDITION

Interest in trade on the Upper Missouri, especially with the Mandans, was part of the motivation behind the famous Lewis and Clark Expedition. The expedition itself illustrates how decisions in the capitals of the Western world-centers of power-influence events in even the most remote regions. Though isolated by distance, North Dakota was deeply affected by world currents. Because Napoleon failed in Santo Domingo and then planned to renew war with England, he sold the vast Louisiana country, including most of North Dakota, to the United States in 1803. Because Thomas Jefferson, a man long curious about the wilderness beyond the Mississippi, became President in 1801, Lewis and Clark crossed the continent to the Pacific.

The expedition was the first effort by the United States to explore and to extend its sovereignty over North Dakota. Although the North Dakota phase was incidental to the expedition's main purpose, it looms large in the history of the state. Lewis and Clark spent more time in and made a fuller record of North Dakota than any other region through which they passed.

On January 18, 1803, Jefferson asked Congress to authorize a party of ten or twelve men under the leadership of an army officer to visit the Upper Missouri. He speciously reasoned that the information secured by the party would enable Americans to take the trade of the Knife River villages (still under Spanish sovereignty) away from the British. Having gone that far, Jefferson continued, the party might as well complete the crossing of the continent. He quietly presented his daring scheme as merely "an additional gratification," an almost incidental afterthought. The unexpected purchase of Louisiana on May 2, 1803, changed Jefferson's subterfuge to an honest purpose and gave the project a practical as well as a scientific objective. Jefferson amended his instructions: Lewis should tell the Indians that "their late fathers, the Spaniards," had surrendered the country to the United States and that "henceforward we become their fathers and friends."

Jefferson's choice of Lewis and Clark as leaders of the expedition was a wise one. Both had spent some years as army officers, commanding men and dealing with Indians on the

frontier; both were members of the landholding gentry and had managed plantations. Jefferson thought that Lewis, then twenty-nine, was "brave, prudent, habituated to the woods, & familiar with Indian manners and character." Clark, thirty-three, was a cou-ageous, red-headed six-footer with a bluff, direct manner of speaking and acting—a person at home in the back- woods. For their party the leaders chose, in Lewis' words, "good hunters, stout, healthy unmarried young men, accustomed to the woods, and capable of bearing bodily fatigue in a pretty considerable degree." They took along much scientific apparatus—a chronometer, sextants, a surveyor's compass, thermometers, and so forth. They also took camp equipment, medicines, and arms, as well as twenty-one bales of presents for the Indians, including scissors, awls, brass kettles, needles, and fishhooks. Such useful items, far beyond the Indian technology, ensured their welcome.

Starting from its camp near St. Louis on May 14, 1804, the party of some forty-four men moved up the Missouri River in a 55-foot keelboat and two pirogues. Here and there Lewis and Clark stopped to hold a council with an Indian tribe, giving medals and flags to the chiefs and telling them the wishes of their new "father" in Washington. They said that the Indians must give up their Spanish flags and medals, that the Great American Father would allow only the boats of his own traders to come up the river, and that these traders would soon bring them all the merchandise they needed. But, Lewis and Clark said, if the red children displeased the Great American Father, he could cut off their supply of trade goods; they should open their ears to the words of the Great Father.

By means of such councils, Lewis and Clark were taking possession of the Missouri Valley for the United States. Only once did they have any trouble. Near the mouth of the Bad River in South Dakota, some Teton Dakotas, an "ill looking", and poorly armed lot, tried to stop them. Vigilance and courage saved the expedition. At one point, Clark, surrounded by young Tetons with their bows and arrows ready, pulled out his sword and spoke "in verry [*sic*] positive terms." The following spring, Clark told an Arikara chief that the Great Father would not let the Tetons "have any more good Guns

&c."⁵

Late in October the expedition reached the cluster of five villages at the mouth of the Knife River, where they planned to spend the winter. The Mandans and Hidatsas flocked down to the riverbank to give the white men a friendly welcome. Two days later, Lewis and Clark made their usual speech at a council and put medals on the chiefs (this was called "making chiefs"), thereby asserting American sovereignty. But Indian dependence on white trade goods was the main prop of sovereignty, and the Mandan-Hidatsa goods were coming-and for some years would continue to come-from the British forts on the Assiniboine, not from American merchants in St. Louis. Sensing American weakness, Le Borgne ("The One-Eyed"), the grand chief of the Hidatsas, contemptuously stayed away from the council.

Whatever impression of strength Lewis and Clark could give with their keelboat and its swivel gun, their armed men, and their own courage would help the American cause. So they built Fort Mandan, their winter camp, as strong as possible. Four miles downstream from the lower Mandan village, it was a triangle of huts and pickets with an outer wall eighteen feet high. It seemed, wrote a North West trader, "made so strong as to be almost cannon ball proof."

Lewis and Clark asserted authority in other ways. They made peace between the Arikaras and the Mandans and Hidatsas, for peace would be essential to white traders ascending the river. They persuaded the Mandans to restore several traps stolen from two Frenchmen and offered to punish some Sioux who had killed and robbed members of a Mandan hunting party. They did not interfere with trade from the British forts but offered their protection to all well-disposed traders. They did, however, forbid the British to give out any medals or flags or to make any chiefs. They told the Indians that they must not accept British medals or flags unless they wished to "incur the displeasure of their Great American Father."

Such actions impressed the Indians. On March 9, 1805, Le Borgne himself finally visited Fort Mandan. Lewis fired two guns in his honor and gave him a medal, a gorget, arm bands,

⁵ *Ibid.*, [I](#), 286; [V](#), 282-286. For other quotations, see [V](#), 299-301; [VII](#), 208-209, 227, 292-293.

a flag, and a shirt. Le Borgne—a strong, self-possessed giant who looked like a fearful demon—was much pleased. In July, 1806, Alexander Henry, a North West trader, saw Le Borgne wrap himself in his American flag for peace ceremonies with the Cheyennes. That same July, Big White, a Mandan chief, tried to get Henry and his fellow traders to salute the American flag flying from the roof of his earth lodge. The Britons pretended not to understand.

To impress the Indians, Lewis and Clark wanted a number of chiefs to visit the President in Washington. On such a trip they would see the vast resources of the United States, gain confidence in its ability to protect them, and conclude that submission was the wisest course of action they could take. In 1805, when the keelboat and a part of the expedition returned to St. Louis, they took along some Arikaras (one a highly respected chief), who visited President Jefferson. In 1806, Lewis and Clark planned to take some Mandans, Hidatsas, and Sioux with them on their return, but only Big White consented to go. He, his family, and Jusseume, who went along as interpreter, were finally returned home, after great difficulty and expense, on September 24, 1809.

Before these events, however, the expedition had spent an interesting winter (1804-1805) at Fort Mandan. Although December was very cold, some of the men went hunting almost every day, bringing in many deer, elk, and buffalo to hang in the smokehouses. At Christmas they fired the cannon when they raised the flag, and Clark treated them to rum and issued flour, pepper, and dried apples for the Christmas feast. Scarcely a day passed without some Mandans coming to visit the fort; the chiefs liked to spend the night there.

Lewis and Clark soon learned about Sakakawea, a young Shoshoni woman of seventeen who had been captured in the Rockies by a war party of Hidatsas.⁶ Toussaint Charbonneau,

⁶ There is controversy over the spelling of the name "Sakakawea" or "Sacajawea." The Reverend Charles L. Hall has argued persuasively that the correct spelling is "Sakakawea." He had been a Congregational missionary to the Hidatsas and Mandans on the Fort Berthold Reservation for thirty years and was an authority on the Hidatsa (Gros Ventre) language when he wrote "[The Grosventre Spelling of the Name, Bird Woman,](#)" *North Dakota Historical Society Collections*, I (1906), 69-72. "Sacajawea" is Shoshone for "Boat Launcher" and has

a Frenchman living in the Knife River villages, had bought her. Now Lewis and Clark hired him as an interpreter in order to secure the services of his wife as guide. The couple moved to Fort Mandan, where, on February 11, 1805, Sakakawea gave birth to "a fine boy." The baby, Baptiste, was taken along on the journey to the Pacific.

Finding Sakakawea was a master stroke. Perhaps no single act contributed so much to the success of the expedition, for she was, according to Lewis, their "only dependence for a friendly negotiation with the Snake [Shoshoni] Indians on whom we depend for horses to assist us in our portage from the Missouri to the columbia river." Clark, especially, came to have a high regard for her, calling her "Janey," and she—a gentle, brave, attractive girl—returned his affection. He later educated Baptiste in St. Louis, and after her death in 1812, he adopted her daughter.

For her part in the great enterprise, Sakakawea won undying fame with the American public. She has had more memorials dedicated to her than any other American woman: a river; a mountain pass; statues in bronze at St. Louis, Portland, and Bismarck; a bronze tablet at Three Forks, Montana; a monument at Armstead, Montana; a public fountain at Lewiston, Idaho; and a cement shaft on the Shoshoni Reservation in Wyoming.

After wintering at Fort Mandan, Lewis and Clark concluded that the Mandans were "the most friendly, well disposed Indians inhabiting the Missouri," a judgment that was to become typical for the tribe. No doubt part of the friendliness of the Indians, even the Mandans, resulted from their dependence on white trade goods. The expedition's blacksmiths had become great favorites during the winter by making battle-axes for the Indians and mending their guns, axes, hoes, and iron tools, for which the women gratefully brought corn in payment. The Indians were "extravagantly fond" of sheet iron for making arrowheads and scraping buffalo hides, so the smiths sold them pieces four inches square for seven or eight gallons of corn. Later the Mandans broke up a corn mill, given them by Lewis and Clark, to make arrow-heads. Le Borgne, the haughty Hidatsa chief, thought that "the only two sensible men" in the expedition

were "the worker of iron and the mender of guns."⁷

TRADE AMONG THE UPPER MISSOURI TRIBES

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, trade brought the tribes of the Upper Missouri many of the necessities and comforts of life. The important items of exchange were white-manufactured goods, horses and mules, corn, buffalo robes, and a variety of furs—wolf, fox (or kit, a small prairie fox), and beaver. Beans, tobacco, grease, leather, and slave women were also traded.

Some articles came thousands of miles to the tipis and earth lodges of these peoples; others of their own production found distant markets overseas. Many items, of course, moved much shorter distances. The merchandise of white manufacture—guns, powder, ball, knives, axes, kettles, blankets (often called strouds), capotes (cloaks with hoods), awls, fishhooks, and so forth—came largely from the British Isles by way of York Factory, Montreal, or New Orleans, passing through such intermediate points as Sault Ste Marie, Prairie du Chien, and St. Louis. The horses and mules came from Spanish settlements in New Mexico and possibly farther south. Before 1800, whites saw Spanish saddles and bridles on the horses of the Mandans. A surplus of corn, beans, and tobacco was grown by the agricultural tribes along the Missouri. Buffalo robes entered trade largely, but not entirely, as a surplus of the more typical Plains Indians. All of the tribes gathered some peltries for trade. Liquor seems to have played only a small part at this time; the Arikaras even resented treats of strong drink.

Traders faced many difficulties. Distances were long. War and uneasy relations between tribes were common, for no tribe wanted to see its enemies supplied with guns and ammunition. The Sioux and Assiniboins made the trail between the British forts and the Knife River villages

⁷ Thwaites, *Original Journals of Lewis and Clark*, I, 227, 242-243, 254-255. See also I, 214, 227 n., 228-232, 249, 27u ; V, 282-286, 338-341. For Le Borgne's comment, see Elliott Coues (ed.), *New Light on the History of the Greater Northwest: The Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry...and of David Thompson... 1799-1814* (3 vols.; New York: Francis P. Harper, 1897), I, 329.

unsafe, and the Sioux earned the epithet "pirates of the Missouri": they delighted in plundering traders ascending the river. Because of such obstacles, the North Dakota tribes suffered more than others from the economic disadvantages arising from high transportation costs, the profits of many middlemen, and a small quantity of goods. The more remote the tribe, the higher the price it paid for white goods and the smaller the quantity it received.

Each tribe, of course, traded what it had for what it needed. The Cheyennes and Crows, western neighbors of the agricultural tribes, would undertake month-long expeditions to New Mexico to steal Horses and mules from the Spanish settlements. They would then go to the Arikaras, Mandans, and Hidatsas and trade horses, buffalo robes, dried meat, furs, women slaves, and leather lodges for corn, beans, and tobacco. They also bartered for goods which the agricultural tribes, being closer to the forts and living along the river, had secured from white traders. The Mandans did not have many horses in 1797; the Arikaras and Hidatsas had more, some Hidatsa families having from twenty to thirty.

In their turn, the Arikaras would trade some of their horses, along with corn and beans, to the Tetons living east of the Missouri. Each May, the Tetons held a trade fair on the James River, where they exchanged horses for white goods with the Yanktonai and Sisseton Dakotas, who secured them from British posts on the Minnesota River. The Mandans and Hidatsas traded horses and corn to the Crees and Assiniboins living farther north; they also exchanged horses, corn, female slaves, buffalo robes, and a variety of furs (wolf, fox, and beaver) for white goods with traders from the Assiniboine forts. In the general pattern of exchange, horses and mules moved north and east from New Mexico, white goods moved west and south from the British posts, and corn and beans moved east, west, and north from the agricultural tribes.

Sometimes the tribes engaged in a mass exchange called "trading on a pipe" because a pipe of peace was smoked. In 1805, for example, the Crows and Hidatsas came together for such a trade. The Crows put up 250 horses, as well as buffalo robes and leather leggings and shirts; the Hidatsas put up 200 guns, with 100 rounds of ammunition for each, in addition to 100 bushels of corn and a quantity of kettles, axes, and cloth.

Apparently, a horse was roughly equal to a gun. In 1811 a trader paid eleven balls and eleven charges of powder for a buffalo robe.

How well did the traders supply Indian needs? The testimony is conflicting. One trader said in 1795 that the Mandans "were all well provided with guns, pistols, and swords," but two years later, David Thompson reported that the Mandans and Hidatsas had only a few guns and sometimes went for many days without ammunition. They used arrows for hunting, saving their guns for war. In 1804, Lewis and Clark thought that "a great proportion" of the five or six hundred Arikara men had guns. On the other hand, only a few Crows had guns in 1805, and the Tetons still depended on bows and arrows. Yet Charles MacKenzie, a British trader, wrote in 1805: "It is incredible the great quantity of merchandise which the Missouri Indians have accumulated."⁸

Trade naturally, perhaps inevitably, brought dependence and exploitation. Where war was always present, guns were important. Kettles, knives, axes, awls, fishhooks, and many other items of white manufacture were far superior to Indian articles used for the same purposes. So the Hidatsas, closer to the sources of supply, charged the Crows double prices and would not let white traders deal with them. Other tribes also held their more remote neighbors in subjection. The Mandans had to swallow the insults of the Crees and the Assiniboinis, the middlemen who brought them goods and controlled the route from the forts on the Assiniboine River. The Tetons ruthlessly bullied and exploited the Arikaras. The Hidatsas, a fierce and haughty people, feigned friendship for the whites out of need; Le Borgne, their cruel chief, was friend and protector to traders.

Indeed, all chiefs preached friendship with the traders. Some French- men lived for years in perfect safety with the tribes of the Upper Missouri (Menard, Charbonneau, and Jusseaume for example), taking Indian wives and learning the language. The reasons were eloquently expressed by some Yanktons in 1794: "The people whom the French [traders] did not

⁸ Louis F. R. Masson (ed.), *Les Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest: Recits de Voyages, Lettres et Rapports Inédits au Nord-Ouest Canadien* (2 vols.; Quebec: A. Coté et Cie, 1889), I, 344.

frequent were miserable, exposed to die of hunger, and to be conquered by their enemies, from want of defensive arms."⁹ The traders, grateful for protection, always gave presents to the chiefs.

Eager as they were to have white goods, the Indians realized and resented their exploitation. Jean Baptiste Trudeau wrote in 1795 that the Arikaras, once unsurpassed in "gentleness and kindness towards us," were turning "sour" because of the influence of wicked and dissolute traders and were "giving nothing for nothing and never doing us a service without reward."

The purchase of Louisiana started American traders and trappers up the Missouri River. Returning from the Pacific in 1806, Lewis and Clark met eleven separate parties coming upstream in twenty boats loaded with trade goods and supplies. Some planned to trade for peltries, others to hunt and trap on their own account. Thus rivalry between American and British traders was extended along the Canadian boundary of the Upper Missouri country.

To aid American traders, General James Wilkinson issued a proclamation in 1805 excluding foreign traders from the Missouri River. Jay's Treaty, 1795, permitted the British to trade within the United States, but Wilkinson claimed that it did not apply to the land acquired in 1803.

The reports of Lewis and Clark excited more American interest, and in 1807, two large parties left St. Louis for the Upper Missouri. The first, the Pryor-Chouteau party, was a combined group of traders, soldiers, and Indians; the second was Manuel Lisa's expedition to the Yellowstone River.

The Pryor-Chouteau group had several missions. The government was sending Ensign Nathaniel Pryor and thirteen soldiers to escort Big White, a Mandan chief, and his family to the mouth of the Knife River. Other soldiers were returning to their homes some Sioux who had been visiting St. Louis. Pierre Chouteau, Sr., and thirty-two men were going to trade with the Mandans; "Young Dorion" and ten men sought trade with the Sioux. In all, there were ninety-five persons in the Pryor-Chouteau party when it left St. Louis in several keelboats in May, 1807.

⁹ "[Trudeau's Journal](#)," pp. 420, 465-466.

After some members of the group stopped in the Sioux country, the rest went on to the Arikara villages. There they found that the Arikaras and their Sioux allies (then visiting in the villages) were at war with the Mandans. The Arikaras were unfriendly toward the Americans because one of their chiefs had died on a visit to President Jefferson in Washington, so they and the Sioux decided to prevent the traders from going upstream to their enemies. They spurned Chouteau's offer to leave half his goods and a trader with them and demanded instead that the whites surrender all of their guns. Soon the Indians began firing on the boats, killing four men and wounding ten. Pryor and Chouteau were forced to turn back to St. Louis, and for the next two years, licenses issued to traders forbade them to deal with the Arikaras. The attack upon the Pryor-Chouteau party was the beginning of Arikara hostility toward Americans; it may well have been stimulated by British traders.¹⁰

The failure of the Pryor-Chouteau party contrasted with the success of the one led by Manuel Lisa. Before the War of 1812, Lisa did more than any other St. Louis merchant to tie the Upper Missouri country to his city. Born in New Orleans of Spanish parents in 1772, he went to St. Louis in 1790 and entered the fur trade. He was ideally suited for the business; his body could withstand its hardships, his spirit outface its dangers. Ever alert, he learned the character of the Indians and the methods of the trade: when to be tactful, when generous with presents, when bold and daring, when to show the muskets of his men, the swivel gun on his keelboat. In a dangerous country and among a rough and uncivilized people, he was acknowledged master. Yet he became the trusted friend of the Indians.

Lisa liked to boast of his benefactions. He had carried to the Indians the seeds of many vegetables and also a plow. His

¹⁰ Hiram M. Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West* (2 vols.; Stanford: Academic Reprints, 1954), I, 119-123; Clarence E. Carter (ed.), *Territorial Papers of the United States*, Vol. XIV, *The Territory of Louisiana-Missouri, 1806-1814*: (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1949), pp. 108-109, 122, 126, 153, 222, and, especially, 350; Wayne E. Stevens, "Fur Trading Companies of the Northwest, 1760-1816," *Mississippi Valley Historical Association Proceedings*, IX (1915-1918), 288- 289.

blacksmiths worked for them, charging nothing. He lent them traps, asking only preference in their trade. His forts became a refuge for the weak and for the old men no longer able to follow the nomadic wanderings of the bands. Lisa naturally got much rich fur; in one season alone his boats brought \$35,000 worth down the river. But Lisa worked hard for such returns, spending much of his time in the wilderness. From 1807 to his death in 1820, he traveled some 26,000 miles on the Missouri and its tributaries.¹¹

In 1806, Lisa, stirred by the reports of Lewis and Clark, formed a partnership with William Morrison and Pierre Menard (veterans of the fur trade from Kaskaskia, Illinois) to exploit the new country. In the spring of 1807, Lisa and his men left St. Louis in a keel boat laden with merchandise, the first large-scale American effort to open the Upper Missouri. The party safely passed the river tribes, although two or three hundred Arikaras were waiting to stop them and even the Mandans were in an ugly mood. They ascended the Yellowstone, built a post at the mouth of the Big Horn—the first American fort in Montana—and passed a profitable winter trading with the Crows before returning to St. Louis in the spring of 1808.

Manuel Lisa's success brought the chief traders of St. Louis together in the Missouri Fur Company. In June, 1809, the company sent Pierre Chouteau up the river with a party of 350 men (some sources say 150), many keelboats, and enough merchandise for five or six posts. Lisa himself stopped to build Fort Lisa on the Missouri twelve miles above the mouth of the Knife. Other groups had dropped off to establish posts for trading with the Sioux (at Cedar Island) and with the Arikaras (at Grand River).

The forts were a measure of appeasement. Meriwether Lewis, then governor of Louisiana Territory, told Chouteau that British traders were not permitted to trade or hunt on the

¹¹ Irving B. Richman, "Manuel Lisa," [*Dictionary of American Biography*](#) (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 19:28-1958), XI, 291; Kathryn M. French, "Manuel Lisa," [*South Dakota Department of History Collections*](#), IV (1908), 121-124; Henry M. Brackenridge, [*Journal of a Voyage up the Missouri, Performed in 1811*](#) (Vol. VI of *Early Western Travels, 1748-1846*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites; Cleveland: A. H. Clark Company, 1904), p. 29.

Upper Missouri; he was instructed to give any he might find twenty-four hours' notice to leave the territory. If they refused, he was to arrest them and bring them to St. Louis. Lewis believed that control of the Indians depended on cutting off British supplies, and this, he felt, was the way to do it.

After reaching Knife River, Chouteau returned to St. Louis, but most of the party went on to Montana to trade and trap about the Three Forks of the Missouri-rich beaver country in the Rockies. By 1811 the hostility of the Blackfeet had driven the company out of Montana, whereupon Fort Lisa, serving the Knife River villages, became the company's most distant trading post.

The fort, located south of present-day Mannhaven on the west bank of the Missouri, consisted of a square blockhouse and some small outhouses surrounded by a palisade about fifteen feet high. In 1811, Reuben Lewis, a younger brother of Meriwether, and some of the hunters were living in the upper story of the blockhouse; the lower was a storeroom for furs. A vegetable garden, proudly tended by an Irish-man, lay near the fort. Francis M. Benoit, the chief factor there in 1811, charged exorbitant prices—ten dollars a quart for whiskey.

High prices were a result of the remoteness of the Dakota country, an isolation that was somewhat relieved by the Missouri River. Yet that stream's swift, muddy current, its shifting channel and threatening driftwood, and the Indian tribes along its banks posed serious problems for the traders. The Sioux, especially, blocked the river. The Sioux country itself contained little of interest to the traders; they preferred the richer fur regions farther upstream. But the Sioux often pillaged them or imposed their own terms for passage.

The Missouri, a watery highway into the wilderness, rose in a giant spiral, without falls or rapids, from just above St. Louis to central Montana, a distance of 2,285 miles. Dugout canoes or pirogues and keelboats were used to ascend its winding course. And these and other craft—Mackinaw boats, buffalo-skin canoes, and rafts made by lashing two canoes together—floated downstream with cargoes of peltries.

A keel boat was fifty to seventy feet long, had a beam of fourteen to sixteen feet, and could carry a cargo of some twenty tons. It had a mast with sails and a cabin, or cargo box, that rose four or five feet above the deck. Manned by a

crew of twenty hardy young French Canadians or Creoles from St. Louis, it was propelled upstream, according to circumstance, by sails, oars, poles, or a long towline called a cordelle. The crew was well armed, and the boat had a light cannon, known as a swivel gun, mounted in the bow.

When a keelboat set off up the Missouri in early spring, the crew would indulge in a last drunken frolic. The first night out, however, gloom would spread over them as they thought of the dangers ahead. Each morning they would make an early start; each night they would camp on shore, sleeping in blankets or buffalo robes about a fire. The fare was plain: corn hominy for breakfast, a slice of fat pork and a biscuit at midday, a pot of mush with a pound of melted lard for supper. A hunter, ranging ahead, might bring in game, bear or deer lower down the river and buffalo when they reached the Dakota country.

The toil was exhausting. Dead buffalo, logs, even whole trees came floating down the swift flood. Sometimes fallen trees matted into great rafts and barred the way. Trees held fast in the river bed, called planters or sawyers, threatened the boat with their bobbing branches. The men fought the current, grabbing the oars or poles or scrambling along the shore with the cordelle. In such a struggle Manuel Lisa was a spirited leader. One moment, wrote Henry Brackenridge in 1811, Lisa would be "at the helm, at another with the grappling iron at the bow, and often with a pole....His voice, his orders, and cheering exclamations, infused new energy." He would pass out grog and raise a song, making the woods ring with his shouts of encouragement.

During the famous race of 1811 when Lisa's keelboat overcame a three-week lead by Wilson Price Hunt's Astorians, Lisa's men covered long distances—20, 27, 30, 33, and once even 75 miles in a single day when they sailed with a favorable wind far into the night. Making a heroic effort, they covered the 1,600 miles from St. Charles, the starting point near St. Louis, to the Knife River villages in a little less than three months. In 1804 the keelboat of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, usually traveling from 8 to 20 miles a day, covered the same distance in about five months. The return trip downstream could be made in about two weeks. In 1806, Lewis and Clark traveled from 40 to 70 miles a day while descending the Missouri.

EFFECTS OF THE WAR OF 1812

After the promising start of the Missouri Fur Company, the War of 1812 broke the weak tie between the tribes in North Dakota and the American traders at St. Louis. Before the war, British influence among the tribes of the Upper Missouri and Upper Mississippi remained strong. Throughout the wilderness, British traders were instruments of British sovereignty, teaching the Indians to regard the British king "as their Great Father, who sent the Traders to supply them with Goods, and to purchase their Furs." In 1813, after the outbreak of war, Lisa and the Missouri Fur Company abandoned their three forts (one at Cedar Island, another near Grand River, and the third close to the Knife River villages) in North and South Dakota.

British free traders and the men of the North West Company apparently swung the sympathies of most of the Upper Missouri tribes over to the British side. According to rumor at St. Louis, the North West Company even built a post among the Mandans. True or not, trade from St. Louis came to an end. The tribes of the Upper Mississippi were even more clearly aligned with the British. Encouraged by trader Robert Dickson, some Indians from Minnesota went east to aid the British armies.

The North West Company and the Indians with whom they traded, however, took little part in the War of 1812. The company furnished the British government with merchandise for presents to the Indians. It also lost some property at Sault Ste Marie, pillaged by the Americans, and some vessels on the Great Lakes, but in 1814 it safely sent a million dollars' worth of furs from the upper country to Montreal.¹²

To counteract British influence on the Upper Missouri, William Clark, then Superintendent of Indian Affairs at St. Louis, in August, 1814, appointed Manuel Lisa as subagent for all of the Missouri tribes above the mouth of the Kansas River. Clark gave Lisa \$1,335 worth of merchandise to win over the Indians. Lisa went up the Missouri to his fort a short distance

¹² Gordon C. Davidson, *The North West Company* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1918), pp. 139-142, 289; John C. Luttig, *Journal of a Fur-Trading Expedition on the Upper Missouri, 1812-1813*, ed. Stella M. Drumm (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society, 1920); Louis A. Tohill, *Robert Dickson, British Trader on the Upper Mississippi: A Story of Trade, War, and Diplomacy* [Ann Arbor: Edwards Brothers, 1927], pp. 42-64.

above present-day Omaha, where he worked successfully to keep the Omahas and nearby tribes loyal to the United States. He even organized war parties against the pro-British Indians on the Upper Mississippi. His activities did not extend to the Indians in North Dakota, however. Those tribes were too remote to be drawn into the war by either side.

During the peace negotiations, British fur interests asked their government to secure a new boundary with the United States. All of the lines they suggested as being satisfactory ran up the Missouri River to the Rocky Mountains. Their proposals would have placed the larger part of North Dakota in British territory, but none of them were included in the peace treaty. It did provide, however, that the United States make peace with all the tribes with which it was at war. As a result, "William Clark, Ninian Edwards, and Auguste Chouteau signed treaties with many tribes in the summer of 1815 at Portage des Sioux, a small French village near the junction of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers.

Most of the tribes at the peace council were from the Upper Mississippi, but Lisa brought forty-three chiefs and headmen (Yanktons, Tetons, Omahas, and other tribes) from the Missouri. None of them, however, represented tribes in North Dakota. Lisa brought down Partisan, the Teton chief who had tried to stop Lewis and Clark in 1804-, and also Black Buffalo, the Teton who had helped them. One observer said that the wildest, least sophisticated Indians at the council were those from the remote Upper Missouri.¹³

The old obstacles, distance and hostile tribes, that had frustrated the Spanish still frustrated the Americans. In spite of the Louisiana Purchase, the Lewis and Clark Expedition, and the efforts of Manuel Lisa and other traders, the Upper Missouri country, especially the more remote portions in North Dakota and Montana, was still not tied to St. Louis in 1815.

¹³ Robert L. Fisher, "[The Treaties of Portage des Sioux](#)," [Mississippi Valley Historical Review](#), XIX (March 1933), 495-508. A long document in Carter, [Territorial Papers](#), XIV, 614-621, considers the Indian problem on the northwest frontier but does not mention the Upper Missouri.