

CHAPTER 5



The Upper Missouri Country

THE INDIAN TRADE eventually made the Upper Missouri country a colonial hinterland of St. Louis. Three factors had long delayed the process: the great distance to the more remote parts, the refusal of Congress to place a military force among the Mandans, and the hostility of some of the Indians. Finally the American Fur Company, Kenneth McKenzie, and the steamboat tied the region to St. Louis, and the Missouri River became the major artery of the fur trade. Holding a monopoly, the American Fur Company exploited the buffalo (buffalo robes were the chief item of trade), the Indians, and its own employees. The Indians became more dependent on the traders' goods, more demoralized by their liquor.

The fur trade was, of course, only a transitory phase in the development of the region. First, smallpox wiped out many of the Indians and started the decline of the trade. Then Indian hostility, the establishment of military posts, and the destruction of fur-bearing animals ended it. The coming of the Northern Pacific Railroad to the Missouri River opened a new era. In North Dakota, the Upper Missouri country, as well as the Red River Valley and the Drift Prairie, was to become a hinterland of the twin cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul.

THE YELLOWSTONE EXPEDITION

After the War of 1812 the merchants of St. Louis again

sought to exploit the Upper Missouri country. They were aided by John C. Calhoun, then Secretary of War and a strong nationalist. "To extend and protect our trade with the Indians," he wrote, he planned to advance the authority of the United States up both the Missouri and Mississippi rivers into regions still under British influence. Although at first he had chosen the mouth of the Yellowstone, he decided to put the army post for the Missouri beside the Mandan and Hidatsa villages at the mouth of the Knife River. He also planned another fort on the Mississippi at the mouth of the Minnesota River. Calhoun believed that the Mandan post should be supported by a second one at Council Bluffs. St. Louis—especially Thomas Hart Benton's *St. Louis Enquirer*—cheered the idea: it would add to the security of the West, keep the Indians in check, destroy British influence among them, protect the fur trade, and be a step toward the "actual possession of the whole American Territory."

The remoteness of the Mandan villages caused Calhoun's plan to end in partial failure. Colonel Henry Leavenworth reached the mouth of the Minnesota easily enough and began building the post there (later named Fort Snelling) in the summer of 1819. But when Colonel Henry Atkinson, in command of the Yellowstone Expedition, started up the Missouri with a thousand men the same summer, his steamboats (the first ever used on that river) broke down or found the water too low. Atkinson could only reach Council Bluffs. He built a post there (named Fort Atkinson in 1821) and spent the winter. The delay and unwise contracts for supplies rather unfairly discredited the Yellowstone Expedition. Congress cut the appropriations for it so much that it could not go on to the Mandan villages. In the debate a senator from North Carolina opposed "sending military expeditions to such extremely remote points."

Nevertheless, the fort at Council Bluffs did advance the military frontier several hundred miles. For the first time the Plains Indians witnessed the military strength of the United States. Atkinson paraded his soldiers and demonstrated the steamboat *Expedition* to impress them. But this was not enough. He wrote to Calhoun in November, 1820: "It is more than probable if our traders do not make establishments among them [the Indians of the Upper Missouri], under the

protection and influence of a respectable detachment of troops, they will be so far drawn away by British influence that it may be impossible to recall them.”¹ Atkinson argued for an annual excursion of troops up the Missouri from Council Bluffs until a fort could be built higher up. Calhoun felt that the hostility of Congress made such an excursion inadvisable.

THE ARIKARA WAR

The experiences of the traders revealed the strength of barriers posed by distance and Indian hostility. As with Manuel Lisa earlier, North Dakota and other grassland areas were on the route of the traders, not their goal. In 1821 and 1822, William H. Ashley and Joshua Pilcher took the lead in seeking to exploit the more remote Upper Missouri. Both sought the beaver of the Rockies rather than the buffalo of the Great Plains. Both used the Missouri River as a highway and then gave it up. In 1821, Pilcher built Fort Benton at the mouth of the Big Horn. The next year, he built Fort Vanderburgh among the Mandans and sent two men, Jones and Immel, with 180 trappers to the Rockies. He then had about 300 men trapping beaver in the mountains, the first venture in that region since the War of 1812. In the fall of 1822, his men sent some \$25,000 worth of furs down the river to St. Louis.

That spring, Ashley sent one hundred men led by Andrew Henry, a veteran of the business, to the Three Forks of the Missouri in southwestern Montana. Starting in the river with two keelboats and fifty horses, they were scarcely underway when one of the keelboats struck a snag and sank with a loss of ten thousand dollars in property. Above the Mandan villages the Assiniboin Indians, feigning friendship, stole the horses being ridden along the bank. Henry’s men spent the winter trapping near the mouth of the Yellowstone River and in the spring set out for the Blackfoot country in northern Montana. Ashley himself recruited another hundred men and went up the Missouri with two keelboats.

¹ Clarence E. Carter (ed.), *Territorial Papers of the United States*, vol. XV, *The Territory of Louisiana-Missouri, 1815-1821* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1949), pp. 673-674, 685; Edgar B. Wesley, “[A Still Larger View of the So-Called Yellowstone Expedition](#),” *North Dakota Historical Quarterly*, V (July 1931), 220-233.

Disaster struck in the spring of 1823. The Blackfeet, possibly egged on by British traders, killed four of Henry's men near Great Falls and drove him out of the country. On the Yellowstone they killed Immel, Jones, and five other men, taking horses, traps, and furs worth fifteen thousand dollars. Three days later, June 3, the Arikaras attacked Ashley's party at their villages. Ashley had stopped there, at the mouth of the Grand River in northern South Dakota, to buy horses. After pretending friendship, the Arikaras struck Ashley's camp on the riverbank at dawn. Within fifteen minutes they had killed fourteen men and nearly all of the horses they had sold the whites the day before. Ashley took the survivors down the river and sent a message to Colonel Henry Leavenworth at Fort Atkinson.

Leavenworth set out at once to punish the Arikaras, in his words "to open and make good this great road." He had 220 soldiers and 4 keelboats. Ashley joined him with 80 of his mountaineers; Pilcher added 40 more and talked 400 or 500 Sioux into joining the force to plunder their enemies. Leavenworth approached the Arikara villages on August 9, the Sioux rushing ahead.

The Arikaras came out to fight the Sioux, but went back into their villages when they saw the whites. The Sioux then plundered the corn fields, but Leavenworth did nothing until the next day, when he fired his two six-pounders and his howitzer into the villages. The artillery fire caused little damage. Leavenworth then planned an assault, but when the Sioux would not take part, he gave it up. His refusal to fight aroused the contempt of the Sioux, who rode off, stealing some of his horses and mules as they left.

Leavenworth signed a treaty with the Arikaras by which they agreed to return Ashley's property. They gave up only three guns, one horse, and sixteen robes, then ran away. Leavenworth returned to Fort Atkinson. He had lost no men in fighting, but seven drowned when one of his keelboats sank. His conduct angered the trappers; some of them set the abandoned villages on fire. Pilcher believed that Leavenworth's weakness would increase the outrages against the whites: "You came," he wrote Leavenworth, "to 'open and make good this great road'; instead of which you have, by the imbecility of your conduct and operations,

created and left impassable barriers.” Pilcher gave up trading above Council Bluffs. Ashley, after some more misadventures, finally abandoned the Missouri and went overland, out the Platte River, to the Rockies. For many years the Arikaras continued to harass whites who ascended the Upper Missouri.²

THE ATKINSON-O’FALLON EXPEDITION

Within a few years, however, a show of military strength, a strong combination of traders, and the steamboat made the Upper Missouri a useful trade route. In 1824, Congress authorized an expedition to regain the prestige lost by Leavenworth. The following spring, General Henry Atkinson, accompanied by Indian Agent Benjamin O’Fallon, led 476 soldiers up the Missouri from Council Bluffs. Eight keelboats carried most of the men; forty rode horses along the riverbank.

Atkinson and O’Fallon held councils and signed treaties with sixteen tribes from Council Bluffs to the Knife River. They staged military parades and fired off rockets and cannons to impress the Indians. They also handed out presents, but they gave the Arikaras a reprimand for misconduct and only four hundred plugs of tobacco.

Under terms of these treaties, signed in 1825, the Indians promised to protect the traders licensed by the United States government, not to sell any guns or ammunition to any tribe not in amity with the United States, and to turn over to officers of the United States for punishment any foreign trader or any Indian who injured a white man. Toussaint Charbonneau, the husband of Sakakawea, signed (as a witness) the treaty negotiated at Knife River. It was the first between the United States and the Mandans and Hidatsas. In the council, both tribes disavowed the killing of some of Ashley’s men by attributing the action “to the imprudence of their young men” who “fired in the night upon camps of the whites under the impression that they were Indians.”

The Crows became very hostile in their council at the Knife River villages. When they started to take the presents before they

²Hiram M. Chittenden, [*The American Fur Trade of the Far West*](#) (2 vols.; Stanford: Academic Reprints, 1954), I, 150-155, 248-249, 262-264, 270-280, II, 588-606.

were told to do so, O'Fallon struck three or four chiefs over the head with his pistol. But there was no bloodshed, and the next morning the chiefs and braves came for more presents, saying that "they would throw all that had passed behind them."

Upon his return, Atkinson reported that he had impressed the Indians, that he had found no evidence of British influence among them, and that no fort was needed above Fort Atkinson at Council Bluffs.³

AMERICAN FUR COMPANY OPERATIONS

Although the army established no post on the Missouri River above Council Bluffs until the declining days of the trade, the American Fur Company advanced up the river. The firm, created by John Jacob Astor, was the first great monopoly in the United States. When Astor, a barrel-chested German immigrant, consolidated his fur-trading interests in the American Fur Company, he was the second richest American. When he died in 1848, his private fortune (made, for the most part, in New York real estate) was by far the largest in America. James Parton, his biographer, thought him "one of the ablest, boldest, and most successful operators that ever lived," but selfish, grasping, and ruthless.

The American Fur Company was chartered in 1808 by New York State and had a capital of one million dollars. Astor exerted great influence in Washington, where he had the support of Lewis Cass, for a time governor of fur-rich Michigan Territory and later Democratic candidate for President, and of Thomas Hart Benton, for thirty years United States senator from Missouri. In 1822, Cass and Benton secured the abolition of government trading factories, which sold goods to the Indians at cost. Soon after, the American Fur Company hired Senator Benton as its attorney.

After the War of 1812 the company, with its headquarters at Mackinac, acquired a monopoly of the Indian trade around the Great Lakes and the Upper Mississippi River. It was

³ Russell Reid and Clell G. Gannon (eds.), "[Journal of the Atkinson-O'Fallon Expedition](#)," *North Dakota Historical Quarterly*, IV (October 1929), 5-56.

aided by an act of 1816, lobbied through Congress by Astor, excluding British traders. The firm soon began to look farther west. Astor at first made agreements with St. Louis merchants by which the American Fur Company sold them trade goods (largely imported) and had the first option to buy their furs. For these privileges it promised not to supply their competitors or to compete itself for their Indian trade. But in 1822 the company gave up such agreements and established its own Western Department in St. Louis. It made an agreement with a St. Louis firm and in 1827 changed its St. Louis partner to Bernard Pratte and Company. The American Fur Company supplied the trade goods and marketed the furs; the St. Louis partner supervised the business with the Indians. Profits or losses were shared equally. The leading man in the St. Louis house was soon Pierre Chouteau, Jr., a businessman of Astor's own ruthless quality. The firm name changed from Bernard Pratte and Company to Pratte, Chouteau and Company and then to Pierre Chouteau, Jr., and Company.

Astor's allies in St. Louis were the old French nabobs of the fur trade, united by business interests and social ties. William Clark, Thomas Hart Benton, and Lewis Cass were their friends and spokesmen in the national government. Chouteau married a sister of Bartholomew Berthold (a partner of Bernard Pratte); Ramsay Crooks, Astor's chief lieutenant, married a daughter of Bernard Pratte. Their very names were to leave marks on the Upper Missouri country: Fort Pierre, Fort Clark, Fort Cass, Fort Benton, and Fort Berthold. The combination was powerful and aggressive. Annie Heloise Abel, a student of its operations, has written:

Between the Chouteaus and Astor there had never been any appreciable difference, any dissimilarity of methods or of public morals. All of them were resourceful, eternally vigilant, unscrupulous, notoriously selfish, adept at the shaping of national policies to private ends, brazen in their defiance of the law, remorseless in their exploitation of the Indians.⁴

⁴Annie Heloise Abel (ed.), *Chardon's Journal at Fort Clark, 1834-1839* (Pierre, S.D.: Privately printed, 1932), p. xvi; Kenneth W. Porter, *John Jacob Astor: Business Man* (2 vols.; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931). I, 164-168' II, 686-718, 739, 744-745, 751-752.

Such were the men, living in their great houses in New York and St. Louis, who directed the trade and garnered the profits of the Upper Missouri hinterland of which western North Dakota was a part.

General Atkinson and his troops had helped, but American exploitation of fur resources in much of the Upper Missouri country actually came about through the work of some young Scotsmen. Kenneth McKenzie, Daniel Lamont, and William Laidlaw had served apprenticeships with British firms. When the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company united in 1821, they came to the United States, took out naturalization papers at St. Louis, and joined Joseph Renville and others in the Columbia Fur Company.

Renville and his partners located their principal post on Lake Traverse and had others at Prairie du Chien and Green Bay. In 1822 and 1823 they built three posts on the Upper Missouri: Fort Lookout (above present-day Chamberlain, South Dakota), Fort Tecumseh (two or three miles above the mouth of the Teton River), and an unnamed fort at the Knife River villages. The Arikaras soon drove two of their employees, James Kipp and J. P. Tilton, out of the Knife River post, whereupon the pair put up a trading house in one of the Mandan villages. Kipp learned the Mandan language and traded with the tribe for many years. In 1825-1826 he built a fort at the mouth of the White Earth River, 140 miles above the Mandans, for trade with the Assiniboins.

The Columbia Fur Company was competing with Astor's American Fur Company from Lake Michigan to the Upper Missouri. For all their ruthlessness, Astor's men could not crush it. So, in 1826, Ramsay Crooks, managing Astor's fur empire, began negotiations with McKenzie, by then the leader of the Columbia partners, for a consolidation of interests. Crooks wanted to secure McKenzie's talents for the American Fur Company, as well as to end the profit-killing competition. He was willing to take in the others, who were good traders.

Crooks and McKenzie reached an agreement in the summer of 1827. McKenzie, Laidlaw, and Lamont were to take charge of a new division of the Western Department of the American Fur Company, the Upper Missouri Outfit. They would withdraw from the Great Lakes and Upper

Mississippi. As compensation, they would have a free hand on the Missouri above the mouth of the Big Sioux River. McKenzie was to have a salary of \$1,500 per year, as well as a share of the profits. He brought with him to the Upper Missouri Outfit most of the middle-rank men, such as Kipp, of the Columbia Fur Company. The inventory of the company's property on the Missouri at the time of the transfer was about \$17,000 (\$14,453 of it at Fort Tecumseh).

The agreement, together with others Crooks made about the same time with smaller companies, eliminated competition in the Upper Missouri country. The Indians, except for brief intervals, had to deal with a monopoly practically as long as the fur trade lasted. The position of the American Fur Company thus became a key factor in the development of the region. Monopoly meant greater exploitation of the Indians, those of North Dakota along with the rest.

McKenzie's energy and Astor's resources brought rapid expansion. In the fall of 1828, McKenzie sent Kipp with the keelboat *Otter* to build a post at the mouth of the Yellowstone River. McKenzie wanted beaver, and that fall he sent Étienne Provost to invite the Rocky Mountain trappers to bring their catch to the new post. Located at the junction of the Yellowstone and the Missouri, it could be a base of operations for the upper country. In 1830, McKenzie changed its name from Fort Floyd to Fort Union. He made it his headquarters, and it became the most important post on the Upper Missouri.

McKenzie sought trade with the Blackfeet, a tribe which had been hostile toward Americans ever since Meriwether Lewis killed two of its warriors on the Marias River in 1806. The Piegans, one division of the tribe, trapped beaver and would allow no white men in their country. In 1830, McKenzie sent out

an old trapper named Berger to induce the Blackfeet to trade with Fort Union. Berger had worked at a Hudson's Bay Company post which served the tribe and knew their language and customs, as well as many individual members of the tribe. Berger brought in the Blackfeet, an astonishing feat.

Kenneth McKenzie won their friendship, sent them an itinerant trader, and promised them a fort in their own country. In 1831 he made a peace treaty between the Blackfeet and the Assiniboins: "So long as the water runs, or the grass grows, they

may hail each other as brethren.” He sent James Kipp and twenty-five men to build a post, Fort Piegan, at the mouth of the Marias River. Kipp traded for 2,400 beaver-pelts in ten days, winning the Piegans from the Hudson’s Bay trader with liquor. In the fall of 1832, David D. Mitchell built Fort McKenzie on the Missouri River six miles above the mouth of the Marias, to replace Fort Piegan, and for many years it was the center of Blackfoot trade.

At first, McKenzie sent itinerant traders up the Yellowstone to the Crows, but in 1832, Samuel Tulloch built Fort Cass for them at the mouth of the Big Horn River. It served both the Crows and the white trappers of the mountains. In 1831, Kipp built Fort Clark at the Knife River villages; in 1831-1832 a new post, Fort Pierre, took the place of nearby Fort Tecumseh and

served the Sioux. Thus in its first five years the Upper Missouri Outfit had built five important posts (not counting Fort Piegan, which had been abandoned and burned), opened up a vast region, and secured beaver from the mountains.⁵

Exploitation of the far reaches of Upper Missouri country called for better transportation. Keelboats, built at Pittsburgh for two or three thousand dollars, required large crews for small cargoes—twenty-five French *voyageurs* for twenty-five tons of freight. They also needed the whole summer to get goods to the more remote posts. Although steam navigation was just beginning on the Lower Missouri in 1830, McKenzie and Chouteau wanted to try a small steamboat on the upper river. They believed that such a boat, costing about eight thousand dollars, would save time and expense.

They had the *Yellowstone* built. It was 130 feet long, had a draft of 66 inches, and could carry 144 tons of freight. The *Yellowstone* went up to Fort Pierre in 1831, and the next year it reached Fort Union, an achievement noticed even in European newspapers. Every spring after that, the American Fur Company sent one or two steamboats up to Fort Union or beyond. They started their return trip soon after reaching the head of navigation, while the water was still high. In time, larger steamboats were used on the Missouri (carrying up to 500 tons), but their draft averaged only 50 inches. In 1849, freight cost six to eight dollars per hundredweight from St. Louis to Fort Union, and a steamboat could ascend the Missouri to that point in eight or ten weeks; a record set in 1843 was forty-nine days. Snags, low water, and the shifting channel endangered the steamboats, however, so that their average life on the river was only three years. Yet they saved time and money and tied the Upper Missouri country to St. Louis until the coming of the railroad.

Older methods of transportation were used even after the advent of the steamboat. Small traders still took goods up the river by pack horse. Kenneth McKenzie usually went on horseback from Fort Pierre to Fort Union in the fall. He sent keelboats to the posts above Fort Union and regularly used mackinaw boats to take the returns of the trade to St. Louis in the summer and fall.

⁵Chittenden, *American Fur Trade*, I, 323-337; II, 953-957

Forts Pierre and Union had boatyards, (called *chantiers*) where work-men built the mackinaws—flat-bottomed boats forty or fifty feet long. These required a crew of only five and would carry a cargo of fifteen tons. The mackinaws made only one trip down the river, rushing along at one hundred miles per day, and were then sold at St. Louis for five dollars each. For twenty years James Kipp herded a fleet of mackinaws down the Missouri each summer. Their crews would secure liquor in settlements along the way and become unruly, and Kipp would have to struggle to get the furs to St. Louis. Then he would return overland to his post.⁶

The Upper Missouri Outfit located its principal posts on the river close to some tribe. Only five were staffed the year round, but these had many dependent wintering houses which were occupied each fall and abandoned each spring. The permanent forts stocked \$15,000 to \$20,000 worth of goods and employed 15 to 20 men. The wintering houses might have from \$500 to \$3,000 worth of goods and from 3 to 6 men. In 1835, Kenneth McKenzie had 84 men at the 4 forts in his charge (Union, Clark, Cass, and McKenzie), a reduction from an earlier number.

Each fort had a stockade some sixteen feet high and a strong gate. Within the stockade stood the residences (some with glass windows) of the trader and his man, along with stables, warehouses, blacksmith and carpenter shops, a powder magazine, and rooms for trading. Accommodation varied from fort to fort. Fort Union, the most elaborate, had barracks for Indian visitors. Blockhouses generally guarded two corners of the stockade with cannon. There were always horses and dogs at the forts, and sometimes cattle and chickens (milk and eggs were treats in the wilderness) and a garden. The stockades enclosed a considerable area, Fort Pierre, the largest, was 325 feet by 340 feet; Fort Union was 220 feet by 240 feet; Fort Clark was 132 feet by 147 feet; Fort Jackson, a wintering house in Montana, was only 50 feet square.

Staffing the forts, in addition to the company partners, were clerks, interpreters, hunters and *engagés*. A clerk might have

⁶Louis C. Hunter, [*Steamboats on the Western Rivers: An Economic and Technological History*](#) (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), pp. 48, 101, 117, 224, 235-236, 377.

charge of a post or wintering house and so had to be able to keep records: several clerks assisted McKenzie at Fort Union. The interpreters, of course, played an important role in bargaining with the Indians. The hunters supplied the fort with meat. The other employees, or *engagés*, held a variety of jobs; some were skilled craftsmen, smiths and carpenters, and others built the forts, handled boats, herded horses, transported goods, put up hay, and helped with the trade. Some were white men, but on the Upper Missouri, many were Red River half-breeds, or *métis*.

Men of every rank, from McKenzie to the lowly *engagés*, took Indian wives and raised families of half-breed children. Alexander Culbertson, long in command of Fort Union, married a beautiful Blackfoot woman (a graceful swimmer and horsewoman); they sent their children to the best schools in the United States.

Life at the forts varied. Dried or fresh buffalo meat was the chief food, but when buffalo could not be found, the people living at a fort might have to subsist on boiled corn. At Fort Union, however, Kenneth McKenzie dined in state (he was long known as the King of the Missouri): his clerks wore coats; a white cloth covered the table; two waiters, one of them a Negro, served milk, cream, butter, coffee, wine, and bread made with white flour, as well as the usual fare. McKenzie imported other luxuries, including French brandy, plums, almonds, newspapers, and cigars.

James Archdale Hamilton, an English aristocrat who clerked at Fort Union, ordered fashionable clothes from London each year. To the amazement of the *engagés*, he took a bath and put on a clean shirt every day. Christmas meant special treats of eatables and often a drunken spree. Hunting was, of course, a common amusement. In 1843, John James Audubon took part in a ball at Fort Union; Culbertson played the fiddle and the clerks and *engagés* danced reels and cotillions with the Indian women, dressed in their best for the festivity. Yet a sense of loneliness often depressed Francis A. Chardon at Fort Clark, and probably many another trader.

The focal point of activity at the forts was barter with the Indians. In late winter, Astor shipped trade goods, usually imported from England, from New York to St. Louis. When

the river ice broke up, Chouteau sent them up the Missouri to the various posts. By fall, the clerks would be sorting them into smaller outfits and going out to their wintering houses, using carts (probably of the Red River variety) or pack horses. By fall, too, Chardon would be lending traps to those Mandans who wanted to go out for beaver. In winter, the clerk in charge of a fort might send out two or three men with an assortment of goods by sled to an Indian camp to trade for a few weeks.

The Indians wanted mostly coarse woolen goods of English manufacture, such as red and blue strouds, blankets, and blue cloth, but they also needed guns, powder and lead, tobacco, knives, flints, and kettles (brass, copper, or tin). For the 1840-1841 season, for example, Chouteau ordered six thousand pairs of French blankets, three hundred North West guns (\$5.62 each), and three hundred dozen butcher knives as well as other goods.

Trade started in the fall. At Fort Union, McKenzie sold much liquor (a noisy, drunken business conducted at night) to keep the Indians away from the Hudson's Bay Company traders. At Fort Clark the company sold no liquor, for the Mandans preferred water and were fond of tea and coffee. The traders gave presents to start the trade, but on the Upper Missouri they apparently did not extend credit, practically a universal practice in the Indian trade. Chardon's journal, McKenzie's letters from Fort Union, Charles Larpenteur's recollections—none mention Indian credit. At Fort Clark in the 1830's, Chardon frequently bought beaver pelts from white trappers. With the Indians he traded for buffalo robes, beaver and other furs, and meat and corn. He sold them horses as well as the usual trade goods.

In the spring the *engagés*, using a press, made up the peltries into packs weighing a hundred pounds each. Ten buffalo robes or sixty (sometimes more) beaver pelts made a pack. In spring or summer the packs went down the river to St. Louis, where they were opened, counted, weighed, and then shipped to New York by way of New Orleans. Astor sold some in New York, shipped some to Europe and some to China.

Comprising most of the returns from the Upper Missouri were buffalo robes. Since the life of Plains Indians turned on the buffalo hunt, they naturally brought robes to the traders and also some meat, especially tongues. In 1833 the *Yellowstone* took on 7,000 robes at Fort Union. In July, 1835, the steamboat *Assiniboine* burned just below Heart River with 1,100 packs of

robes and other furs and property, a \$60,000 to \$80,000 loss, for the boat and cargo were not insured. Fort Clark's receipts best show the returns from North Dakota. It received 3,270 robes and 1,140 beaver pelts in 1835, 3,130 robes and 442 beaver in 1836, 3,200 robes and 436 beaver in 1837, and 2,870 robes and 404 beaver in 1838. At the fort the robes were valued at three dollars, the beaver at four. The returns also included a few wolf, fox, and muskrat skins.

Although one Indian woman could dress only ten robes a year, the American Fur Company received great quantities of them at St. Louis, about seventy thousand robes a year from 1834 to 1844. Ramsay Crooks could not find a market for them in Europe, so they were sold in the United States for about four dollars apiece. Books and articles dealing with the trade do not identify the purchasers, but whoever they were, they would not give much for the principal product of the Great Plains.⁷

Yet the American Fur Company wrung profits from its operations. The company's competitors, known as the "opposition" on the river, raised the price of furs, increased the number and expense of trading posts and *engagés*, flooded the Indian country with goods, and wiped out profits. Now and then the company encountered competition, for it was a simple matter of experienced men, often former employees, to get an outfit on credit and go up the Missouri to the Indian country, but such opposition never lasted very long. McKenzie would raise the price of furs, giving a blanket for a robe or paying twelve dollars for beaver (three times the usual value). The competitors could not stand the losses and would give up or sell out. The company might even use violence; Joseph La Barge believed that it had plotted his murder when he was a member of the opposition. Although the Indians liked competition for their furs, they were generally loyal to established traders. They knew that

⁷Abel, *Chardon's Journal, passim; Maximilian*, Prince of Wied, *Travels in the Interior of North America* (Vols. [XXII](#), [XXIII](#), [XXIV](#) of *Early Western Travels, 1748-1846*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites; Cleveland: A. H. Clark Company, 1905-1906), *passim*; Merrill G. Burlingame, "[The Buffalo in Trade and Commerce](#)," *North Dakota Historical Quarterly* III (July 1929), 273.

the newcomers would soon be gone

Many things strengthened the American Fur Company's monopoly. It benefitted from the influence of Lewis Cass and Thomas Hart Benton in Washington and so escaped penalties for taking liquor into the Indian country. It benefitted from the distribution of government presents to the tribes. The subagents for the Missouri River tribes, generally independent traders or former employees of the company, came up the river with company traders and handed out the presents with the trader standing by, or even turned them over to the trader for distribution. One of the agents, John F. A. Sanford, married the daughter of Pierre Choteau and later became a partner in the company.

The company also used liquor to retain the loyalty of the Indians. Congress had forbidden liquor in the Indian trade in 1802 and had strengthened the prohibition in 1834. McKenzie believed, however, that it was an absolute necessity, especially to prevent the Indians from going north of the boundary to the Hudson's Bay Company. The American Fur Company always managed to get liquor past the inspectors. In 1831, William Clark refused to search its outfit, saying that he trusted the "good faith" of the company.

In 1833, McKenzie took a still up to Fort Union and manufactured his own liquor (he bragged of his "Fort Union wine") until he was reported the next year. The company, however, did not lose its license. The Fort Union inventory in 1832 showed forty barrels of alcohol, two of whiskey, one of Jamaica rum, and one of shrub. In 1842 the company secured the appointment of Andrew Drips, one of its own traders, as Indian agent for the Upper Missouri. Drips stopped the liquor trade of the opposition but did not disturb the company.

The liquor trade was part of a ruthless exploitation of the Indians. In January, 1844, for example, Charles Larpenteur went from Fort Union to a Cree camp north of the boundary at Woody Mountain. Although the thermometer stood well below zero (it was so cold that one of the mules froze to death standing up), he traded five gallons of alcohol for 180 robes, about all there was in camp.

Many eyewitnesses have testified that contact with the traders demoralized the Indians and made them lazy, wretched, and even poor hunters. Certainly it often meant prostitution for

Indian women and girls, their husbands or fathers lending them for small sums. The Tetons called the Indians who hung around the forts “Loafers” and “Flat Bottles.” Yet all of the Indians had become dependent on white goods. The trade bred ill will, and because force was the only law in the Indian country, violence was common. “At present the intercourse between the parties,” wrote veteran trader William Gordon in 1831, “depends but too often for profit to their relative strength; taking alternate advantages of each other—hence a spirit of mutual bad feeling obtains, alike injurious to both parties.”⁸ The trader had plundered the Indian, or the Indian plundered the trader. Many traders died at the hands of Indians, but in 1844, Alexander Harvey and Francis Chardon turned the tables and murdered six Blackfeet at Fort McKenzie. The traders, however, were generally honest men who stimulated the industry of the Indians, created a new desire for goods, made peace between the tribes, and introduced firearms, kettles, and other tools which added to Indian comfort.

The traders exploited their *engagés*. These men signed three-year contracts for about one hundred dollars per year; in comparison, James Kipp, a clerk, was paid six hundred dollars a year. Except for provisions secured in the Indian country, a blanket, and an outfit of clothing, the *engagés* had to buy all of their necessities and comforts from company posts at high prices—coffee and sugar, for example, at a dollar a pint. They often ended their term of employment owing the company from one to two hundred dollars. Many of them deserted, sometimes making off with company property. Stories were also told of *engagés* mysteriously disappearing while on their way to St. Louis to collect three years’ wages.

The merchants, in turn, exploited the traders. Astor and Chouteau imported goods and turned them over to the traders on credit at a large advance over original cost. They also determined the prices at which fur returns were credited against the traders’ debts. The traders, then, could not determine the price at which they bought or sold; the monopoly had them. The profit or loss of the business venture was shared, but if the traders suffered losses, the

⁸ Abel, *Chardon’s Journal*, p. 351

merchants still made a profit in supplying the goods and marketing the furs. As Chouteau wrote Astor in 1833, “generally the loss falls upon the traders.”

There is much evidence to bear this out. Astor and Chouteau became rich; the chief traders in the Indian country did not. Manuel Lisa was said to have died insolvent. After forty years, Charles Larpenteur had very little. On the Upper Mississippi River, Joseph Rolette, Sr. (“King Rolette”), lost his property to the American Fur Company; Ramsay Crooks failed in 1842.

The real profits of the trade were far less than the difference (200 to 2,000 percent) between the cost of the goods and their selling price would suggest. The trader had to have two or three times as many men to protect himself and his property as the business would otherwise require. The risks were considerable, the expenses large for the capital involved. “We are satisfied,” wrote Lewis Cass and William Clark in 1828, “that the average profits of the fur trade are not in proportion to the enterprise and skill required to prosecute it and to the risk attending it.”⁹

The partnership agreements between the merchants and traders commonly ran for three or four years. Changes were frequent. When his agreement ran out in 1834, Astor, then seventy and ill, retired. He sold the Northern Department (trading from Mackinac with the Great Lakes and Upper Mississippi regions) to Ramsay Crooks and others, and the Western Department to Pratte, Chouteau and Company. Both groups continued to be popularly known as the American Fur Company. In 1835, Daniel Lamont pulled out of the Upper Missouri Outfit to enter a mercantile business in St. Louis, and David D. Mitchell became a partner in his place. About 1839, Kenneth McKenzie also withdrew to go into business in St. Louis; he made a fortune there, appropriately, as a wholesale liquor dealer. Honoré Picotte took McKenzie’s place as agent in charge of the Upper Missouri Outfit and made Fort Pierre his headquarters. In 1838, Pratte, Chouteau and Company became Pierre Chouteau, Jr., and Company, and in 1864 the firm sold out to the Northwestern Fur Company.

⁹Porter, *Astor*, II, 817; see also 769, 815-838, especially 827.

THE GREAT SMALLPOX EPIDEMIC

A smallpox epidemic brought about a decline in the fur trade, for it wiped out about fifteen thousand Indians on the Upper Missouri. The American Fur Company steamboat *St. Peter's* brought the disease to Fort Clark and Fort Union in June, 1837. By August, eight or ten Mandans were dying every day. But the Hidatsas and Arikaras, also living near Fort Clark, did not suffer so heavily. Neither did the Sioux, whose nomadic habits checked the spread of the disease. Finally the sedentary Indians, terrified by the toll, scattered over the prairie. On August 11 the Mandans abandoned their village, leaving the sick behind, and moved across the Missouri. The Indians blamed the whites for the calamity and made many threats of vengeance. An Arikara shot one of Chardon's men at Fort Clark. Four Bears, long a friend of the whites, called on the Mandans and Arikaras to kill them. "I have Never Called a White Man a Dog," he said while dying, "but today I do Pronounce them to be a set of Black harted Dogs."

No one can know just how many Indians dies, At Fort Union, Charles Laerpenteur though that half the Assiniboines were gone. The Mandan population fell in a few months from about 1,800 to some 125. In 1854, E. T. Denig, a trader at Fort Union, estimated that war and disease had reduced the Crees by an eighth, the Arikaras by a fifth, the Blackfeet and Sioux by a third, the Assiniboines and Crows by half, and the Mandans by three-fourths of their former numbers. With such losses among its customers, the Indian trade could not help but decline.¹⁰

After the epidemic, the Mandans and Hidatsas moved up the Missouri River and the Arikaras took over the abandoned village beside Fort Clark. In 1845 the Hidatsas began to build Like-a-Fish-Hook Village (so named for a bend in the Missouri) about forty-two miles above the mouth of Knife River. They asked for a trader, and in 1845 the Indian women helped Francis Chardon build Fort Berthold beside their village. During the next few years, the Mandans also moved to Like-a-Fish-Hook Village, and in 1862 the Arikaras

¹⁰Abel, [Chardon's Journal](#), pp. 118-145, 394-396.

joined them.

The Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikaras who lived beside Fort Berthold became known as the Three Tribes. They suffered much. A cholera epidemic hit them in 1851, and smallpox again in 1866. The Yanktonais attacked them so often that the Three Tribes did not dare go far from the village to hunt. Often hungry, they asked the Indian agent for protection.

WHITE INTRUDERS IN THE INDIAN COUNTRY

All Plains tribes were threatened by a white invasion of the Indian country. It began in 1849 when Congress organized Minnesota Territory and when thousands of gold seekers began to take the overland trail to California. In 1851 the Santee Sioux gave up most of southern Minnesota to the United States. That same year, the tribes of the Northern Great Plains promised to allow white travel along the Platte River. When the Indians molested the emigrants going out the Platte, the army punished them. It then bought Fort Pierre for a military post in 1855, and built Fort Randall downstream in 1857.

The settlement of Iowa (admitted as a state in 1846) and Minnesota (admitted in 1858) stimulated beginnings in southeastern Dakota. The Yanktons ceded fourteen million acres between the Missouri and Big Sioux rivers in 1858. Settlements sprang up at Sioux Falls, Vermillion, and Yankton, and in 1861, Congress organized Dakota Territory.

The discovery of gold in Montana in 1862 increased travel through the Indian country. Gold seekers rode Missouri River steamboats to Fort Benton, where they took wagons overland to Virginia City and Helena. In 1860, only two steamboats went up to Fort Benton; in 1866, thirty-one made the trip; and in 1867, thirty-nine arrived.

Such traffic brought about the establishment of woodyards along the river. Reckless and hardy "woodhawks" earned good money providing fuel for steamboats. Living lonely lives, they fortified their cabins with stockades and sold, in addition to wood, fresh meat to passing steamboats. In the fall, miners would descend the Missouri in mackinaw boats. On November 17, 1864, a total of 17 mackinaws with 180 men stopped at Yankton on their way downstream.

The Montana gold rush created some overland traffic across

North Dakota. Congress appropriated funds to protect the emigrants, and in 1862 the Secretary of War placed James L. Fisk in charge of a party gathering at Fort Abercrombie. Hiring Pierre Bottineau as a guide, Fisk conducted the emigrant train (117 men and 13 women) to Fort Union and on to Fort Benton. Each night the men formed the wagons into a corral to protect the stock. As the train moved across North Dakota, a young couple were married, a mother gave birth to a baby, the women washed clothes and baked bread, a mule drowned, and a wagon upset in a river. On Sundays, N. P. Langford, a layman, read the Episcopal service. The grass was parched, water poor and scarce, and wood wanting.

That same year, another train went to Montana by way of Pembina to avoid the Sioux. In 1863, Fisk led a train of fifty-three men and twenty wagons from Fort Abercrombie to Fort Benton. In 1864 he set off with eighty-eight wagons and nearly two hundred persons besides a cavalry escort of fifty. This time, Fisk's train and another took a more southerly route through Fort Rice. One member of his party thought that the desolate plain was "in fact literally and emphatically good for nothing to the white man."¹¹

Steamboat and overland travel aroused the Sioux, but war started outside North Dakota. In the summer of 1862 the Santee Sioux, living on reservations along the Minnesota River, attacked the settlement and killed several hundred whites. When an army under Henry Hastings Sibley crushed the uprising, many of the Santees fled west to join Sioux bands about Devil's Lake. Others, their property and annuities confiscated, were removed to Crow Creek Agency in South Dakota.

To satisfy the desire of Minnesotans for revenge and to teach the Sioux a lesson, the army planned to trap them with a pincers movement near Devil's Lake. Sibley would lead 2,800 men against them from Minnesota; General Alfred Sully, a West Point graduate, would come up the Missouri River with 2,000 cavalrymen to cut off their escape to the west. With Pierre Bottineau and his métis scouting ahead for

¹¹Documents on the Fisk expedition are in *North Dakota Historical Society Collections*, II (1908), Pt. I, pp. 421-461; Pt. II, pp. 34-85.

Indian sign, Sibley swung his force westward north of present-day U.S. 10.

He fought the retreating Sioux, most of whom had taken no part in the Minnesota Massacre, in three battles: Big Mound (seven miles north of present-day Tappen), Dead Buffalo Lake (north of Dawson), and Stony Lake (northwest of Driscoll). Sibley's artillery, six-pounders and mountain howitzers, scattered the Indians. They were not on the warpath and were, of course, burdened with their families and all their possessions. At Big Mound, Sibley reported, the white soldiers collected and burned "vast quantities of dried meat, tallow, and buffalo robes, cooking utensils, and other indispensable articles."

Following the fight at Stony Lake, the Sioux crossed the Missouri River near present-day Bismarck; under fire from Sibley's troopers, many women and children drowned. His men then burned between 120 and 150 abandoned wagons and carts. Sully had not come up to cut off the Sioux retreat, and Sibley's men were too exhausted from their march in dry, hot summer weather to pursue the Indians across the river. Sibley thought that he might have killed or wounded 150 Indians; his own losses amounted to 9 men. He hoped that his destruction of Indian property would cause "many, perhaps most of them, to perish miserably in their utter destitution during the coming fall and winter."

After Sibley and his soldiers turned back toward Minnesota, the Sioux recrossed the Missouri and set out on a buffalo hunt on the James River. Sully, finally arriving, found their camp in what is now northwestern Dickey County. The Indians were willing to give up some chiefs as a guarantee of good behavior, but they would not agree to unconditional surrender. When the Indians began to abandon their camp, Sully attacked. His troopers shot down fleeing men, women, and children, killing about 150. They took some 156 prisoners (picking up babies on the prairie), burned 300 lodges and from 400,000 to 500,000 pounds of dried buffalo meat, and shot the captured horses. Sully lost 20 men. This was the Battle of Whitestone Hill, September 3, 1863—the bloodiest ever fought on North Dakota soil.

The Sioux, however, were still defiant. In 1864 the War Department sent Sully and 2,500 men to crush them. In July he came up the Missouri with steamboats and built Fort Rice six or

seven miles above the mouth of the Cannonball River. On July 28, Sully found the Sioux camp in the Killdeer Mountains. There were bands of Teton and Yanktonais and even some Santees from Minnesota. Sully's artillery drove the Indians from their camp, but he could not pursue them in the broken country to the north. His men, he reported, burned much abandoned property: "tons of dried buffalo meat packed in buffalo skin cases, great quantities of dried berries, buffalo robes, tanned buffalo, elk, and antelope skins, household utensils, such as brass and copper kettles, mess pans, &c., riding saddles, dray poles for ponies and dogs."

Sully then marched west to the Yellowstone River and returned down the Missouri to Fort Rice. In the Badlands the Sioux fired on his pickets and stampeded some horses, but Sully's force pushed ahead, as he said, "fighting, hunting a road, and digging it out." From the Little Missouri River to the Yellowstone, the country, Sully wrote, was "covered with myriads of grasshoppers.... My animals were almost starved." Some were abandoned and shot. Sully left a company of soldiers at Fort Union and another at Fort Berthold.¹²

THE MILITARY FORTS AND SIOUX HOSTILITIES

In 1864, Sully had built Fort Rice, the first military post on the Missouri River in North Dakota. The next few years saw a thoroughgoing military occupation of the region. In 1866 the army built Fort Buford three miles below the mouth of the Yellowstone River, and in 1867, Fort Stevenson, Fort Totten, and Fort Ransom were constructed. Fort Stevenson, on the north bank of the Missouri about seventeen miles east of Fort Berthold, would protect the Three Tribes. Fort Totten, on the southern shore of Devils Lake, would control a reservation for some of the Yanktonais and Santee Sioux. Fort Ransom, on the Sheyenne River about fifteen miles above present-day Lisbon, would guard a trail from Fort Abercrombie to the Missouri; in 1872 it was replaced by Fort Seward at Jamestown. In 1870 the army built

¹²Reports of Sibley and his officers and of Sully and his officers are in [*War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*](#), ed. R. N. Scott *et al.* (130 vols.; Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, Vol. XXII, Pts. [I](#) and [II](#); Vol. XLI, Pt. [I](#).

Fort Pembina and in 1872 Fort McKeen on the west bank of the Missouri about five miles south of Mandan. The latter was renamed Fort Abraham Lincoln that fall and enlarged in 1873. It was to protect the engineers and work party of the Northern Pacific Railroad.

At first the forts were collections of cottonwood-log huts with pole-and-earth roofs, though some were built of sawed timbers or adobe. They generally had stockades, but Fort Stevenson had none. Their garrisons consisted of one hundred to five hundred men, many of them immigrants who were unaccustomed to frontier life, poor horsemen, and afraid of the Sioux. Red River often performed the more dangerous duties, such as carrying the mail from fort to fort. The death rate was high, for the soldiers suffered from dysentery and scurvy on a winter diet of salt pork and fish without fresh vegetables. Life was monotonous; drunkenness and desertion were common.

The forts were to control the Indians and to protect the routes to Montana, but they only increased the hostility of the Sioux, especially the Yanktonais and Tetons. Sitting Bull's band of Hunkpapas (a division of the Tetons) led the resistance. Some mail carriers from Fort Stevenson reported a talk with Sitting Bull:

His business, he says, is to kill whites, and he will kill them as long as he and his band last. He boasts that war is more profitable to him than peace; that it brings him arms, ammunition, clothing, and especially great numbers of horses and mules, while the tribes who have submitted are dying of misery and hunger in the places where the whites have penned them up. 13

The Sioux struck at the whites everywhere. They attacked steamboats on the Missouri, especially those which went aground on sand bars. They killed mail carriers traveling between military posts. They wiped out miners descending the river in mackinaw boats. Rumor had it that Fred Ferard, a trader at Fort Berthold, recovered \$75,000 to \$100,000 from a concealed compartment in such a boat after the Indians had killed the miners. In 1864 the Sioux killed twelve of the Fisk party and besieged the rest in Fort Dilts (present Bowman County), saying, "Go home and come back no more."

When troops were building Fort Buford, Sitting Bull warned them to leave the country at once. Much of the time, the Sioux held the Missouri River forts in a state of semisiege. They almost

¹³Lucile M. Kane (trans. And ed.), *Military Life in Dakota: The Journal of Philippe Régis de Trobriand* (St. Paul: Alvord Memorial Commission, 1951), pp. 289-290. See also pp. 171, 259, 261, 264-265, 341-342, and, especially, 63-64.

never attacked, but would come sneaking in to run off the beef herd, steal horses and mules, cut off a wood party, or take the scalp of a careless soldier. When discovered, they would sit on their horses at a safe distance, making insulting gestures.

The army could not cow the Sioux. Infantrymen obviously could not catch them. General Philippe Régis de Trobriand, in command of Fort Stevenson, explained why cavalrymen were equally helpless:

Each [Sioux] warrior carries with him a piece of buffalo meat that has been dried in the sun. This is all the food he needs for a few weeks. His horse eats no grain; he gets enough nourishment by grazing on the prairie.... There is no equipment to carry. His saddle is nothing; his bridle just a lasso of buffalo leather, and he hardly uses that. If he must go up a hill on the gallop while being pursued, he will run alongside his horse in order to spare him.... The Indian pony without stopping can cover a distance of from sixty to eighty miles between sunrise and sunset, while most of our horses are tired out at the end of thirty or forty miles.... In brief, the movement of Indian horsemen is lighter, swifter, and longer range than that of our cavalry, which means that they always get away from us.

INDIAN TREATIES AND RESERVATIONS

Even though white troops were ineffective, many of the Indians were ready to quit fighting. De Trobriand described them as “tired of war, miserable, harassed, and hungry.” The Fort Berthold tribes opposed resistance, and in 1868 the Arikaras began to enlist as army scouts at Fort Stevenson.

The United States government itself persistently sought peace. In the fall of 1865 it signed treaties with many of the Teton bands: the Indians promised to withdraw from the routes of travel for annuities of thirty dollars for each lodge. In 1865, 1866, and 1867, government representatives talked peace with the Sioux at Fort Rice. In 1868 many of them signed a treaty, some at Fort Laramie (eastern Wyoming) and others at Fort Rice. The treaty—the basic one with the Sioux—is known as the Fort Laramie Treaty or the Sherman Treaty (William Tecumseh Sherman headed the peace commission).

By its terms the United States closed the Bozeman Trail, and the Sioux accepted as a reservation roughly the portion of present-day South Dakota lying west of the Missouri River. The United States promised help to each family when

it began to farm: tools and equipment, the services of a blacksmith, instruction in farming methods, a cow and a team of oxen, and the assistance of teachers, physicians, and carpenters. It offered rations (a pound of meat and a pound of flour daily for each person) during the transition to an agricultural life. It agreed that the Sioux could hunt in the country west of the reservation "as long as the buffalo are in sufficient numbers to justify the chase," but they could not live there permanently.¹⁴

The treaty was generous, much more generous than the treaties with tribes which had not fought the United States. But its purpose, of course, was to destroy the Teton way of life by placing the people on a reservation. In 1868 and 1869 the Indian Bureau established the Cheyenne River Agency and the Grand River Agency, both on the Missouri, as places of distribution for rations. By 1869 there were 4,500 Sioux (Hunkpapas, Yanktonais, Cut Heads, and Blackfoot Sioux) at Grand River Agency.

Both sides, however, violated the treaty. Many Sioux, still defiant, continued to live away from the reservation, to run off stock from the forts, and to commit other warlike acts. Sitting Bull and several other Sioux leaders had not signed the treaty. For its part, the United States failed to keep whites out of the unceded Indian country.

The government had no trouble with the Three Tribes. Poverty stricken and hungry, their members often went begging at Fort Stevenson. Sioux raiders killed many of them. In summer their crops failed; in winter they suffered from scurvy. Small pox took its toll in 1866. The Three Tribes did receive government aid, however. In 1864, General Alfred Sully left a company of soldiers at Fort Berthold to protect them. Two years later, the Three Tribes gave the United States the right to build roads and telegraph lines across their country; they also ceded the land for Fort Stevenson. In 1868 the government set up an agency, with a resident agent, for them at Fort Berthold. Before then, an agent had visited them only to distribute annuity goods under terms of the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851. In 1868, however, Mahlon S.

¹⁴Charles J. Kappler (comp.), *Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties* (3 vols.; Washington: Government Printing Office, 1903, 1913), II, 676-678, 686-693, 770-775.

Wilkinson, their first resident agent, built blacksmith and carpenter shops and a saw- and gristmill. Unfortunately, he also robbed them when he distributed annuities.

The Three Tribes were gradually beginning to occupy a dependent position on a restricted reservation. The Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851 defined their territory as lying west and south of the Missouri between the Heart and Yellowstone rivers. It ran west to the sources of the Heart and Little Missouri. In 1870 the President of the United States reduced their lands when he set aside a reservation for them by executive order. They lost the region from Fort Berthold to the mouth of the Heart River on the west side of the Missouri, but at the same time they gained land north of the Missouri. Some 2,100 Indians belonged to the agency at Fort Berthold. About half of them, however, were away hunting, serving as army scouts at the military posts, or wintering at camps between Fort Buford and Fort Peck, Montana. At the agency, about half lived in log cabins and half in earth lodges. A tenth were seriously ill. They complained that although they had never made war on the United States, as the Sioux had, the government lied to them, cheated them, and allowed them to starve. In 1876 the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions sent the Reverend and Mrs. Charles L. Hall to establish a mission for them.¹⁵

Some Santee and Yanktonai Sioux gathered on a reservation south of Devils Lake. On February 19, 1867, the Sissetons, Wahpetons, and Cut Heads (a band of the Yanktonais) signed a treaty for a reservation there. The army built Fort Totten that summer, and when winter came, the commander sent two traders and an interpreter to invite the Sioux on the Mouse River to come in to the fort. Cold and starving, they came willingly and settled nearby. The region, once rich with buffalo, had been hunted bare by the métis, who had a permanent camp south of Devils Lake. The commander at Fort Totten issued rations to 681 Indians

¹⁵Adrian R. Dunn, "[A History of Old Fort Berthold](#)" (M.A. thesis [later published], University of North Dakota, 1951), pp. x, 59-61, 65, 70, 74-76, 78. Dunn's thesis was published in [North Dakota History](#), XXX (October 1963), 157-240.

during the winter.

Once on the reservation, these Sioux made rapid progress. They began to raise corn, potatoes, and turnips and to cut hay. In 1871 they cultivated more than one hundred acres. That summer, William H. Forbes, their first agent, and his assistant, James McLaughlin, came to live at the old fort (the army had built itself new quarters of brick). McLaughlin, a young Scotch-Irish immigrant from Canada, had learned the Sioux language and had married a talented woman of mixed Scotch, French, and Sioux ancestry in southern Minnesota. A man of dignity, honesty, and force, he was to become one of the best Indian agents in the nation and to serve the Indian Bureau for fifty-two years. At Fort Totten he abolished the Sun Dance and taught the Indians to work. They received no free rations, such as were given to the western Sioux by the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, but were paid in subsistence and clothing for cutting wood.

In 1872 there were 725 Indians attached to Fort Totten Agency. Forbes built a saw- and gristmill for them and made other improvements worth five thousand dollars. He persuaded the Grey Nuns of Montreal to start a school at Fort Totten in 1874. The Indians themselves built a two-story brick house for the nuns. To promote the school and mission, three chiefs had gone with Forbes to visit Bishop Grace in St. Paul. The chiefs told the Bishop that they wanted "the man with the cross not with the gun." Father Jerome Hunt, an able priest, came in 1882. He started a little newspaper in the Sioux language and also published three religious books in that tongue.¹⁶

THE DECLINE OF THE FUR TRADE

The Indian wars, followed by reservation life with government rations and annuities, brought the fur trade to a close. Its decline had begun with the reduction of the Indian population by the smallpox epidemic of 1837. Then, as the hunts of the Red River métis expanded, buffalo became less abundant. White gold seekers crossing the Great Plains also diminished the amount of

¹⁶Charles De Noyer, "[The History of Fort Totten](#)," *Historical Society Collections*, III (1910), 183-184, 188, 199, 237-240; James McLaughlin, [My Friend the Indian](#) (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1910), pp. 7-14, 22-24, 29, 32.

game; an Assiniboin chief noted in 1853 that “as the white man advances, our means of life grow less.” In the 1860’s war hastened the decline of the trade.

As traffic increased on the Upper Missouri, steamboats became common carriers, making business life easier for independent traders. Smaller companies entered the trade even before the American Fur Company withdrew. The latter sold Fort Pierre to the army in 1855, abandoned Fort Clark sometime before 1862, and sold out to Hubbell and Hawley—the Northwestern Fur Company—in 1864. J. B. Hubbell of St. Paul was president of the firm. The other important company of these later years was Durfee and Peck, said to be the A. J. Smith Company of Chicago. Both the Northwestern Fur Company and Durfee and Peck owned steamboats.

The military posts, offering protection and new customers, attracted the trading companies. When Fort Rice was built, Durfee and Peck set up a store for both soldiers and Indians. When Fort Stevenson was constructed, the traders moved over from Fort Berthold, though still keeping a place of business at the old location. When Fort Buford was enlarged in 1867, the commanding officer bought old Fort Union and used its timbers at Buford. At the same time, the traders moved down the river to the military post. In 1871, Durfee and Peck sold Fort Berthold to the government (for use as an Indian Agency) for eight thousand dollars. All of the old fur-trading forts were now gone. The traders had become sutlers at the military posts.

A new monopoly soon appeared. In 1870, Congress decreed that there could be only one sutler at each post. The rest lost their licenses and had to leave. The law opened the way to graft. The post trader at Fort Berthold was said to have paid a thousand dollars to Orville Grant, brother of the President, for his appointment. Durfee and Peck were the sutlers at Fort Stevenson from 1870 to 1872.

These latter-day traders, like the earlier ones, still faced the problem of distance. In spite of the increase in steamboat traffic, transportation costs were high. To take a steamboat up the Missouri River cost \$250 a day, \$100 for wood alone. Freight charges were correspondingly high—ten cents a pound from St. Louis to Fort Benton in 1867—making prices very high at the military posts.

In the declining years of the fur trade, Durfee and Peck employed Pierre Garreau as an interpreter at Fort Berthold. Then in his sixties, Garreau, son of a Cree woman and a Turtle Mountain Frenchman, had spent his life in the Missouri River trade. A man of enormous strength and courage, he was honest,

temperate, devout Catholic and a legendary hero of great influence among the Indians. In 1866 he outfaced a hundred Sioux who were about to attack Fort Berthold. Joining their circle, he showed them his left hand (the one which had squeezed the Assiniboin—another legend), taunted them about their relatives whom he had killed, and called them old women when none of them would fight him. Cowed, the Sioux rode off.¹⁷

At Fort Berthold in the 1860's about half of the trade was with the Three Tribes and half with their enemies the Sioux. When the Sioux came in for a few days to trade, they would have a truce, visit in friendly fashion with the Three Tribes, and trade horses for corn. At the fort, Garreau would smoke for an hour or more and tell all the news of the region. On beginning the trade, the Indians first bought sugar, coffee, and hard bread. The traders were forbidden to sell guns or liquor. A buffalo robe, worth \$2.50, was the unit of value; a three-point blanket cost three robes, sugar thirty cents a pound. When the trading was over, the trader gave a present to each family. When the Indians were herded onto reservations and the Indian agents and sutlers of the military posts replaced the fur traders, the first stage in the exploitation of the Upper Missouri country had come to an end. The Northern Pacific Railroad reached Bismarck in 1873. Its coming opened a new era. The fur companies had made the Upper Missouri a hinterland of St. Louis; the railroads were to make the North Dakota portion of it a hinterland of St. Paul and Minneapolis. By 1873 the Missouri River, so long a great highway, was about to lose some of its historic significance.

¹⁷Ethel A. Collins, "Pioneer Experiences of Horatio A. Larned," [North Dakota Historical Society Collections](#), VII (1925), 39-48.