
SPECIAL HISTORY STUDY: THE FUR TRADE
AT FORT LARAMIE NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

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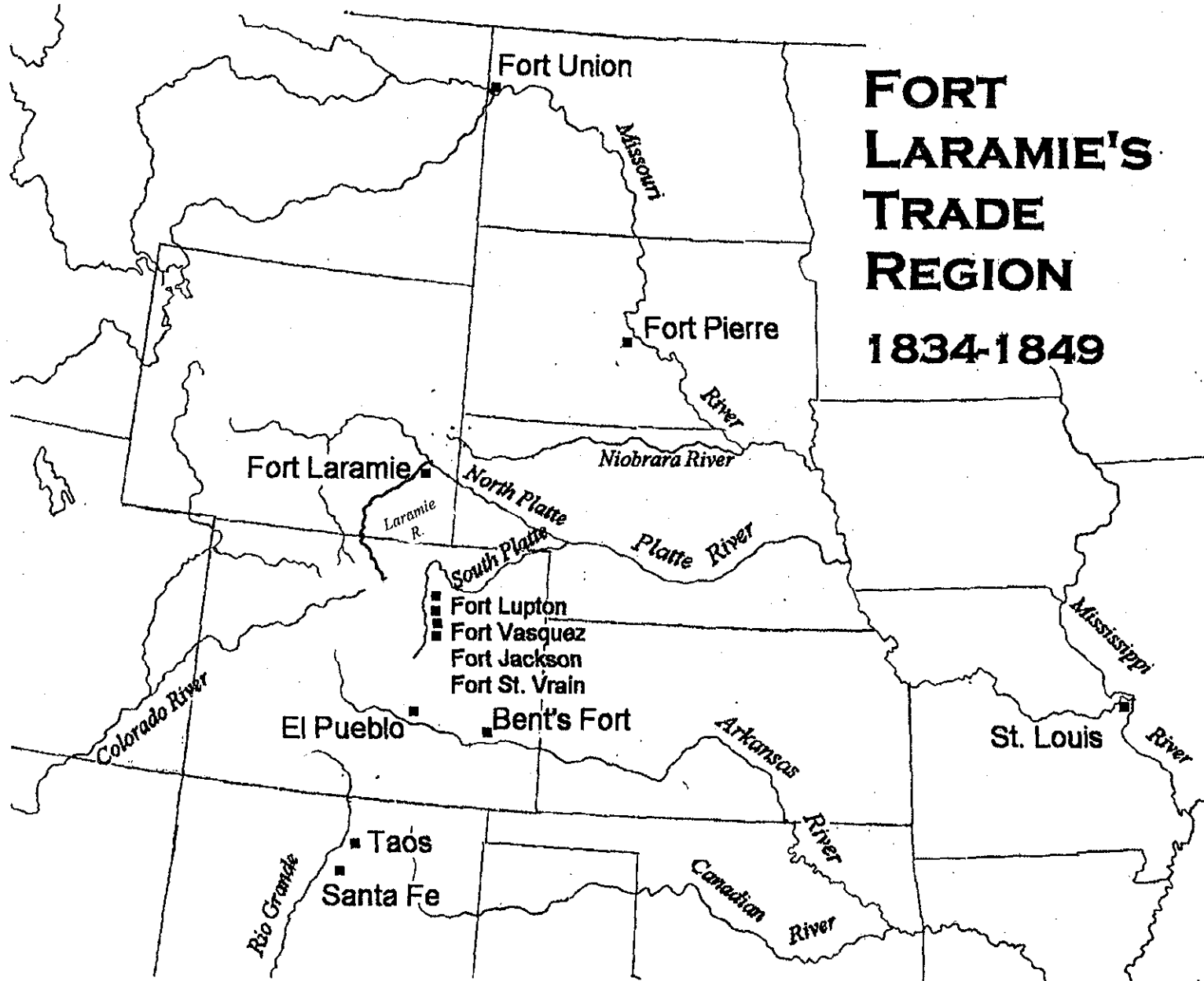
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FORT LARAMIE'S TRADE REGION

1834-1849

Fort Laramie Fur Trade History

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Preface:

A new study of the fur trade era has long been needed by the staff at Fort Laramie National Historic Site. At the request of Superintendent Jim Mack, this report was prepared to aid in interpretation and resource management, by augmenting our knowledge of the post's early history, its day to day affairs, its personnel, and its relationships with native trading partners. In addition, this study provides a clearer assessment of the significance of the fort's fur-trade era in western American history than has hitherto been done. Finally, it frames the post's history within the context of the inter-ethnic relations that developed on the plains before American military force ended Indian resistance and supplied the police power requisite for "settlement" to proceed.

Fort Laramie played a substantial part in the drama of the early nineteenth century American West. Perhaps best known as a military post from 1849 to 1890, the site had been a fur trading fort for fifteen years before the United States government decided to purchase it in 1849. By then, "Fort Laramie," as it was usually called, had already become famous as an oasis and support facility for travelers along the Oregon-California Trails. It was mentioned countless times by passing emigrants from 1841 until 1869, when the first transcontinental railroad was completed. Prior to its decommissioning as a military post in 1890, Fort Laramie provided support for the American conquest and consolidation of the Great Plains. Considerably less well known, however, is the story of Fort Laramie (also called Fort William and Fort John) during the 1830s and 1840s while several companies operated it as a civilian fur trading post.

Much of the published literature on Fort Laramie focuses on its role in the history of the overland migration or military affairs. Among the most familiar books on the fur post are LeRoy Hafen and Francis Marion Young's Fort Laramie and the Pageant of the West (1938), and Remi Nadeau's Fort Laramie and the Sioux (1968). Both of these are useful, but neither is strongly based on documentary materials related to the fur trade; rather, they rely heavily on emigrants' journals, published secondary works and army records for descriptions of the fort as a trading post. In addition, both books offer somewhat dated interpretations. New information and refined interpretive frameworks developed over the past thirty or more years call for a re-assessment of the trading post's significance and "meaning" in western American history. Primary source documents, principally from archives in the state of Missouri, offer a sufficiency of data to reconstruct and analyze the fort's fur trade history and society.

1. Introduction:

In the summer of 1837 a Baltimore artist named Alfred Jacob Miller, who had never been west before and would never go again, approached "Fort Laramie," as it was already known to the mountain men. Miller was hired as an "expeditionary artist" by William Drummond Stewart, a Scot nobleman, retired soldier, and sometime writer who had fallen in love with the American West. Thanks to his patron, Miller became the only man to paint the "mountaineers" during their brief hey-day during the "rendezvous era" that lasted from 1825 until 1840. He was also the first and only artist to paint images of the original "Fort Laramie." Officially, in 1837 the post was still named "Fort William," as its founders had christened it, but use of the name "Fort Laramie" was already becoming general. Miller produced several paintings depicting the fort, three of which bore useful descriptive notes. One shows the post at a distance, reproducing the view travelers would have had as they approached from the east. A second features details of the post's exterior, and the third offers an interior view.

The notes accompanying Miller's paintings yield glimpses of the isolated log-built trading post on the Laramie River near its junction with the North Platte River. "This fort built for the American Fur Company," he wrote, "situated about 800 miles west of St. Louis, is of a quadrangular form with block houses at diagonal corners to sweep its front in case of attack. Over the front entrance is a large block house in which is placed a cannon, the interior of the fort is about 150 feet square surrounded by small cabins whose roofs reach within 3 feet of the top of the palisades against which they abut. The Indians encamp in great numbers here 3 or 4 times a year, bringing peltries to be exchanged for dry goods, tobacco, beads, and alcohol." Though he got some of his facts

wrong, Miller's paintings and descriptions convey a sense of the powerful presence of this fur trading center that would soon undergo a transformation.

In another note, for his interior view of the fort, Miller wrote: "When this space is filled with Indians and traders as it is at stated periods the scene is lively and interesting. They gather here from all quarters; from the Gila at the south, the Red River at the north, and the Columbia River west, each has its quota and representatives, Sioux, Bannocks, Mandans, Crows, Snakes, Pend-Oreilles, Nez Perces, Cheyennes and Delawares, all except Black Feet who are 'betes noirs' and considered 'de trop.' As a contrast there are Canadian trappers, free and otherwise, half breeds, Kentuckians, Missouriians and Down-Easters. . . . This fort was built by Robert Campbell who named it Fort William in honor of his friend and partner William Sublette. These gentlemen were the earliest pioneers after Messrs. Lewis and Clarke and had many battles with the Indians."¹ Miller's prose and pictures helped to establish an enduring romanticized vision of the post on Laramie River, and its polyglot society.

Miller's notes on the post included several errors, as would the journal entries of some of the fort's later visitors. The post was not erected for the "American Fur Company;" Sublette and Campbell were hardly the first to go west after Lewis and Clark; and it seems a bit unlikely that "representatives" of so many Indian nations gathered there with regularity. Still, Miller captured something of the post's significance, and he was quite correct in asserting that the fort could be a "lively and interesting" place. Indeed, Fort Laramie was one of the most important centers of the western Indian and fur trades,

¹ Miller's notes are reprinted in Bernard DeVoto, Across the Wide Missouri (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1943), pp. 443-44. DeVoto created in prose a romantic image of the era that harmonizes with Miller's artwork. The most detailed review of Miller's Fort Laramie images is Robert Combs Warner, The Fort

and it had much to do with plains affairs in the 1830s and 1840s. It also helped to shape the future of Indian-white relations in the west, and it sheltered a populace uniquely associated with the fur trade—a multi-ethnic society rarely visible in early United States history.

Fort Laramie's significance lay, in part, with its location on the Laramie River, a tributary of the North Platte River. The Platte River consists of two main streams. The North Platte River rises in northern Colorado, then takes a wide north-easterly circuit around the Laramie and Shirley mountain ranges of Wyoming, and then flows southeastward across Nebraska. At the present town of North Platte, Nebraska, the north fork is joined by the waters of the South Platte, which rises just east of the front range of the Rockies north of today's Denver, Colorado.

Famous for being "too thin to plow and too thick to drink," and "a mile wide and an inch deep," the Platte winds through a prairie landscape. Tallgrass prairie can be found at its eastern extreme, while the higher elevations to the west supports shortgrass prairie featuring an abundance of prickly-pear and sage brush. The Platte was for the most part un-navigable, as many a fur trader learned from bitter experience when they attempted to float cargoes of robes down its muddy current. Timber in historic times was scarce, though sometimes the river bottom boasted luxuriant groves of cottonwoods and various shrubs. As Merrill Mattes pointed out long ago, today's river banks are far more crowded with timber and brush than was ever the case in time past.²

Laramie of Alfred Jacob Miller: A Catalogue of All the Known Illustrations of the First Fort Laramie (Laramie: University of Wyoming, 1979).

² Merrill J. Mattes, The Great Platte River Road: The Covered Wagon Mainline Via Fort Kearney to Fort Laramie, second ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), p. 9 [hereafter cited as Mattes, Great Platte River Road].

Early travelers saw practically limitless stretches of grassland along the river valley, and even the distant hills were generally cloaked in grasses rather than trees. Most of the ground surface is sandy, but it supported species such as yucca, sage, and other shrubs. The foundation of the prairie ecosystem is the diversity of rich grasses and forbs that provided sustenance for a wide variety of mammals and birds. In the early nineteenth century the prairies were home to multiple millions of bison and prairie dogs, uncountable numbers of wolves, deer, elk, antelope, and many other creatures. The region's most formidable predator, the grizzly bear, could sometimes be found in the bottoms and uplands along the Platte. Beavers, too, inhabited the tree-lined bottoms.

The Platte was known to Spaniards from New Spain as the *Rio Chato* by the early eighteenth century. It was upon the banks of the South Platte in 1719, in present Nebraska, that a large force of Spaniards and their Pueblo allies were nearly all slaughtered by a party of Pawnee warriors and, possibly, French soldiers.³ The French, like the Spaniards, knew of the river by the early eighteenth century. It was Étienne Véniard, sieur de Bourgmont, who first offered the French reliable information on the Platte. In 1714 Bourgmont ascended the Missouri at least as far as the mouth of the Platte, which he refers to as "Nibraskier." His journal, in translation, indicates that above the Kansas River "is the wide river called by the French and by the Indians the Nibraskier, a tributary that flows from the northwest and west-northwest." Bourgmont's journal from the 1714 trip provided data that the famed French cartographer Guillaume DeLisle used to produce maps showing a river called the *Rivière des Panis*, which is

³ There is some dispute as to whether or not French soldiers were present. The famed "Segesser II" hide painting, now the property of the Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe, depicts numerous French soldiers, but not all scholars accept the validity of that image. See David J. Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p.170-71; and Bernard L. Fontana, *Entrada: The*

understood to denote the Platte.⁴ According to A. P. Nasatir, French *coureurs de bois* had reached the Platte prior to 1720 and had used that name for the river.⁵ Many maps dating to the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries show what was most likely the Platte River, though French maps always show it as *la Riviere Pani*, reflecting the fact that the Pawnee nation inhabited its lower reaches.⁶

Clearly, Franco- and Anglo-American fur hunters and Indian traders had plumbed the course of the Platte well before any “official” United States expedition entered the region. Lewis and Clark spent no time exploring the Platte River, but when Lt. Zebulon M. Pike passed through the country in 1804 on his way to New Mexico he encountered traders among the Pawnee. When Stephen H. Long’s expedition was travelling along the Platte in 1820 they recruited two French Canadian traders who had lived among the Pawnee for several years to serve as guides. As well, the Republican Pawnee requested whiskey from Long, sure evidence that traders had been in the area.⁷ In 1812 the famed “returning Astorians” under Robert Stuart had also traversed the prairies, following the North Platte as a part of their route to St. Louis. By 1824 the “Ashley men,” Thomas Fitzpatrick and James Clyman, “rediscovered” the route eastward from the South Pass that led from the Sweetwater River to the Platte.⁸

Legacy of Spain and Mexico in the United States (Tucson: Southwest Parks and Monuments Association, 1994), p. 141.

⁴ Information on Bourgmont may be found in Frank Norall, Bourgmont: Explorer of the Missouri, 1698-1725 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), pp. 22-3, 108-09. See also William H. Goetzmann and Glyndwr Williams, eds., The Atlas of North American Exploration From the Norse Voyages to the Race to the Pole (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1992), pp. 94-5.

⁵ Abraham P. Nasatir, Before Lewis and Clark: Documents Illustrating the History of the Missouri, 1785-1804, 2 vols. (St. Louis: Historical Documents Foundation, 1952), 1: 7-12.

⁶ The writer consulted several maps copied at L’Archive National de Québec, Canada, in August 1999, and maps reproduced in Pierluigi Portinaro and Franco Knirsch, The Cartography of North America, 1500-1800 (New York: Crescent Books, 1987).

⁷ Maxine Benson, ed., From Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains: Major Stephen H. Long’s Expedition, 1819-1820 (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Press, 1988), pp. 160-61.

⁸ See Mattes, Great Platte River Road, pp. 426, 480-81.

These explorers and traders encountered the Native American tribes that had inhabited the area for many centuries. Among the native residents of the Platte River east of the forks would be the several divisions of the Pawnee nation as well as the Otoe nation. Indeed, the word Nebraska means "flat river, or water," in the Otoe language.⁹ Native nations living along the upper reaches of the North Platte included several divisions of the Lakota as well as the Cheyenne and Arapaho.

Early American explorers such as Zebulon Pike and Stephen Long recognized that Native Americans in the plains relied heavily upon bison for food, clothing, lodging and household utensils. Bison, or buffaloes, also occupied a central role in much of their religious and cosmological structures. When Native Americans acquired horses in the early eighteenth century their lives and cultures underwent a dramatic transformation. Mobility, hunting and warfare practices all changed. Horse ownership became a primary means of calculating wealth, and horse-raiding became a major avenue by which young men acquired wealth and status within a tribe. Some tribes, such as the Cheyenne, which had formerly planted crops gave up farming and turned to bison for their subsistence base. By the time Fort Laramie was established, many thousands of Indians lived, hunted and fought within the area bounded by the North Platte and the Arkansas rivers, the western reaches of the central plains. They were also eager to establish regular access to the manufactured trade goods available to the south in New Mexico or to the east. Fort Laramie would be established to meet this need. Of equal importance in its founding was the high demand for fine furs in the east and in Europe.

⁹ Benson, ed., From Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains: Major Stephen H. Long's Expedition, 1819-1820, p. 173.

2: The Rush for Furs:

In the early nineteenth century far west (1800-1850) the fur trade played a leading role in establishing social and economic links between Euro-Americans and Native Americans. The "fur trade," for the purposes of this report, is best considered as a dual-component enterprise, consisting of a "hide and skin trade" that usually involved Euro-American hunters and trappers, and an "Indian trade" that depended upon Indian producers of bison robes. Apart from their purely economic dimensions, both elements of the trade encouraged and shaped cross-cultural relationships, and affected international and domestic affairs as well as government policies. From the time of Lewis and Clark's expedition until the United States Army began to force Native Americans onto reservations, the region drained by the Missouri River and its tributaries offered the chance for economic success to hundreds of men from the United States, most of whom were of Anglo-American and Franco-American descent. Native Americans also, both men and women, were also in a position to benefit from such economic activity, though to some degree their participation in the trade left them vulnerable to a growing dependency on alien technologies that tended to supplant traditional ones.

Bison robes and the pelts of beaver, martin, ermine, otter, muskrat and other furbearers fetched high prices in eastern American and European markets to meet the demands of haberdashers, furriers, and the general public. Ever since the seventeenth century the fur trade had constituted the principal economic endeavor associated with the western "wilderness." In the 1650s that "wilderness" was located along the Connecticut river valley; two centuries later it was found along the Platte and Yellowstone rivers.

During the boom years of the 1820s and 1830s furs still beckoned the trapper and the trader “across the wide Missouri.” While definitive figures are lacking, it is safe to assert that several hundred thousands of dollars worth of furs—principally beaver fur—were taken out of the Rockies during these boom years, by such outfits as the Ashley-Henry brigades, Smith, Jackson & Sublette, and the Missouri Fur Company. The financial successes stemming from this surge of activity would also bring about the construction of Fort Laramie.

Competition, both international and domestic, played a major role in shaping the trade and determining locations of trade forts. Competition was also an important factor in bringing whiskey—often with tragic consequences—into the plains and mountains for the Indian trade. Native Americans were willing partners in the trade. Despite a variety of substantial changes in native life brought on or accelerated by the fur trade, Native Americans in general considered the trade to be worthy of their interest and attention. Trading posts such as Fort Laramie became centers from which new material goods, as well as new ideas and serious problems, spun out into native communities. In these few decades, immense changes came with breath-taking speed, and natives adapted as best they could to the dramatic metamorphosis of their world.

By the beginning of the 1830s the fur-rich region of the Upper Missouri River had attracted many traders representing several companies. The lower Missouri River, a major avenue of Indian-White commerce, was dotted with numerous trading posts from St. Louis to Council Bluffs, but the upper river and its resident tribes remained relatively free of posts. That would soon be altered, for in 1830 the American Fur Company (AFCo) and Bernard Pratte & Company built impressive Fort Union at the confluence of

the Yellowstone and Missouri rivers. High intensity competition marked much of the next three decades of the Missouri River trade. Likewise, by 1830, trappers and traders had been active on the Santa Fe Trail and the Arkansas River for at least a decade, and beavers were practically cleaned out from the small streams of New Mexico. The region lying between the South Platte and the Upper Missouri, having almost no trading posts, beckoned a number of entrepreneurs who saw economic opportunities there.

From the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains, the majority of streams flow eastward, and thus offered several natural routes from St. Louis into the fur country. The mountain men were well acquainted with the Arkansas River and its tributaries, which provided access to New Mexico and the southern plains. To the north, another route into the far west developed along the Platte River, which empties into the Missouri at present-day Bellevue, Nebraska, a few miles south of Omaha. Of special importance to the story of Fort Laramie is the fact that by 1825 trappers had developed an access route along the North Platte River to transport trade goods, furs and men between St. Louis and the mountains.

This route, which later became famous as the Great Platte River Road of the Oregon-California Trail, first took form as a regular thoroughfare under the aegis of William H. Ashley's "enterprising young men" in the early 1820s. "Ashley men" such as James Bridger, William Sublette, Robert Campbell and Thomas Fitzpatrick would later be connected with the story of Fort Laramie and other fur posts on the North and South Platte. Many mountain men learned the trade and became familiar with the western "Indian Country" and its people while in the Ashley's service. Two "Ashley Men,"

William Sublette and Robert Campbell, became the prime movers in the founding of Fort Laramie.

3. Sublette and Campbell's Gambit:

Robert Campbell and William Sublette's association began to take shape in 1826 when both were engaged in the fur trade on the Upper Missouri. Later they would be partners in the trade on the North Platte, and continued doing business until Sublette's death in 1845. An immigrant from northern Ireland, eighteen-year-old Campbell arrived in the United States in 1822. By 1825 he had reached St. Louis, where his life took a dramatic turn. He was diagnosed with tuberculosis, a deadly disease that baffled the medical profession. Doctors suggested that he take a trip to the Rocky Mountains, where the high altitude and crisp, dry air brought relief and sometimes a complete cure to "lungers" in the early stages of the affliction. Taking the doctor's advice, Campbell joined a party of trappers outfitted by William H. Ashley and commanded by Ashley's youthful successor, Jedediah Strong Smith. Having made a small fortune in the central Rockies, Ashley withdrew from direct engagement in the trapping and trading business in 1825. Thereafter he continued to back other traders, offering financial support, providing goods, and marketing furs and peltry in exchange for a share of their profits.¹⁰

An intelligent and reasonably well educated young man, Campbell quickly mastered the trade under Smith's tutelage. On July 18, 1826, Campbell witnessed an agreement by which Ashley sold out to his three most promising proteges: Jedediah Smith, David Jackson, and William Sublette. Robert Campbell became a clerk in the new

¹⁰ A new full-length biography of Campbell has recently appeared; see William R. Nester, From Mountain Man to Millionaire: The 'Bold and Dashing Life' Life of Robert Campbell (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1999). For a brief but sound biography see Harvey L Carter, "Robert Campbell," in Leroy R. Hafen, ed., The Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West, 10 vols. (Glendale, CA: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1968-73) [hereafter cited as Hafen, ed., Mountain Men, vol : page .], 8: 49-60. For Ashley's career, see Richard M. Clokey, William H. Ashley: Politics and Enterprise in the Trans-Mississippi West (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983).

company, thus gaining additional experience and initiating a fruitful long-term relationship with Sublette.

William L. Sublette, born in Kentucky in 1799, was one of four brothers and two sisters. His family moved to St. Charles, Missouri, in 1817, but by 1822 both of his parents were dead, and he decided to try his luck in St. Louis's fur trade, which had started to make a come-back from several years of stagnation that followed the War of 1812. An experienced backwoodsman, Sublette readily found a berth among William Ashley's trappers in 1823. During the next few years he spent as an "Ashley man," Sublette came to understand both the obvious dangers of the trade as well as the enormous profits that accrued to a lucky and determined few. Sublette probably accompanied Ashley in 1825 when the "General" took a fur harvest down to St. Louis that was calculated to be worth roughly fifty thousand dollars.¹¹

In 1827 Campbell became a "brigade" leader, taking his men as far north as a Hudson's Bay Company post on the Snake River. After four years in the mountains, his health appeared to be fully restored and he returned to St. Louis in 1829, richer by some \$3000. After a visit to Ireland from February 1830 through June 1831, Campbell returned to St. Louis to learn that Comanche warriors on the Santa Fe Trail had killed his former leader and potential future partner, Jedediah S. Smith.¹² Smith, Jackson & Sublette's

¹¹ For a brief biography, see John E. Sunder, "William Lewis Sublette," in Hafen, ed., *Mountain Men*, 5: 347-59.

¹² See Carter, "Robert Campbell," in Hafen, ed., *Mountain Men*, 8: 49-60. Campbell recalled that he went to Ireland in "the spring of 1832," [See "A Narrative of Col. Robert Campbell's Experiences in the Rocky Mountains Fur Trade From 1825 to 1835;" in Campbell Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis. MO (hereafter cited as Campbell Narrative, MoHS), p.35]. Dale L. Morgan says Campbell left New York in February 1830 and returned in June 1831 "by way of Richmond." See Dale L. Morgan and Eleanor Towles Harris, eds., *The Rocky Mountain Journals of William Marshall Anderson* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1967) [hereafter cited as Morgan and Harris, eds., *Rocky Mountain Journals*], p. 272. Having netted roughly \$100,000 in just four years, the firm of Smith, Jackson and Sublette had been dissolved in 1830, and soon Smith made the fatal decision to engage in the Santa Fe trade.

mountain enterprise was sold for roughly \$16,000 to another group of "Ashley men."¹³ The new partners, Thomas Fitzpatrick, James Bridger, Milton Sublette (younger brother of William), Henry Fraeb and Jean Baptiste Gervais, were experienced and able trappers, but they lacked the business acumen necessary for real success. Within a few years their outfit, the Rocky Mountain Fur Company (RMFCo), would lose out to the superior organization, tactics, and financing of their chief competitor, Bernard Pratte & Company. Successors to this company would eventually take over the operation of Fort Laramie.

Identifying and keeping track of the numerous outfits involved in the Platte River trade is not an easy task. The attempt is necessary, however, in order to illustrate the multiple layers of connections linking one group of entrepreneurs to another, and to explain how these interconnections affected operations at Fort William/Fort John/Fort Laramie. Useful to any study of the western fur and Indian trades is a recognition of the ambitions of Pierre Chouteau, Jr., of St. Louis. Through his lengthy affiliation with John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company, and with Bernard Pratte & Company and its successors, Chouteau was the guiding spirit, and one of the principal architects, of a concerted effort to gain complete control over the fur and Indian trade from the three Forks of the Missouri all the way south to the Arkansas River. Fort Laramie was one of the pawns in his maneuvers to control the fur trade.¹⁴

Bernard Pratte & Company, a regionally powerful company of St. Louis Frenchmen, in which Chouteau played an important role, had grown more formidable at the close of 1826. Several years of competition, then loose affiliation, with John Jacob Astor's New York-based American Fur Company (AFCo), had persuaded Bernard Pratte

¹³ The selling price of \$16,000 appears in Sunder, "William Lewis Sublette," in Hafen, ed., *Mountain Men*, 5: 352.

& Company to join Astor's outfit. In December 1826 Bernard Pratte & Company "merged" with Astor's company to form its Western Department. The St. Louis company became a quasi-independent branch of Astor's company.¹⁵

After Pratte and Chouteau strengthened their company and allied with Astor in 1827, fur traders as well as the government customarily referred to the St. Louis branch of Astor's outfit as "The American Fur Company." With regard to western fur trade history, this usage has engendered considerable confusion. Friends and foes alike knew Astor's AFCo simply as "the Company," and its various rivals over the years were generically known as "the Opposition." The term "AFCo," though technically inaccurate, was almost universally applied to the companies that ran the Western Department after Astor retired.

When Astor went into retirement in 1834 he sold the AFCo's Northern Department to Ramsay Crooks, the only person legally entitled to use the old company name. Bernard Pratte & Company purchased the former "Western Department," and soon changed their name to Pratte, Chouteau & Company, which had no claim upon Astor's original company name. Bernard Pratte, Sr.,'s death in April 1836 would place Chouteau at the helm of the company. Pierre Chouteau, Jr., was a key member of Bernard Pratte & Company (1823-34), then Pratte, Chouteau & Company (1834-39), and finally he headed

¹⁴ For Chouteau see Janet Lecompte, "Pierre Chouteau, Junior," in Hafen, ed., *Mountain Men*, 9: 91-123.

¹⁵ In an 1835 re-organization Pierre Chouteau, Jr., reduced the UMO's trading zone and set up the Sioux Outfit under the direction of Honoré Picotte. William Laidlaw, who had previously sent UMO outfits to the Sioux on the Platte River from Fort Pierre, angrily quit the company when he was informed of the change. Laidlaw sold his share to Jacob Halsey and entered an opposition outfit for brief period, though he returned to work for the "Company" after 1837. See Lecompte, "Pierre Chouteau, Junior," in Hafen, ed., *Mountain Men*, 9: 108-111. One component of the new Western Department in 1827 was an aggressive outfit formerly called the Columbia Fur Company. Backed by St. Louis capital and led by Kenneth McKenzie, William Laidlaw and Daniel Lamont, Columbia Fur had been Bernard Pratte & Company's most vigorous rival from 1823 to 1826. Wooed by the St. Louis Frenchmen, the Columbia Fur Company merged with Bernard Pratte & Company in 1827 to become the Upper Missouri Outfit (hereafter referred to as the UMO) which operated forts Union, Pierre, Clark, Piegan, and other posts.

his own firm, Pierre Chouteau, Jr. & Company (1839-65). All of these concerns were connected with the "American Fur Company," which adds to the confusion over who was in charge of Fort William/Fort John/Fort Laramie.¹⁶

Meanwhile, two upstart traders, Campbell and Sublette, were preparing to expand their operation into trade domain claimed by Chouteau. Robert Campbell had found a firm friend in William Sublette. Their friendship had been materially strengthened on July 18, 1832, the date of the famous "Battle of Pierre's Hole," which pitted trappers and their Snake and Nez Percés allies against Gros Ventres of the Prairie, a component of the Blackfeet confederacy. (The fight may be seen in two contexts: natives fighting against "traditional" enemies, and Blackfeet anger at the incursions of American trappers in their territory.)

During the fight, a musket ball that evidently killed a man next to him struck Sublette "on the left arm, fracturing the bone, and passing out under the shoulder blade." Campbell assisted his friend from the skirmish line and dressed his wound. Immediately prior to the fight the two had exchanged verbal wills in case one of them died in the fray and the other survived. In a letter he wrote to his brother Hugh just after the battle Campbell gestured indirectly toward his future ambitions. After describing the circumstances of Sublette's wounding, Campbell wrote: "In giving you these details of an encounter with savages, while the incidents are yet fresh in my memory, I fear I shall only add to your antipathy of the mode of life that *necessity* and *choice* have caused me

¹⁶ Chouteau and Astor's careers were similar but not identical. (Astor died in 1848, fourteen years after selling his company, while Chouteau remained actively engaged in the fur trade until 1859, when his son, Charles, assumed the company's day-to-day operations. Pierre, Jr., died in 1865.) The point here is that Chouteau was not merely Astor's vassal, but critics from their time, like some historians in our own, often ignored the differences between the two men or their companies. As a result, charges of "monopoly" seemed, and still seem, more credible than they appear upon closer examination. Fort Laramie would figure in such charges during the early 1840s, as we shall see.

to adopt. To confess the truth I am sick of it." Eight year's experience had turned Campbell into an unusually savvy "mountaineer," but he recognized the unmistakable risks involved in the mountain trade, and probably had already concluded that it would be preferable to make money out of the fur trade by operating as a supplier and broker from the safety of St. Louis.¹⁷

After the fight at Pierre's Hole, both Campbell and Sublette sold goods to the faltering RMFCo. According to his memoir, Campbell sold his merchandise to "Fallon and Vanderburg" at the 1832 rendezvous, then conveyed the wounded Sublette back to St. Louis along with eighty mules, each loaded with 150 pounds of beaver skins, carrying better than \$35,000 worth of fur.¹⁸

Before the year was out, Sublette and Campbell decided to mount an aggressive campaign against Pratte and Chouteau's well-entrenched UMO men in the Upper Missouri. On December 20, 1832, Campbell and Sublette formed a three-year partnership, each man committing \$3000 to the enterprise. (In 1836 the agreement was extended, and each put up nearly \$10,000 in additional funds. The partnership continued, with another renewal, until 1842.)¹⁹ By April 1832 Sublette and Campbell, with backing from their former patron William Ashley, had already arranged for the necessary credit to ship goods to the Upper Missouri, and received a federal license to trade in "Indian Country." Like many such licenses, this one authorized the firm to trade at a multitude of sites. Because federal trade and intercourse acts stipulated that traders could only do

¹⁷ Letter quoted in Carter, "Robert Campbell," in Hafen, ed., *Mountain Men*, 8: 53.

¹⁸ See Campbell Narrative, MoHS, p. 40. According to Dale L. Morgan, these men were William O. Fallon and James Vanderburgh (Morgan and Harris, eds., *Rocky Mountain Journals*, p. 297). Morgan says Campbell had five men and fifteen horses, ten of which carried trade goods (Morgan and Harris, eds., *Rocky Mountain Journals*, p. 273).

¹⁹ "Articles of Co-partnership . . .," December 20, 1832; "Articles of agreement . . .," January 1, 1836; "Dissolution of Copartnership," January 15, 1842; all in Sublette Papers, MoHS.

business at specified locations, the traders attempted to cover the widest possible area when applying for a license. Listing almost every place at which Bernard Pratte & Company traded, the license also included “a point of timber on the south side of the Grand river Platte, called Laremais’ point, about ten miles below the Black Hills . . .”²⁰ This seems to be the first reference in a license to the future location of Fort Laramie.

In addition, William Sublette received a permit from William Clark, former co-leader of the famed “Corps of Discovery” and now Superintendent of Indian Affairs at St. Louis, to carry up to “four hundred and fifty gallons of whiskey for the special use of his boatmen.” The permit stipulated that it was “not to be used in trade, or barter, or be given to Indians.”²¹ A federal trade and intercourse law passed a few months later, in July 1832, specified that “no ardent spirits shall hereafter be introduced, *under any pretence*, into the Indian country.”²² Thereafter, since the use of liquor was a well-established aspect of the trade, practically all fur traders routinely smuggled quantities of liquor into their trading zones in flagrant defiance of the law (see section 13 on the liquor trade, ahead).

By the spring of 1833 Sublette was prepared to move up the Missouri. He intended to establish as many as a dozen trade houses to compete with Bernard Pratte & Company. Campbell noted that he and Sublette had “determined to open trade on the Upper Missouri, near Fort Pierre, for buffalo, with the Sioux Indians. . . . Sublette went

²⁰ News of the Plains and Rockies 1803-1865, vol. 1 (Spokane, WA: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1996), 342-43.

²¹ Permit dated April 25, 1832, signed by Clark, in Sublette Papers, MoHS.

²² See excerpt from “Authorization of a Commissioner of Indian Affairs,” July 9, 1832, in Francis Paul Prucha, Documents of United States Indian Policy (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), p. 62.

up in two keel boats, cordalling and sailing up the river. At the same time I went out to the Green river rendezvous."²³

Campbell had fitted out a supply train with some \$15,000 in goods for the Horse Creek rendezvous on the Green River in present-day Wyoming.²⁴ Upon leaving the rendezvous, Campbell set out for the Yellowstone and traveled down to the Missouri, arriving at the mouth of the Yellowstone on September 21, 1833. There he found Sublette, whose crew had begun construction on a trading post named "Fort William." That day, Sublette and eighteen men (including "the greater number of our indifferent hands") left for St. Louis, conveying some packs of furs and robes. By the last of October the fort's picket-walls were about finished, and the UMO men at nearby Fort Union²⁵ were growing nervous about their new neighbors. On New Year's Eve, a similarly worried Campbell registered his frustration in his private journal. "I feel a Hell upon earth on account of the uncertainty of all our affairs," he wrote, adding "I have vowed if an offer arrives that I can leave this country I will do so forever, for even admitting that we made money (which is more than doubtful) I would not undergo the vexation which I now do for all that could be made here."²⁶

Sublette and Campbell had little to fear from competition with the famed (but none too successful) Rocky Mountain Fur Company. Two years earlier, in 1831,

²³ Campbell Narrative, MoHS, pp. 41-2. Note also that this reference seems to indicate that Campbell, like Kenneth McKenzie and others, realized that the beaver trade was in decline and sought an alternative money-maker.

²⁴ Fred R. Gowans, Rocky Mountain Rendezvous: A History of the Fur Trade Rendezvous, 1825-1840 (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1975), p. 102.

²⁵ Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site, North Dakota, is now a unit within the National Park Service. For its history consult Barton H. Barbour, "Fort Union and the Upper Missouri Fur Trade, 1830-1867," Ph.D. dissertation, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM, 1993 (currently in press at University of Oklahoma Press).

²⁶ "The Private Journal of Robert Campbell," ed. by George R. Brooks, reprinted from Bulletin of the Missouri Historical Society, October 1963 and January 1964, pp. 32-3.

hamstrung by their inability to get supplies to the western rendezvous sites, the RMFCo signed a contract with William Sublette, stipulating that Sublette would provide them with goods and transportation for their furs. By July 1832, at the "Teton Fork of the Columbia River and under the Three Teton mountains," the RMFCo signed another agreement whereby Sublette would also handle their banking and supply business. As a result of these two deals, Sublette gained virtual control over the concern.²⁷ Campbell and Sublette's overall plan involved gaining control of several outfits, including the RMFCo in which William's younger brother Milton was a partner, in order to create a powerful bargaining position with respect to Bernard Pratte & Company.

Probably as a measure of desperation, in July 1833 the RMFCo made a deal whereby the St. Louis resident Edmund T. Christy received an outfit worth roughly \$6600, with profits or losses to be shared equally, but the venture lost money and did nothing to save the company.²⁸ Less than a year later, undone by fierce competition and hounded by their principal creditor, Sublette, the RMFCo would sell out to him. Sublette had more or less assured Bernard Pratte & Company that he would stifle this particular competition.²⁹

With at least three posts³⁰ established on the Missouri and Robert Campbell left in charge of thirty men and a stock of goods at the Yellowstone post, Sublette departed for St. Louis. His mission, according to Campbell's later reminiscence, was to make

²⁷ See "Articles of agreement . . .," dated July 25, 1832; Sublette Papers, MoHS.

²⁸ See "Articles of co-partnership and agreement . . .," July 20, 1833; Sublette Papers, MoHS; also Morgan and Harris, eds., Rocky Mountain Journals, pp. 288-89.

²⁹ For the full story of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company see Don Berry, A Majority of Scoundrels: An Informal History of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company (New York: Harper Brothers, 1961), especially pp. 311-13 and 363-67.

³⁰ Robert Campbell's "Narrative" mentions what may have been the three main posts: at "the mouth of the Yellowstone," at "the mouth of the Sioux near Fort Pierre," and "a trading post at the Mandan village;" Campbell Narrative, MoHS, p. 43.

“arrangements for a division of the country, between Bernard Pratte & Co., and Sublette & Campbell.” Intense competition for Upper Missouri furs was costly, and a territorial division offered a mechanism for limiting excessive expenses. Campbell and Sublette knew that Fitzpatrick and Bridger, “resident partners” of the RMFCo, had previously failed to secure a similar arrangement with Andrew Drips and William H. Vanderburgh, two AFCo field-men sent into the mountains from Fort Union.³¹ Where others failed, however, Sublette and Campbell would succeed. In a letter dated “Grovent Village, September 25, 1833,” Sublette told Campbell that “I shall propose to McKenzie what was talk of but I think he will not take yet. if you should succede[sic] with him try to get a division of the country.”³²

Fort Union’s *bourgeois* Kenneth McKenzie, who preferred to ruin competitors rather than meet their price, believed “it was not good policy to buy out opposition, rather work them out by extra industry and assiduity.” With reference to Campbell and Sublette, he wrote in December 1833: “Our opponents must get some robes but it is my wish that it should be on such terms as to leave them no profit.”³³ Chouteau disagreed, for he felt that the two men were in a position to make things difficult for the “Company” on the Upper Missouri, and deemed it more prudent to make a deal.

After intermittent negotiations occurring between November 1833 and July 1834, the Western Department’s UMO boss, Kenneth McKenzie, bought out the upstarts, taking over their fort and all goods on hand.³⁴ More was at stake in this deal than the sale of the offending post, Fort William. One more Missouri River post would be unlikely to

³¹ Campbell Narrative, MoHS, p. 44.

³² Sublette, Grovent Village, September 25, 1833, to Campbell, copy in Sublette Papers, MoHS. [NOTE: letter carries the notation: “This letter is the property of W. H. Semrott of St. Louis, Mo.”]

³³ McKenzie to James Kipp, December 17, 1833; Fort Union Letterbook, Chouteau Collection, MoHS.

upset the overall trade. Instead, if Bernard Pratte & Company and Sublette & Campbell's scheme went according to plan, steady profits would flow to both outfits. The object was to minimize the inefficiency and costs associated with the keen—even vicious—competition that often typified the fur trade. A memoir Campbell dictated in 1870 details the boundaries: “We commenced upon the Arkansas, at a point south of the Platte, on the 24th degree from Washington; thence up to the forks of the Platte, then to the dividing line of the waters emptying into the Missouri, thence we continued on that line to the Rocky Mountains, and thence on to the three forks of the Missouri, covering all west and south of that line. To Chouteau & Company [here Campbell incorrectly uses a later name for Bernard Pratte & Co.] was assigned all the Territory North and East of that line.”³⁵

Evidently, no more specific records of the deal have survived. The bargain was made in January 1834, in New York, between William Sublette and “Astor’s people” (Dale Morgan’s phrase). The result was a cartel-style deal crafted by St. Louis businessmen who knew each other, and who agreed that too much competition was a bad thing. Bernard Pratte & Company bought Sublette and Campbell’s Fort William, even though they realized the post was not intended to be a permanent fixture. Clearly, Sublette and Campbell meant it to be a nuisance and a spur to persuade Pratte & Company to buy them out—and it worked.³⁶

The purchase of Fort William placed the Pratte-Chouteau interests largely (though never totally) in control of the Upper Missouri trade. For their part, Sublette and Campbell gained an opportunity to develop a new location—likely at the junction of the

³⁴ Details of these negotiations may be found in the “Fort Union Letterbook,” November 1833 to July 1834; Chouteau Collection, MoHS.

³⁵ Campbell Narrative, MoHS, p. 45.

Platte River with Laramie River—where they might trade without interference from the bigger company. Chouteau's men had promised not to compete with Sublette and Campbell's outfit, and Sublette and Campbell had agreed not to trap in the Rockies for a period of one year. In addition, Bernard Pratte & Company agreed that "there would be no longer be any intermeddling by Mackenzie in R. M. F. Co. affairs."³⁷

Sublette and Campbell's bold gamble had paid off, but when other companies later tried the same ploy they usually found the costs of challenging Chouteau too expensive. By 1832-33 many entrepreneurs saw Bernard Pratte & Company as a bloated monopoly out to obstruct or destroy them. The Chouteau company's "monopoly" of the Upper Missouri fur trade may have been more fable than reality, but in 1833 they proved willing to pay off Sublette and Campbell to protect their dominant position.

³⁶ This interpretation is my own. For a reference to the division of territory between "Sublette and Astor's people" see Morgan and Harris, eds., Rocky Mountain Journals, pp. 24-5.

³⁷ See Morgan and Harris, eds., Rocky Mountain Journals, p. 25.

4. Sublette & Campbell Build Fort William, the First "Fort Laramie":

Even as Sublette and Campbell concluded their bargain with Bernard Pratte & Company, their next move was already planned. During late spring or early summer of 1834, after turning over their goods and post on the Missouri to Chouteau's men, Robert Campbell "sent a party of trappers across the country from the Yellowstone, with our furs, to our new fort." Like their post at the mouth of the Yellowstone, the new one located on Laramie's River, an affluent of the North Platte, would be named Fort William. According to Campbell, the name again honored his partner, Sublette.³⁸

Jason Lee, a missionary travelling with Nathaniel Wyeth's rendezvous-bound company of traders, was one of the first persons to note the new post's existence. Passing Scott's Bluffs on May 30, 1834, Lee reached the Laramie Fork on June 1. Upon arrival he wrote: "This stream is generally very difficult to cross, it being very rapid. Some of Sublett's men who are building a Trading Fort [at] a little distance came to us[,] they are planting corn."³⁹ In July Lee wrote a letter to the Christian Advocate that adds to his laconic journal entry. "Mr. Wm. Sublette," wrote Lee, "is building a trading post at Laramies Fork, on the Platte, about thirty days' march from Independence, Mo. . . . The Sious Indians, which are a powerful and numerous tribe, range along near this place, and will in future, no doubt, often frequent this place, as well as many other tribes."⁴⁰

William Marshall Anderson, a young man from Kentucky who also traveled with Sublette in 1834, left the "only eye-witness account of the founding of Fort Laramie." Anderson arrived at the "mouth of Laramee's Fork" on May 30, "where Capt. Sublette intends to erect a trader's fort." The next day, May 31, Anderson wrote, "we laid the

³⁸ Campbell Narrative, MoHS, pp. 45-6.

³⁹ "Diary of Jason Lee," Quarterly of the Oregon Historical Society, 17: 2 (Portland, 1916), p. 129.

foundation log of a fort, on Laramie's Fork. A friendly dispute arose between our leader and myself, as to the name. He proposed to call it Fort Anderson, I insisted upon baptising it Fort Sublette, and holding the trump card in my hand, (a bottle of champagne) was about to claim the trick. Sublette stood by, cup reversed, still objecting, when Patton offered a compromise which was accepted, and the foam flew, in honor of Fort William, which contained the triad prenames of clerk, leader and friend."⁴¹

In this improbable rendering of the event, Anderson got Patton's first name wrong; it was almost certainly "Edwin L." rather than "William." An experienced hand in the trade, Edwin Patton had served the "King of the Upper Missouri," Kenneth McKenzie, by clerking at Fort McKenzie and Fort Union in 1833. According to Dale Morgan, Patton remained in charge of Fort William "during the winter of 1834-35, and after Sublette and Campbell sold out to Fontenelle, Fitzpatrick & Co, in the spring of 1835, Patton no doubt helped to bring down the furs and robes he had traded."⁴²

Apparently, no records of this season's trade at Fort William have survived. Indeed, there seems to be no records of any kind related to this earliest period in Fort Laramie's history. As previously noted, Sublette and Campbell had planned to "open trade on the Upper Missouri, near Fort Pierre, for buffalo, with the Sioux Indians" in 1832-33.⁴³ Perhaps they, like other canny traders, foresaw a profitable future for the buffalo robe trade and concluded that a Platte River post would serve that purpose equally well. Campbell's experience had already shown that it was sometimes possible to

⁴⁰ Morgan and Harris, eds., Rocky Mountain Journals, p. 31.

⁴¹ Morgan and Harris, eds., Rocky Mountain Journals, pp. 15, 109.

⁴² Morgan and Harris, eds., Rocky Mountain Journals, pp. 340-41.

⁴³ Campbell Narrative, MoHS, pp. 41-2.

move bison robes down the Platte River to the Missouri, if the water and weather were favorable.

For reasons which are not fully clear, though Campbell's laconic vow to "leave this country . . . forever" offers a hint, Campbell and Sublette quickly decided to quit the business of operating a trading post. Between the time they concluded their arrangements with Bernard Pratte & Company (December 1833-June 1834) and the following spring (1835), Sublette and Campbell found buyers for their new fort. Among them was Milton Sublette. Milton helped to organize the firm of Fitzpatrick, Sublette & Bridger on or shortly after June 20, 1834, with former members of the RMFCo. (William Sublette and Robert Campbell had earlier been milking the RMFCo for some time, skimming profits and leaving the company with a growing debt-load.) Shortly thereafter, Milton Sublette and the other members of the new firm, Fitzpatrick, Sublette & Bridger, elected to merge with Fontenelle, Drips & Company. The new organization was called Fontenelle, Fitzpatrick & Company. The new concern trapped in the Rockies, provided furs to Chouteau's company, and led several of Chouteau's "Rocky Mountain Outfits" during the 1830s. In 1835 they delivered roughly 600 robes and 9,000 beaver skins; in 1836 they sent 2352 robes.⁴⁴ In 1837 Fontenelle, Fitzpatrick & Company again had charge of the UMO's "Rocky Mountain Outfit," and some of the goods furnished them were destined for sale at Fort Laramie.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ American Fur Company Papers, microfilm edition, Roll 18, "Furs and Skins, vol. 1: 1835-1837," pp. 15, 23.

⁴⁵ "Invoice of Sundry Merchandise furnished Rocky Mountain Outfit 1837 under charge of Fontenelle, Fitzpatrick & Co," in American Fur Company Papers, vols. Y and Z, MoHS.

It was this outfit, Fontenelle, Fitzpatrick & Company, that had made an agreement to purchase Fort Laramie from Sublette and Campbell.⁴⁶ Specific details on this sale are lacking. Almost forty years later, Campbell recalled simply that “During the winter of 1834-35, the two Fur trapping companies—Fontenelle & Drips and that of Fitzpatrick, Milton Sublette and Bridger formed a partnership, and we (Sublette & Campbell) sold out to them.” Campbell wrote that he “went up from St. Louis in the Spring of 1835 to transfer over to the new company, the goods and animals that we had at Fort Laramie.” After the sale Campbell returned to St. Louis with his and Sublette’s furs and buffalo robes. By the autumn of 1836 he and Sublette “commenced business in St. Louis,” and ownership of Fort William passed to its new operators.⁴⁷

After their 1835 sale of Fort William, Campbell and Sublette play a role only as middlemen, brokering peltry and supplying goods to several outfits that struggled to wring profits from the fur trade. For the next several years the two made good money, renewing their partnership in 1839. Trouble was ahead, for the Panic of 1837 spawned a major national economic slump by 1839, and its evil effects persisted for years. The partners weathered the fiscal storm, surviving in part by bringing suit against many customers who owed them past due debts. But financial matters remained a nagging problem, which may explain why their partnership was dissolved by mutual consent in

⁴⁶ See Morgan and Harris, eds., *Rocky Mountain Journals*, p. 304; and Berry, *A Majority of Scoundrels*, pp. 365-66. Note that Berry ends his book on the RMFCo with the words: “End of an era. The competition now well and truly set at rest” (p. 367). This was not true, either for the Rocky Mountain trade, or for that of the Platte River country.

⁴⁷ Campbell Narrative, MoHS, pp. 46, 48. Robert Campbell went west only twice more in his long life. In 1851 he accompanied Thomas Fitzpatrick, Father Pierre Jean De Smet and other dignitaries to make a treaty with the Sioux and several other nations, and again, in 1870 journeyed to Fort Laramie to serve as a member of President Grant’s Peace Commission to treat with Red Cloud’s Sioux. Campbell’s earlier wishes were ultimately fulfilled, for his true interest lay not in being a “mountain man,” but in becoming an entrepreneur. This he did with great success, amassing a large fortune and playing a key role in opposing the “American Fur Company” for many years. Campbell, with and without Sublette, backed several

January 1842. Several months later, Campbell was obliged to request a loan of \$12,000 from his friend Sir William Drummond Stewart, since "all the Illinois banks has gone down and Missouri is not Loaning nor has she for one year past."⁴⁸

Oddly, in May 1843 Sublette applied for and received a license to trade with Indians in a vast area ranging from the mouth of the Yellowstone to "Laramie's fork of the Great Platte," and even as far south as "Fort William [Bent's Old Fort] on the Arkansas."⁴⁹ During his few remaining years Sublette developed coal mines, real estate, and a farm at Sulphur Springs, not far from St. Louis. He married in 1844, only to die about eighteen months later while en route with his old friend Campbell to a health resort at Cape May, New Jersey. Both Campbell and Sublette were tubercular, but unlike his friend Campbell, Sublette's condition was not permanently improved as a result of his western travels.⁵⁰

opposition outfits over time, notably that of Harvey, Primeau & Company, which challenged Chouteau's hegemony over the Missouri River during the late 1840s and early 1850s.

⁴⁸ "Dissolution of Co-partnership," dated January 15, 1842, Sublette Papers, MoHS.

⁴⁹ Trade license, May 1, 1843, signed by David D. Mitchell; Sublette Papers, MoHS.

⁵⁰ Carter, "William Lewis Sublette," in Hafen, ed., Mountain Men, 5: 358-59.

5. Fontenelle, Fitzpatrick & Company, 1835:

Milton Sublette would find it impossible to get any sort of favored treatment (not to mention plain brotherly assistance) from his older sibling, William, even as Milton drifted toward financial and personal disaster. Milton had earned a reputation as a hardy and enterprising soul, trapping in New Mexico and the Rockies since the late 1820s. Back in 1830 he—along with James Bridger, Thomas Fitzpatrick, Henry Fraeb, and Jean Baptiste Gervais—had created the RMFCo by buying out Milton's brother's outfit, Smith, Jackson and Sublette.

Milton's new partner, Lucien Fontenelle, who had competed against and then joined the "Company," worked out a deal with the RMFCo whereby Fontenelle, Fitzpatrick & Company became AFCo field agents, buying goods from and selling furs to the larger concern. They also received a trade license from William Clark, Superintendent of Indian Affairs at St. Louis allowing them to trade in the Fort Laramie area. Fitzpatrick took charge of the post, while Bridger led trapping parties into the mountains.

Lucien Fontenelle was born on a plantation near New Orleans, and as a young man he ventured to St. Louis. In 1819 he joined the Missouri Fur Company (MoFCo) shortly before its founder, Manuel Lisa, died. Joshua Pilcher, one of the surviving partners, took over company's management. Fontenelle continued to work for the MoFCo through the 1820s.⁵¹ Possibly by 1824, and certainly by 1825, Fontenelle, Andrew Drips, Joshua Pilcher, William Vanderburgh, and Charles Bent had created a partnership designed to make the MoFCo profitable, but it was too late and the company went out of business by the end of 1828. At that time, Andrew Drips and Fontenelle

purchased the MoFCo's Bellevue post, which they sold to the government in 1833.⁵²

After making a deal with John P. Cabanné in January 1830, Fontenelle and Drips aligned themselves with the AFCo.⁵³ By 1834 Fontenelle had joined Milton Sublette's outfit.

On August 1, 1835, Lucien Fontenelle wrote a letter to Drips (his exact whereabouts at the time is unknown) that alludes to their mutual business arrangements. He observed that the outlook "stands fair," and told Drips that "Fitzpatrick may be able to give you some information on the subject." Fontenelle also requested Drips to "settle all accounts (Separately) which regards our old and new concerns," meaning whatever arrangements had been made between Chouteau's outfit and Fontenelle & Drips and Fitzpatrick, Sublette & Bridger. In addition, Fontenelle mentioned side deals having to do with backing the trapping expeditions of John Grey (a mixed-blood Iroquois whose real name was Ignace Hatchioraquasha) and [Michel?]"Robidoux."⁵⁴

Fontenelle had led the trade caravan of 1835 (which included missionaries Marcus Whitman and Samuel Parker on their first trip west) part way to the rendezvous site but on June 10 cholera struck, forcing the afflicted Fontenelle to yield command of the train to Fitzpatrick. Later that summer Fontenelle returned to Bellevue (Council Bluffs) with 120 packs of beaver fur, but deeply in debt and drinking heavily.⁵⁵

The experiment in semi-autonomy soon failed, and within one year most of Fontenelle, Fitzpatrick & Company drifted off or became hirelings of Chouteau's

⁵¹ Alan C. Trotman, "Lucien Fontenelle," in Hafen, ed., *Mountain Men*, 5: 81-85.

⁵² Morgan and Harris, eds., *Rocky Mountain Journals*, p. 308.

⁵³ Trotman, "Lucien Fontenelle," in Hafen, ed., *Mountain Men*, 5: 88, says Fontenelle and Drips became members of the AFCo in late 1828 or early 1829. Morgan and Harris (*Rocky Mountain Journals*, p. 308) say that it was "early in January 1830."

⁵⁴ Fontenelle, Fort William, August 1, 1835, to Drips (place unknown), in Drips papers, MoHS; see also Morgan and Harris, eds., *Rocky Mountain Journals*, p. 324.

⁵⁵ Trotman, "Lucien Fontenelle," in Hafen, ed., *Mountain Men*, 5: 96, 99.

company.⁵⁶ James Bridger, for example, despite wide renown in his own time and later, was not a very capable businessman. Chouteau's company was unwilling to place him in a position that required a keen sense of financial management. Years later, William Laidlaw wrote at Fort Union in 1843 that Bridger was "not a man calculated to manage men, and in my opinion will never succeed in making profitable returns."⁵⁷ Jim Bridger excelled at trapping beaver, and few men possessed a better mental map of the west, but he was no businessman.

Milton's new outfit, Fontenelle, Fitzpatrick & Company, was short-lived. At the 1836 rendezvous Joshua Pilcher negotiated its sale to the dominant "Company" as part of Chouteau's program aimed at eliminating all competition. Deciding to lead the Marcus Whitman-Henry Spalding party of missionary emigrants to Oregon, Milton set out in the spring of 1836, but his deteriorating physical condition (he probably suffered from cancer in his leg) forced him to halt at Fort William/Fort Laramie.⁵⁸ Even so, it seems that Milton continued to believe the fur trade could bring him profits. He was soon disabused of such notions. Specific details of the sale have apparently not survived, but LeRoy R. Hafen believed that "the principal provisions were for transfer of debts," of which Fontenelle, Fitzpatrick & Company had plenty, perhaps as much as \$40,000.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ LeRoy R. Hafen, Broken Hand: The Life of Thomas Fitzpatrick, Mountain Man, Guide and Indian Agent, revised ed. (Denver: The Old West Publishing Company, 1973), pp. 146-47; hereafter cited as Hafen, Broken Hand.

⁵⁷ Quote is from Morgan and Harris, eds., Rocky Mountain Journals, p. 268.

⁵⁸ Several sources seem to indicate that Milton's leg was amputated early in 1835. In both 1835 and 1836 Milton was on the trail to a rendezvous. Possibly, two or more amputations were performed. Strangely, a receipt for an amputation and related services performed by Dr. B[ernard]. G. Farrer is dated February 4 and 24, 1836. Stranger still, the bill was paid by Pratte, Chouteau & Company, and charged to Milton Sublette's account. See receipt dated February 4, 1836, in Chouteau Collection, MoHS. (Would it have taken a whole year to transmit the bill, even though the operation took place at St. Louis?)

⁵⁹ Hafen, Broken Hand, p. 159. As John Sunder points out, "The story is difficult to piece together because the company said little about its business deals and made rather complex arrangements with its associates." Sunder, Joshua Pilcher, p. 117.

In the summer of 1836, after Pilcher executed the transfer of Fontenelle, Fitzpatrick & Company to Pratte, Chouteau & Company, Thomas Fitzpatrick sent grim news to Milton Sublette, via Andrew Drips. Fitzpatrick “would have nothing more to do with [Milton] as a Partner,” though he had promised to bring him trade goods at Fort William. On December 13, 1836, Milton Sublette complained in a letter to Pratte, Chouteau & Company that Fitzpatrick’s action “leaves me in an awkward situation as I am at a loss how to draw on the Company.” Owing money to several trappers, and seeing the “Chians . . . all returned to the south fork” of the Platte, Milton felt aggrieved by all parties. He had also “heard a great deal that your object was to brake up this post,” but he was reluctant to “sencure [sic] the American Fur Company,” perhaps because he still hoped for support from them.⁶⁰

Embittered, Milton Sublette had apparently been betrayed and defrauded by many persons, including his brother, his former partners, and the Pratte, Chouteau outfit. Remaining at Fort Laramie, the “Thunderbolt of the Rockies” died on April 5, 1837, just two months before William Drummond Stewart and Alfred Jacob Miller arrived.⁶¹ Such was the sad career of one fur trader who had attempted to outdo Pratte, Chouteau & Company. His partner Fontenelle, however, would continue to work at Fort William, but under new management—Pratt, Chouteau & Company.

⁶⁰ Milton Sublette at Fort William, December 13, 1836, to Messrs. Pratte, Chouteau & Co., in Chouteau Collection, MoHS.

⁶¹ See Doyce B. Nunis, Jr., “Milton G. Sublette,” in Hafen, ed., *Mountain Men*, 43: 331-49.

6. Fort William After 1835: The Traders

On December 10, 1835, Kenneth McKenzie sat at Fort Union, “alone in a smoky room [with] the thermometer 15 degrees below zero,” writing a letter to American Fur Company partner Ramsay Crooks. McKenzie mentioned that during a stop at Fort Pierre that autumn he had sent “Mr. [David D.] Mitchell to take out an equipment to Laramie’s Fork on the river Platte, to trade with the Sioux and Cheyenne, a fine Buffalo Country, and where Sublette & Co established a post last winter.”⁶² By that time the firm of Fontenelle, Fitzpatrick & Company already owned Fort William, and was closely connected to the so-called “American Fur Company.” Indeed, they were about to sell out to the AFCo. McKenzie’s letter exemplifies the confusion found in source materials regarding the various owners and operators of Fort William/Fort John/Fort Laramie.

From the time Sublette and Campbell sold their fort on “Laramée’s River,” the history of its operators is a tangled affair. Overlapping patterns of temporary partnerships and commercial associations characterized the trade structure in the Platte River country, and the documentary record is far from complete. Nonetheless, the basic story revolves around Pratte, Chouteau & Company’s (the “AFCo”) acquisition of Fort William from Fontenelle, Fitzpatrick & Company, and its subsequent operations at the post.

Joshua Pilcher, formerly a partner in the Missouri Fur Company but by now an employee of Chouteau’s company, arrived in June 1836 to orchestrate the post’s transfer. In this transaction, the Chouteau outfit gained several advantages. First, the big company had absorbed one of its leading subordinate outfits, thus eliminating a potential competitor. Secondly, the post allowed the company to tap the Lakota robe makers’

produce at the source. Thirdly, since Fort William/Fort Laramie was close to the mountains, Pratte, Chouteau & Company could easily forward goods to the annual trappers' rendezvous.

Andrew Drips or Lucien Fontenelle, two of the post's former owners, usually led Chouteau's "Rocky Mountain Outfit" until it was discontinued in 1840, the year of the final mountain rendezvous. Both men also spent time at Fort William/Fort Laramie. For several years their base of operations was the new Fort William at Laramie River, which explains why the post was sometimes called "Fort Lucien" between 1835-1840.⁶³

Fontenelle continued to serve Pratte, Chouteau & Company for a few years, as a part-time bourgeois at Fort William/Fort Laramie, and sometimes he led UMO/"Rocky Mountain Outfit" trapper brigades into the Crow land and the Yellowstone River country. In 1837 Fontenelle's Indian wife and four mix-blood children joined him at Fort Laramie. Debilitated by his alcoholism, and with little to show after his many years in the trade, Lucien Fontenelle died at Bellevue, his old Missouri River post, in 1839.⁶⁴

Joshua Pilcher, concurrently a federal Indian Agent and an agent for Pratte, Chouteau & Company (the "AFCo"),⁶⁵ wrote on June 21, 1836, from "Fort Lucien," meaning Fort William, to Pierre Chouteau, Jr. Pilcher advised Chouteau that "every thing I see and hear, admonishes me to move caution and prudence. To enter into details, might give unnecessary anxiety, but I cannot avoid stating that all my anticipations seem to be

⁶² McKenzie to Crooks, December 10, 1835; Fort Union Letterbook, Chouteau Collection, MoHS.

⁶³ Trotman, "Lucien Fontenelle," in Hafen, ed., *Mountain Men*, 5: 89, 94.

⁶⁴ Trotman, "Lucien Fontenelle," in Hafen, ed., *Mountain Men*, 5: 96, 99; see also Louise Barry, ed., *The Beginning of the West: Annals of the Kansas Gateway to the American West, 1540-1854* (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1972), p. 286 [hereafter cited as Barry, *Beginning of the West*].

⁶⁵ Pilcher's dual role seems to have elicited no negative commentary. Marcus Whitman, on September 18, noted that: "Major Pilcher joined us at Fort Williams and come on to rendezvous, as agent of Pratt, Choteau & Co., in whose behalf he bought out the 'mountain partners,' so that the whole business now belongs to them." Morgan and Harris, eds., *Rocky Mountain Journals*, p. 342.

approaching a consumation [sic] . . . The party for the mountains is about to move not however without leaving a large outfit for this post for the Indian trade."⁶⁶

Pilcher noted that he had encountered only one man in whom he placed any real confidence, "a young man of the name of Woods is left in charge of the post. . . ." "Who and what he is," Pilcher continued, "I know not: but about five minutes conversation with him, and a slight observation of his deportment since my arrival, convinces me that whoever he is, he is worth all the rest together, so far as relates to business." Observing that the men at the fort were reluctant to furnish him horses to replace the jaded beasts he took from Fort Pierre on the Missouri, he added: "now that I am with the party, I feel no uneasiness for it is verry certain that I never lose sight of them horses or no horses until I put a period to this business."⁶⁷

Perhaps Pilcher brought some hands from Fort Pierre to install at the newly acquired post. Fort William would henceforth comprise an important trading post within the big company's "Sioux Outfit" trade area lying between the Platte and Missouri rivers. In 1835 the new "Sioux Outfit" had been carved out of a very large territory which had formerly been under the Upper Missouri Outfit's jurisdiction.⁶⁸ One of Pilcher's men may have been "L. Crawford," who signed himself "Clerk & trader in charge of Fort William." Crawford wrote a detailed letter to "P. Chouteau, Esq." on June 29, 1836. In it he noted that "Majr. Fitzpatrick and Sublette [most probably Milton] left this seven days ago (& with them Mr. Pilcher) for the mountains. I am left in charge of this post, and my

⁶⁶ Joshua Pilcher, Fort Laramie, June 21, 1836, to Pierre Chouteau, Jr., St. Louis, in Chouteau Collection, MoHS. Portions of this letter are also cited in John E. Sunder, Joshua Pilcher: Fur Trade and Indian Agent (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), pp. 117-18 [hereafter cited as Sunder, Joshua Pilcher].

⁶⁷ Joshua Pilcher, Fort Laramie, June 21, 1836, to Pierre Chouteau, Jr., St. Louis, in Chouteau Collection, MoHS. See also Sunder, Joshua Pilcher, pp. 117-18.

⁶⁸ See Charles E. Hanson, Jr., "Frederick Laboue and his River," Museum of the Fur Trade Quarterly 27: 1 and 2 (Spring and Summer 1991), pp. 6-7.

particular department is to trade with the Indians, Mr. Woods to keep the accounts and trade with whites, under my direction." Crawford noted that a trapper named "F. Valentine," who had been on the roster of the "Mountain Outfit," would carry the letter to St. Louis. This suggests that at least some of the first Chouteau men to arrive at Fort William were engaged to work out of Fort Union under Kenneth McKenzie, since that post generally had control of the "Mountain Outfit." Fitzpatrick was sometimes its designated leader, and he was also permitted to sign drafts on behalf of Pratte, Chouteau & Company.⁶⁹

Crawford mentioned that the man named "F. Valentine," who was "equipped here [at Fort William] last year for the Crow country," was owed \$144.60 (after paying a debt of \$37.40) for fifty-two pounds of beaver. Crawford had been authorized to purchase the furs at \$3.50 a pound, but as he lacked authority to write drafts on the "Company" and Fitzpatrick was absent, Valentine was headed to St. Louis to collect his due. Crawford also noted that "Capt. Bonnevillle has settled his affairs in this country" and was heading back to civilization, but Crawford hoped to buy Bonneville's "eight kegs of liquor . . . if he will take a reasonable price for it." After spending four relatively fruitless years in the trade, Bonneville was prepared to re-join the army.⁷⁰

In order to make their business run smoothly, fur traders used informal, extra-legal diplomacy, as indicated in Crawford's note that "we had brought about a peace" between Oglala and Brule Sioux and the Cheyenne during the spring, but it had fallen

⁶⁹ L. Crawford, Fort William, June 29, 1836, to Pierre Chouteau, Jr., in Chouteau Collection, MoHS.

⁷⁰ L. Crawford, Fort William, June 29, 1836, to Pierre Chouteau, Jr., in Chouteau Collection, MoHS. Bonneville spent about four years in and around the Rockies (1832-36) while on leave from the army. In the spring of 1836 William Clark granted Bonneville a license allowing him to trade with the Arapahoes on the south side of the Platte, at "Laramai's point," among other places. See Berry, *Beginning of the West*, p. 307. The best treatment of Bonneville's story remains Edgely W. Todd, ed., *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville*, by Washington Irving (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958).

apart a few days earlier. This meant, he thought, that the two nations would not trade at Fort William during the coming winter. Worse, it would likely "give Sublette and Vasquez another chance of doing something next year," presumably on the South Platte where the Sioux and Cheyenne sometimes traded.⁷¹

The "Mr. Woods" at Fort Laramie is again mentioned in a letter written by James A. Hamilton to Pierre Chouteau, Jr., in December 1837, suggesting that Woods remained at the post for more than a year after Pilcher's visit. Wrote Hamilton, "B. Woods of Laramies Fork writes to Mr. Drips that he has no goods and the Indians have left him and gone to P. A. Sarpy who is 8 miles from him, he says he is doing nothing, all hands on expense, and if he had \$2000 in goods he could do well."⁷²

When Chouteau's company acquired Fort William in 1836 Pierre D. Papin was in command of its Sioux Outfit, headquartered at Fort Pierre. He had held this position since 1834. Like many men who worked for the "Company," Papin had first opposed and was then bought out by UMO chief Kenneth McKenzie in 1830.⁷³ Possibly the transfer of Fort William had been attended by some conflict or mis-communication. In a letter dated "Platte River," November 26, 1837, Frederick Laboue informed Pierre D. Papin that he had arrived at "Fort Laramie" only to learn that the clerk in charge, Woods, was unwilling to turn it over. Evidently, Woods had been told by Andrew Drips to let no one take over unless Drips sent an express with word to that effect. At the time of Laboue's

⁷¹ L. Crawford, Fort William, June 29, 1836, to Pierre Chouteau, Jr., in Chouteau Collection, MoHS.

⁷² J. A. Hamilton, St. Louis, December 22, 1837, to Pierre Chouteau, Jr.; Chouteau Collection, MoHS. Oddly, Peter A. Sarpy seems to have been viewed as "opposition," yet his brother, J. B. Sarpy, was a shareholder in Pratte, Chouteau & Company. See "Memorandum: Les Affaires de Pratte Chouteau & Co ont Terminee Avec les Retours de 1839," dated December 16, 1850, Chouteau Collection, MoHS.

⁷³ William A. Goff, "Pierre Didier Papin," in Hafen, ed., Mountain Men, 9: 309-11.

appearance, Drips was apparently in the vicinity of Fort Hall on the Snake River, and would not return to St. Louis before late fall of 1837.⁷⁴

Laboue noted in this letter that several traders were jostling for positions in the Platte valley trade at the time. Peter A. Sarpy's post was located eight or ten miles below the mouth of Laramie River. Peter was the younger brother of John B. Sarpy, who worked for the AFCo's Western Department. For several years after 1831 Peter Sarpy operated the Bellevue Post near the junction of the Platte and the Missouri, close to present Omaha, Nebraska. The "Portuguese Company" of Antonio Montaro probably traded on the Platte from a post on Powder River, more than one hundred miles to the northwest. Joseph Jouett also traded in the vicinity. In 1839, however, Joshua Pilcher (by then Superintendent of Indian Affairs at St. Louis) granted Montero a license to trade with the Crow at Powder River as well as with the Sioux at "Larames Fork," and with the Cheyenne on the South Platte.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Harvey L. Carter, "Andrew Drips," in Hafen, ed., Mountain Men, 8: 150-51.

⁷⁵ Letter in French from Frederick Laboue, Platte River, November 26, 1837, to P. D. Papin; Chouteau-Papin Collection, MoHS; and Edgely W. Todd, "Antonio Montero," in Hafen, ed., Mountain Men, 2: 258-60.

7. Competition at the Platte:

It will be perhaps useful to summarize briefly the confusing events of the post's first few years. Sublette and Campbell built it in 1834, after making an agreement to divide a large trading territory with the "AFCo"—in actuality Pratte, Chouteau & Company. Retaining Fort William on the Platte for less than a year, they sold it to Fontenelle, Fitzpatrick & Company. Finding themselves unable to stand independent of, or to compete against, the larger St. Louis outfit, in 1836 Fontenelle, Fitzpatrick & Company sold out to Pratte, Chouteau & Company via its agent, Joshua Pilcher. Some of the former partners became vassals of Pratte, Chouteau & Company, while others, such as Milton Sublette, were left out in the cold. The "AFCo" bought Fort William partly as a measure to consolidate its control over the supply system that kept the mountain trapping business running smoothly. To its several posts scattered along the Missouri, it now added the one on the North Platte. This made it possible to move goods upriver by steamboat to Bellevue at the mouth of the Platte, from whence wagons could easily carry merchandise overland to Fort William. Upon arrival at the timber fort on Laramie River, goods could be sorted into smaller outfits and transported to the annual mountain rendezvous. This practice continued until the final rendezvous occurred in 1840.

During the 1830s the beaver trade sharply declined, due to changing fashions in the hatters' trade and the exploitation of alternative fur sources, such as the South American nutria. Beaver trapping, most of which had been done by white trappers, was supplanted by the growing trade in buffalo robes, harvested and prepared for market by Indians. Explicit reference to this significant change appears in a letter written at Fort Union in May 1835. "As the Beaver Trade for the past three years has been regularly

declining notwithstanding every facility and encouragement we have given [to the Indians] . . . it appears to me that our sheet anchor will be, the Robe Trade.”⁷⁶ Although this letter related to the Blackfeet trade on the Missouri River, the basic theme applied equally to the Platte. As it turned out, Fort William/Fort John/Fort Laramie was ideally situated to exploit the robe trade, which continued to be an important source of income for the large company for several more years.⁷⁷

Problems in sorting out the connections from one outfit to another arise partly because the documentary record is incomplete, and some relationships must be at least partly inferred. On the other hand, it seems that the largest concern in this story, Pratte, Chouteau & Company, may have deliberately obscured some business arrangements in order to limit their liability in case of contested debts. The big company’s relationship with Fontenelle, Fitzpatrick & Company illustrates this problem. Clearly, the two outfits were connected, but when it came to debt collection the “host” company (Pratte, Chouteau & Co.) sought some legal distance from its dependent, and may have thrown up a smoke screen for that purpose. A summary of the case follows.

In May 1835 one Leonard Searcy received a bill from Fontenelle, Fitzpatrick & Company “directed to Messrs. Pratte, Chouteau & Company” in the amount of \$1850. In August, Searcy tried to collect his money, but Pratte, Chouteau & Company refused to pay. By 1839, having tried and failed, several times apparently, to collect the amount due him, Searcy brought a suit against Chouteau’s company. In 1843 a jury finally found in favor of Searcy, assessing Pratte, Chouteau & Company a debt of roughly \$2750.

⁷⁶ [unknown writer], Fort Union, May 5, 1835, to Alexander Culbertson ; Fort Union Letterbook, Chouteau Collection, MoHS.

⁷⁷ For an excellent discussion of the trade structure, see David J. Wishart, The Fur Trade of the American West, 1807-1840 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979).

The Chouteau outfit wanted a new trial, arguing a variety of fine legal points. At issue, fundamentally, was the question of whether or not Pratte, Chouteau & Company were in a partnership with "Thomas Fitzpatrick, Milton Sublette and Henry Fraeb & co." and "a co-partnership with Lucien Fontenelle [and] Drips his first name not recollected." Depositions of well-known traders such as Louis Vasquez, David Waldo, John Daugherty and Charles Bent were placed in evidence. Charles Bent said "there was a firm of Fontenelle & Drips and also one of Fitzpatrick Sublette and Bridger and which were afterwards united and constituted that of Fontenelle Fitzpatrick & Co." One letter introduced as evidence indicated that Fontenelle, Fitzpatrick and the rest took orders from Pratte and Chouteau in 1836.

Upon being sworn in, pro-Chouteau man John B. Sarpy claimed that Pratte, Chouteau & Company's dealings with Fontenelle et al included supplying and equipping them, banking for them, and brokering their peltries, but none of this constituted an actual partnership. He also said that in March 1836 Fontenelle & Fitzpatrick was dissolved and Pratte, Chouteau & Company purchased "all the stock in trade in the mountains consisting of their wagons, horses mules tents camp equipage traps &c." Sarpy claimed the larger company had lost "about seventy eight thousand dollars" as a result of its association with the failed outfit. Sarpy's testimony was not allowed in evidence because the court discerned a conflict of interest, though he denied any such conflict.

The jury, as indicated, found in favor of Searcy, but Pratte, Chouteau & Company objected and vowed to take the case to the state supreme court. The final outcome is not

known, but this document appears to indicate that the definition of a “partnership” was a slippery thing indeed in the St. Louis fur traders’ community.⁷⁸

With the “American Fur Company” dominating the Upper Missouri, and Bent, St. Vrain & Company holding a similar position on the Arkansas River, the area between the North Platte and the Arkansas became a competitive battleground for several years. Both of the large outfits erected posts in the region, but a number of other outfits tried, with some success, to enter the fray as well. Among those who traded in the area were Lancaster Lupton, John Sybille and David Adams, Joseph[?] Bissonette, Fulton Cutting of the “Union Fur Company,” and several traders such as Alexander Barclay, William Thrapp and Joseph Doyle, who resided either in Mexican territory or at nearby Pueblo, Hardscrabble, and Greenhorn, small settlements located on the American side of the upper Arkansas River. Indeed, serious competition continued from 1836 until the middle 1840s. Even though the “AFCo” now held Fort William/Fort John/Fort Laramie it is clear that they had not garnered a genuine monopoly.

In 1836, therefore, Pratte, Chouteau & Company were not alone in expanding their trade into the area south of the North Platte. In fact, four rival posts soon competed on a north-south axis within a twenty-mile-square area in the upper reaches of the South Platte. Peter Sarpy and Henry Fraeb, a German immigrant, formed a partnership and set up a post on the South Platte by early 1837 called Fort Jackson. Fort Jackson was situated just north of Fort Lupton. Farther north of Fort Jackson was Fort Vasquez, built in 1835 by Andrew Sublette and Louis Vasquez. Still further north lay a Bent, St. Vrain &

⁷⁸ Transcript of depositions and arguments in the case of Leonard Searcy vs Pierre Chouteau, Jr., November 11, 1843, in Gamble Papers, MoHS.

Company post called Fort Lookout (also known as Fort St. Vrain, to honor its bourgeois, Marcellin St. Vrain, the younger brother of the prominent trader Ceran St. Vrain).⁷⁹ Sarpy and Fraeb's supplies came from Chouteau's company, and their contract supposedly forbade them from trading at Laramie River. But trade prospects at the North Platte must have looked inviting, for Sarpy persisted at least for a while.

In July 1838 Ceran St. Vrain negotiated the purchase of Fort Jackson from Pratte, Chouteau & Company, who by then somehow had gained control of the place, possibly through collection of an outstanding debt. Soon thereafter, Sarpy returned to Bellevue and Fraeb returned to the mountains, where he was killed in 1841.⁸⁰ A letter datelined at "Fort Sarpy" written by Louis Howard to "Mr. Picotte" at Fort Pierre, contains several references to events on the North and South Platte. "Fort Sarpy" may refer to a post "eight or ten" miles below Fort Laramie that Sarpy established after Bent, St. Vrain & Company bought Fort Jackson in July 1838. Howard's letter also mentions Lancaster P. Lupton's arrival with one wagon from the "South fork," and an express that had just arrived from Vasquez and Sublette to see if anyone had occupied "Fontenelle's fort," which presumably meant Fort Laramie.⁸¹

Louis Howard [?] (spelled "Huord") appears in another of Frederick Laboue's letters written in December 1838 from the "Riviere Platte." Howard told Laboue that William Bent had recently arrived with three wagons, loaded mostly with liquor. Laboue reminded Bent that St. Vrain had made an agreement with Pierre Chouteau "not to come onto the north fork of the Platte." Bent replied he had not seen St. Vrain but had received

⁷⁹ John E. Wickman, "Peter A. Sarpy," in Hafen, ed., *Mountain Men*, 4: 283-87.

⁸⁰ David Lavender, *Bent's Fort* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1954), p. 180.

a letter from him written somewhere on the Arkansas, and it informed him that he could go “wherever their Indians were.” Bent intended to “lead the Cheyennes to the south fork” and managed to persuade sixty lodges to go with him, but many remained in the Laramie-North Platte area. This event was important, for it began or accelerated the process whereby the Cheyenne were divided into northern and southern bands. Laboue also noted that Jacob Halsey had told one “Louison” to take possession of Fort Laramie and set fire to Sarpy’s post. Conditions must have been stressful, for Laboue added: “Dear friend, if it was required that I give you every detail about all the blackguards there were in the fort, I wouldn’t have sufficient paper in all of Fort Laramie to write it.”⁸²

Given the concentration of posts on the South Platte, and the fact that only two large outfits—Pratte, Chouteau & Company and Bent, St. Vrain & Company—possessed heavy capital and influence, it is no surprise that they tried to work out an accommodation. Bent, St. Vrain & Company in 1839 reached a cartel-style agreement with Pratte, Chouteau & Company similar to the one made in 1834 between Sublette and Campbell and the Chouteau outfit. According to the latest division of territory, Pratte, Chouteau & Co. would not trade on the South Platte while Bent, St. Vrain & Co. would avoid trading above the North Platte. However, in this instance the two parties to the agreement did not always adhere to the deal, and smaller outfits ignored it altogether. Consequently, competition in the area between the North Platte and South Platte rivers

⁸¹ Letter in French from Louis Howard, Fort Sarpy, September 27, 1838, to Mr. Picotte, Fort Pierre; Chouteau Collection, MoHS. This letter penned at “Fort Sarpy” cannot refer to the post of that name on the Yellowstone built after 1843.

⁸² Letter in French from Frederick Laboue, “Riviere Platte,” December 15, 1838, to P. D. Papin [place unknown]; Chouteau Collection, MoHS.

remained fierce, and is one reason why whiskey flooded the area for several years after 1839.⁸³

⁸³ Lavender, Bent's Fort, pp. 181-86.

8. Descriptions of the post:

Not too long after Pratte, Chouteau & Company purchased the RMFCo's timber-built post on Laramie River it was probably beginning to crumble. Some sources, among them Coutant's History of Wyoming, suggest that the post required rebuilding as early as 1836. But according to several credible contemporary eye-witnesses, this could not have been the case.⁸⁴ One passer-by in 1838, Myra F. Eels, arrived on May 30, later noting that "Fort William" was a "large hewed log building with an opening in the center."⁸⁵ About a year later a reliable German scientist-traveler, F. A. Wislizenus, also passed the post. He thought it: "resembled a great blockhouse . . . built in a rectangle of about eighty by a hundred feet. The outside is made of cottonwood logs, about fifteen feet high, hewed off, and wedged closely together. On three sides there are little towers on the wall that seem designed for watch and defense. In the middle a strong gate, built of blocks, constitutes the entrance. Within, little buildings with flat roofs are plastered all around against the wall, like swallows' nests. One is the store house; another the smithy; the others are dwellings not unlike monks' cells. A special portion of the court yard is occupied by the so-called horse-pen . . . the middle space is free, with a tall tree in it, on which the flag is raised on occasions of state."⁸⁶ By 1841 the original post had definitely been scrapped.

⁸⁴ C. G. Coutant, History of Wyoming (Laramie, 1899) pp. 302-03, which also notes that "It chanced that quite a number of Mexicans wintered at Fort Laramie in 1835-6, and they made the proposition to build the new fort after the plan of such buildings in their own country, and thus it was that adobes were used." The same error is repeated in Hubert Howe Bancroft, History of Nevada, Colorado and Wyoming (San Francisco: The History Company, 1890), p. 683. See Merrill J. Mattes' discussion of such errors in "The Sutler's Store at Fort Laramie," in Annals of Wyoming 18: 2 (July 1946), p. 95.

⁸⁵ Journal of Myra F. Eels, Transactions of the Oregon Pioneer Association (Portland, 1889).

⁸⁶ F. A. Wislizenus, A Journey to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1839 (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society, 1912), pp. 67-8.

Joseph Williams, en route to Oregon that year, crossed Laramie River and saw “a new fort that they were building, called Fort Johns.”⁸⁷

The only surviving images of the original Fort William were made in 1837 by Alfred Jacob Miller. Miller traveled with William Drummond Stewart, a Scottish nobleman who visited the United States several times between 1833 and 1843. As a second son, Stewart was not likely to inherit his family’s ancestral estate, Murthly Castle. Having retired from a military career, Stewart decided to tour the American west, and spent several years consorting with fur traders. In 1833 he met Prince Maximilian of Wied-Neuwied and the prince’s artist-companion, Karl Bodmer. Impressed with the idea of preserving a visual record of his American adventure, Stewart hired a young Baltimore artist named Alfred Jacob Miller to accompany him in 1837. Miller and Stewart (who was acquainted with many of St. Louis’s leading fur traders) arrived at Fort William on about June 25. There they rested for a few days before heading for the summer rendezvous at Horse Creek on the Green River.⁸⁸

Miller’s field sketches from that trip provided the raw materials for numerous images of Fort Laramie and other western landmarks and scenes. The notes that Miller made for his paintings provide information on the trading post. One set of paintings commissioned by William T. Walters of Baltimore in 1858 contains Miller’s notes on an image of the post’s exterior. “The interior,” he wrote, “is possibly 150 feet square, a range of house built against the palisades entirely surround it, each apartment having a door and window overlooking the interior court. Fontenel was in command of the fort,

⁸⁷ Joseph Williams, Narrative of a Tour From the State of Indiana to the Oregon Territory in the Years 1841-42 (New York: Cadmus Books, 1921), p. 38.

⁸⁸ For the story of Stewart’s adventures, see Mae Reed Porter and Odessa Davenport, Scotsman in Buckskin: Sir William Drummond Stewart and the Rocky Mountain Fur Trade (New York: Hastings

and received us with kindness and hospitality.” Miller also noticed “some first-class engravings” in Fontenelle’s quarters. One of these images, according to Mae Reed Porter, showed “Saladin, Sultan of Egypt and Turkey, battling infidels in the Holy Land.” There were also a few “volumes of classical literature” on hand. On another of the Walters paintings, an interior view of the post, Miller noted that there was “a cannon or two sleeping in the towers over the two main entrances.”⁸⁹

A separate set of Miller’s paintings done around 1858 for Alexander Brown of Liverpool, England, sheds more light on Fort Laramie. According to Miller’s notations, the houses within the quadrangle were made of large logs, and their roofs “reached[ed] within three feet of the tops of the palisades.” He also mentioned that “four or five” large engravings graced the post’s reception room.⁹⁰ Miller’s exterior view paintings of Fort Laramie show small structures atop the bastions and blockhouse that may represent weather vanes or lightning rods. Detail is lacking in these images, but contemporary Fort Union’s bastions boasted elaborate three-dimensional weather vanes of tin and iron that are well documented.⁹¹

By the summer of 1843 when Lt. John Charles Frémont passed by, the post had taken the form it retained for the remainder of its career. Frémont wrote that the post was: “a quadrangular structure, built of clay, after the fashion of the Mexicans, who are generally employed in building them. The walls are about fifteen feet high, surmounted

House, 1963); and Bart Barbour, ed., *Edward Warren*, by William Drummond Stewart (Missoula, MT: Mountain Press, 1986). Reference to their arrival at Fort Laramie appears on pp. 139-41 in *Edward Warren*.

⁸⁹ Miller’s notes and images are in Marvin Ross, ed., *The West of Alfred Jacob Miller: 1837*, revised ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), plates 49 and 150.

⁹⁰ See Michael Bell, ed., *Braves and Buffalo: Plains Indian Life in 1837* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), p. 116.

⁹¹ See Ross, *The West of Alfred Jacob Miller*, p. 49; and Morgan and Harris, eds, *Rocky Mountain Journals*, p. 37. Fort Union’s weathervanes area discussed in Barbour, “Fort Union and the Upper Missouri Fur Trade, 1830-1867.”

with a wooden palisade, and form a portion of ranges of houses, which entirely surround a yard of about one hundred and thirty feet square. Every apartment has its door and window, all, of course, opening on the inside. There are two entrances opposite each other and midway the wall, one of which is a large and public entrance, the other small and more private: a sort of postern gate. Over the great entrance is a square tower, with loopholes; and, like the rest of the work, built of earth. At two of the angles, and diagonally opposite each other, are large square bastions, so arranged as to sweep the four faces of the walls.” Frémont saw the bourgeois, James Bordeaux, two clerks—Charles Galpin and Philander Kellogg—and sixteen other men who would have been classed as *engagés*, or common hands and mechanics. Frémont also noted the nearby opposition post, Fort Platte, “a post belonging to Messrs. Sybille, Adams & Co., situated immediately in the point of land at the junction of Laramie with the Platte.” Built of adobe, and not yet completed, the post consisted of three connected ranges of housing with the fourth side open toward the river. From a few hundred yards west of Fort Platte, Frémont spotted Fort John.⁹²

While in the vicinity of Fort John, Frémont recorded his observation that he considered it to be “the most suitable place, on the line of the Platte, for the establishment of a military post. It is connected with the mouth of the Platte and the Upper Missouri by excellent roads, which are in frequent use, and would not in any way interfere with the range of the buffalo, on which the neighboring Indians mainly depend for support.” He also noted that an army post there would help prevent a pan-Indian coalition, protect the

⁹² Mary Lee Spence and Donald Jackson, eds., *The Expeditions of John Charles Frémont*, vol. 1 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970), pp. 210-11, 218-19. James Bordeaux was *bourgeois* at the post for several years, at least from Frémont’s visit in 1843 through 1847, when a Mormon named William Clayton

Oregon road to South Pass, and provide easy access to New Mexico along the route that traders customarily took from settlements such as El Pueblo on Fountain Creek at the Arkansas River. Within a few years the army would act on Frémont's suggestion. The same suggestion would appear in Francis Parkman's The Oregon Trail when it was published in 1849.⁹³ Frémont's companion, the usually voluble and opinionated German cartographer Charles Preuss, had practically nothing to say concerning Fort Laramie.⁹⁴

Artillery was present long before the army bought the post. Many of the larger fur trade forts kept a small cannon or two on hand. Most commonly they were fired to celebrate the arrival of a caravan bringing the season's goods to a post, or the departure of one carrying furs and robes to market. Cannons were also fired on special occasions such as the Fourth of July or other national holidays. Edwin Bryant in 1846 noted that Fort Laramie's "walls are surmounted by watch-towers, and the gate is defended by two brass swivels."⁹⁵ Elija B. Farnham wrote on June 18, 1849, that "the cannon we heard firing is the only piece belonging here, but it is small and light and can easily be run from one door to the other."⁹⁶ A passing "49er" named William G. Johnston stopped at Fort Laramie on May 29, 1849, and saw "two brass swivels . . . mounted at the entrance, each bearing the inscription 'made by John Gallagher, Pittsburgh, Pa., 1829.'"⁹⁷

passed by. (See Mattes files, FOLA, "Fort Laramie Approach Roads, 1847" for an excerpt of Clayton's journal.)

⁹³ Spence and Jackson, eds., The Expeditions of John Charles Frémont, vol. 1, pp. 232-33; and Francis Parkman, The Oregon Trail (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1946), p. 94.

⁹⁴ Erwin G. and Elisabeth K. Gudde, eds. and translators, Exploring With Frémont, by Charles Preuss (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), sheds almost no light on the appearance of the post.

⁹⁵ Bryant, What I Saw in California, p. 109.

⁹⁶ Citation from Mattes's typescript excerpts of Elija Bryan Farnham ms. journal, date of June 16, 1849; Mattes files, FOLA

⁹⁷ William G. Johnston, Experiences of a Forty Niner (Pittsburgh, 1892) p. 121 (citation from Mattes files, FOLA).

9. Lancaster P. Lupton and Fort Platte

As related earlier, the region between the North and South Platte rivers became a traders' battleground for several years after the "AFCo" took over Fort William. One of the principal competitors was a former dragoon lieutenant named Lancaster Platt Lupton. He had served as a junior officer with Colonel Henry Dodge's dragoons on their western expedition in 1834-35. Lupton was a West Pointer with several years of service in the army. One source indicates that he was cashiered for criticizing President Andrew Jackson. Another source suggests that Lupton, sensing the potential for profits, resigned his commission in March 1836 and a few months later established Fort Lancaster (later called Fort Lupton) on the South Platte. A year earlier, Vasquez and Andrew Sublette had set up a post on the South Platte called Fort Vasquez. In 1837 Bent, St. Vrain & Company also placed a post on the South Platte called Fort Lookout, sometimes called Fort St. Vrain.⁹⁸

Lancaster P. Lupton traded on the North and South Platte from 1837 to 1842. In 1836 Lupton took a job as a trader at Fort William/Fort Laramie, and the following year he went into competition against his former employers, establishing Fort Lancaster on the South Platte. Lupton's Fort Lancaster produced fairly well, and in 1841 he decided to expand his operations. With financial aid from a Liberty, Missouri, trader named Hiram Rich, Lupton built Fort Platte and a smaller log-built post on the Arkansas.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Lavender, Bent's Fort, pp. 171-2, 177. See also Janet Lecompte, Pueblo, Hardscrabble and Greenhorn: The Upper Arkansas, 1832-1856 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1978), p.133 [hereafter cited as Lecompte, Pueblo, Hardscrabble, Greenhorn].

⁹⁹ Lecompte, Pueblo, Hardscrabble and Greenhorn p. 133. On September 1, 1839, Indian Superintendent Joshua Pilcher had issued Hiram Rich a trade license, permitting him and eight men to trade at "the big timber, on head of eau qui court & Laramie's fork of the River Platte." This was neither the first nor the last such license for Hiram Rich. He also secured licenses from Pilcher in 1837 and 1840 to trade on the Missouri and elsewhere. In 1836 he had received several thousand dollars in payments from the government for provisioning some "emigrating" Pottawatomies. In 1841 he was appointed sutler for Fort

Lupton, like other traders, wished to exploit the robe trade in the vicinity of Fort Laramie. By 1839 he had placed in operation Fort Platte, about one mile from Fort Laramie.¹⁰⁰ This post contributed substantially to the ongoing illegal whiskey trade, as documented by its chronicler Rufus Sage. Sage wrote a book entitled Rocky Mountain Life, the best source on Lupton's activities and the general situation at Laramie River.

Rufus Sage, born at Connecticut in 1817, grew up as a teetotaler, a non-smoker, and a man who rarely even imbibed coffee. Following several years' work in journalism, Sage decided to travel into the West in 1841. He later claimed that his "innate curiosity, and fondness for things strange and new" compelled him to take the trip, though in a letter to his mother he stated it was to furnish materials for a projected book as well as to improve his health.¹⁰¹ Sage also possessed an amateur's interest in geology and ethnology.

Sage intended to go to Oregon in 1841, but arrived too late at the jumping-off place, Westport, Missouri. A few weeks later some fur traders' caravans arrived, so he "made prompt arrangements with one of them, to accompany it en route, as far as the Rocky Mountains, intending to proceed thereafter as circumstances or inclination might suggest"¹⁰² By early September Sage had become an *engagé* with Lancaster Lupton's outfit. Sage described Lupton thus: "a man of small stature and gentlemanly deportment,

Leavenworth, a post he held until his death in 1862. For one of Rich's licenses see National Archives, Office of Indian Affairs, Letters Received, "Abstract of License granted within the St. Louis Superintendency for the year 1839," in microfilm Series M234, Roll 752, Frame 218 [microfilm hereafter cited as N.A., O.I.A., M234]; see also Barry, ed., Beginning of the West, pp. 313, 431-32.

¹⁰⁰ David W. Lupton, "Fort Platte, Wyoming, 1841-1845: Rival of Fort Laramie," in Annals of Wyoming 49: 1, Spring 1977; p. 84, notes the date of 1841 for Fort Platte's inception; but Charles E. Hanson, Jr., found a letter that David Adams wrote to his wife that indicates an inception date of 1839. See Charles E. Hanson, Jr., ed., The David Adams Journals (Chadron, NE: Museum of the Fur Trade, 1994) [hereafter cited as Hanson, ed., David Adams Journals], p. 2.

¹⁰¹ Ann W. Hafen, "Rufus B. Sage," in Hafen, ed., Mountain Men 3: 263-68.

¹⁰² Rufus Sage, Rocky Mountain Life; or, Startling Scenes and Perilous Adventures in the Far West (Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1880) [hereafter cited as Sage, Rocky Mountain Life], p. 30.

though savoring somewhat of arrogance and self-sufficiency . . . He had been engaged in the Indian trade for several years past . . .”¹⁰³

Lupton’s wagons bound for the Platte River region, Sage exclaimed, carried “no less than twenty-four barrels of alcohol, designed for the Indian trade!” He also claimed that, while whiskey traders faced “severe penalties” under the trade and intercourse acts, their wagons were rarely searched, and never with due diligence. He even opined that federal officers and soldiers in charge of such searches routinely took bribes from traders. Sage basically blamed the government for the liquor trade, claiming that “a few faithful public officers, and attentive to their duty, regardless of fear or favor, would soon accomplish an object so desirable” (i.e., ending the trade). A number of such assertions in Sage’s narrative are either unfounded, or cannot be verified.¹⁰⁴ However, as we shall see, the government did take steps to thwart whiskey traders, with some success.

By November 2, 1841, Sage’s caravan had reached its initial destination, Fort Platte, “situated a short distance above the mouth of Laramie river.” Characteristically, Sage exaggerated the importance of whatever it was that he was involved in, for he claimed that Fort Platte was, after Fort Hall on the Snake River, “the most important point on the route to Oregon.” Fort Platte lay on a level plain on the “left bank of the North Fork of Platte river, three-fourths of a mile above the mouth of Laramie . . . and stands upon the direct wagon road to Oregon, via South Pass.” “Its walls,” Sage wrote, “are ‘adobies,’ (sun-baked brick,) four feet thick, by twenty high—enclosing an area of two hundred and fifty feet in length, by two hundred broad. At the northwest and southwest corners are bastions which command its approaches in all directions. Within

¹⁰³ Sage, Rocky Mountain Life, p. 39.

¹⁰⁴ Sage, Rocky Mountain Life, pp. 52-3.

the walls are some twelve buildings in all, consisting as follows: Office, store, warehouse, meat-house, smith's shop, carpenter's shop, kitchen, and five dwellings,—so arranged as to form a yard and corel, sufficiently large for the accommodation and security of more than two hundred head of animals. The number of men usually employed about the establishment is some thirty . . .” The immediate vicinity consisted of “river bottoms, at various points, . . . thickly studded with proud growths of cottonwood, ash, willow, and box-elder, thus affording its needful supplies of timber and fuel.”¹⁰⁵

Sage also commented on nearby Fort John, noting that it stood one mile south of Fort Platte on the Laramie, that it belonged to the “American Fur Company,” and that “[b]etween these two posts a strong opposition is maintained in regard to the business of the country, little to the credit of either.”¹⁰⁶ He noted that the name of Laramie River originated with “one Joseph Laramie, a French trapper who was killed near its mouth, several years since, by the Indians.”¹⁰⁷

No sooner did Lupton's caravan arrive at Fort Platte than a day-long drunken frolic commenced. As the four-dollars-a-pint liquor flowed, the men at the fort were “Yelling, screeching, firing, shouting, fighting, swearing, drinking . . . without intermission.”¹⁰⁸ The next day much liquor was sold to some Brulé Sioux who came to trade, resulting in mayhem and the death of a chief who tumbled from his horse and broke his neck.¹⁰⁹

Sage alleged several times in his book that the “American Fur Company” had sold “strong drugged liquor” to the Brulés, “for the double purpose of preventing a sale of the

¹⁰⁵ Sage, Rocky Mountain Life, pp. 95-6. See also Howard R. Egan, Pioneering the West 1846 to 1878 (Richmond, UT: Howard R. Egan Estate, 1917), p. 62.

¹⁰⁶ Sage, Rocky Mountain Life, p. 96.

¹⁰⁷ Sage, Rocky Mountain Life, p. 177.

article by its competitor in trade, and of creating sickness, or inciting contention among the Indians, while under the influence of sudden intoxication,—hoping thereby to induce the latter to charge its ill effects upon an opposite source, and thus, by destroying the credit of its rival, monopolize for itself the whole trade.”¹¹⁰

Laudanum and other opiated compounds were often on hand at fur trading forts for medical use, but no direct evidence suggests that they were used to boost the effects of alcohol. An irony here is that because of its long-term commitment to the trade, the “AFCo” generally attempted to exercise restraint in the vending of liquor, but when competition became fierce and rivals’ liquor flowed unimpeded, the larger outfit saw no alternative but to follow suit. As one of Lupton’s traders put it, “The whites want robes, and can get them for liquor when nothing else will do it.”¹¹¹ Competition was certainly rampant in the Platte River Valley in 1841, and each outfit undoubtedly did whatever it could to undermine its adversaries’ ability to make a trade. Sage recorded numerous incidents of Indians fighting among themselves, or with whites at trading posts, while under the influence of alcohol, resulting in deaths and injuries.¹¹²

Parties of Lupton’s men were sent to trade at several Indian camps in November, at the beginning of the robe season. According to federal law, this practice had been made illegal in 1824. Though the government had apparently updated the law and occasionally apprised traders of its existence through circulars, they routinely ignored

¹⁰⁸ Sage, *Rocky Mountain Life*, p. 98.

¹⁰⁹ Sage, *Rocky Mountain Life*, p. 101.

¹¹⁰ Sage, *Rocky Mountain Life*, p. 101.

¹¹¹ Sage, *Rocky Mountain Life*, p. 105.

¹¹² Sage, *Rocky Mountain Life*, pp. 116-22, 136-39, and elsewhere.

it.¹¹³ Additional parties were sent to Fort Lancaster, on the South Platte, and to a post in an important trade district on the White River, “an affluent of the Missouri, some eighty miles northwest of the main trading post” in present Nebraska.¹¹⁴

By April 1842 the situation at Fort Platte had changed. When Sage arrived after an absence he found the fort had been sold, and was currently “occupied by the men of two companies besides our own,” amounting in all to between forty and fifty men.¹¹⁵ In July of 1842 Sage returned temporarily to Independence, Missouri, where he noted that “the company for which I had acted had become bankrupt, and left me a loser to no inconsiderable amount.”¹¹⁶

Lupton’s 1842 bankruptcy obliged him to sell Fort Platte to Pratte and Cabanné (sometimes referred to as the “French Company”), who were competitors with Pierre Chouteau, Jr. & Co.¹¹⁷ Hiram Rich and Albert G. Wilson, two traders at Fort Leavenworth, took over Fort Lancaster. As of 1843 Wilson and Lupton both traded at Fort Lancaster, but the two had an argument resulting in Lupton’s angry departure for the settlement of Pueblo by late 1844. Fort Lancaster was soon thereafter abandoned, as were two posts run by Antoine Robidoux: Fort Uintah (Fort Robidoux) on the Uintah near its junction with the Green River in northeast Utah, and Fort Uncompahgre on the Grand (Gunnison) River in western Colorado.¹¹⁸

¹¹³ See Prucha, Documents of United States Indian Policy, p. 38. Traders were restricted to sites specified in their licenses. Evidence that the law was flagrantly violated appears in Charles Larpenteur, Forty Years a Fur Trader, ed. by Elliott Coues (Minneapolis: Ross & Haines, 1962), pp. 187-208, 215, and elsewhere.

¹¹⁴ Sage, Rocky Mountain Life, p. 105.

¹¹⁵ Sage, Rocky Mountain Life, p. 180.

¹¹⁶ Sage, Rocky Mountain Life, p. 203.

¹¹⁷ Lecompte, Pueblo, Hardscrabble and Greenhorn, p. 133.

¹¹⁸ Lecompte, Pueblo, Hardscrabble and Greenhorn, p. 137. These posts were jettisoned in the wake of a war between New Mexicans and Ute Indians that occurred after some Americans hired to hunt Navajos instead killed some Utes. When the Utes arrived at Santa Fe to claim damages, more were killed, and they declared war on the Mexicans, but Robidoux’s forts got in the way.

After Lupton's outfit collapsed, Sage and a few companions decided to travel toward New Mexico. In early September, Sage and his associates arrived at Fort Lancaster on the South Platte. There they met a party of New Mexicans from Taos who brought mule-loads of "flour, corn, bread, beans, onions, dried pumpkin, salt, and pepper, to barter for robes, skins, furs, meat, moccasins, bows and arrow, ammunition, guns, coffee, calico, cloth, tobacco, and old clothes."¹¹⁹ Statements like this one confirm the existence of a steady trade between New Mexican towns, and a few isolated and basically illegal settlements on the border of New Mexico, and the forts on the North and South Platte.

Sage then visited a Bent, St. Vrain & Company post twelve miles to the south called Fort George, operated by Marcellin St. Vrain, the younger brother of Ceran St. Vrain, one of the principal partners in that company. A few miles farther lay an abandoned post formerly run by "Messrs. Lock and Randolph," and yet a fourth post, also abandoned and falling to pieces, which had been called Fort Vasquez.¹²⁰ In 1843 Sage joined up with Charles Warfield's Texans who, under the pretense of conquering land claimed by the Republic of Texas, raided the small village of Mora, New Mexico, inflicting several casualties and stealing a quantity of livestock and food.

Lancaster Lupton and the Lock and Randolph outfit had gone under for a variety of reasons, not least of which was that the Panic of 1837 had ushered in a severe depression by 1840 that ruined many banks and businesses, creating many financial woes. Inept, under-funded, and inexperienced traders faced many challenges in their

¹¹⁹ Sage, *Rocky Mountain Life*, p. 211.

¹²⁰ Sage, *Rocky Mountain Life*, p. 208. Fort Vasquez was reconstructed in the 1930s and is operated as an historic site by the Colorado Historical Society.

effort to secure a portion of the robe trade, especially when they confronted Chouteau's well financed veterans.

Lancaster P. Lupton had not found success on the North Platte. One contemporary saw Lupton as "a pleasant, well informed little man but a victim of intemperance," which may help explain his descent into bankruptcy. It is also possible that Lupton built his post on the North Platte as a gesture of goodwill for his new in-laws, for he had married a Cheyenne woman in about 1836, and her band generally dwelled in the Platte-Laramie region. The Luptons had two sons (John, 1837; and George, 1841 or 1842) born at Fort Platte.¹²¹

After six years of effort, however, Lupton's Fort Platte had failed to yield large profits. Lupton sold Fort Platte sometime between February and April 1842 to the trading firm of Sibille, Adams & Company.¹²² By August 1843 some connection, the exact nature of which is unknown, definitely linked Sibille and Adams with the St. Louis-based outfit of Pratte & Cabanné. At Fort Pierre on September 7, Indian Agent Andrew Drips wrote a letter to his superior, D. D. Mitchell, in which he noted: "The company of Pratt & Cabenna have succeeded in taking to their fort on the Platte about 300 gallons of alcohol."¹²³ (The matter of the liquor trade will be discussed below, but here the point is that by 1843 Pratte & Cabanné had some interest in Fort Platte.) Thereafter, until about 1846, Pratte & Cabanné provided backing for the smaller outfit, Sibille and Adams. By

¹²¹ Lupton, "Fort Platte, Wyoming, 1841-1845: Rival of Fort Laramie," pp. 86-7.

¹²² Lecompte, Pueblo, Hardscrabble, and Greenhorn, p. 133, indicated that "Fort Platte was sold to Pratte and Cabanné," but they were the next purchasers. Lupton, "Fort Platte, Wyoming, 1841-1845: Rival of Fort Laramie," says "Between February 12 and April 26, 1842, Fort Platte changed hands and the new owners were Sybille, Adams & Company." Lupton also notes that when Rufus Sage returned to Fort Platte in late April 1842 he "found the fort and its fixtures claimed by Sybille and Adams" (pp. 86-7).

¹²³ Letter from Drips, excerpted in "Fort Tecumseh and Fort Pierre Journals," South Dakota Historical Collections vol. 9 (Pierre: Hipple Printing Company, 1918), p. 188; also quoted in Lupton, "Fort Platte, Wyoming, 1841-1845: Rival of Fort Laramie," p. 95.

March 1845, Pratte & Cabanné would entirely take over the operation of Fort Platte.¹²⁴

Within two more years, however, John Sibille would again work for Pierre Chouteau, Jr., & Company.¹²⁵ In fact, he would eventually work alongside Andrew Drips, his former nemesis. In June 1849, after Drips brought several wagonloads of robes and furs from Fort John to Fort Pierre, John Sibille was placed in charge of six Mackinac boats that carried them to the company headquarters at St. Louis.¹²⁶

Also, by December 1845 Chouteau's company bought out Pratte & Cabanné's establishment called Fort Bernard, presumably the same post called Fort Platte. Honoré Picotte wrote that "we have bought out Messrs. Pratte & Cabanné's interest at Fort Bernard on the Platte; we therefore have all the Country to our selves, excepting Mr. Kencelleur who is opposing us at this place [i.e., Fort Pierre] with a small outfit. We paid Messrs. Pratte & Cabanné 25% advance on St. Louis cost for goods deliv[ere]d in the Country, and they were very glad to accept this proposition as they are tired of the business."¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Lecompte, Pueblo, Hardscrabble, Greenhorn, pp. 132-33; see also Hanson, ed., David Adams Journals, pp. 48-50, 98; and Lupton, "Fort Platte, Wyoming, 1841-1845: Rival of Fort Laramie," p. 86.

¹²⁵ "Sibille can be sent where you think he will be most useful." Source: Honoré Picotte[?], Fort Pierre, to Louison Frenier[?], Dec. 4, 1847. Sibille is also mentioned on Dec. 18, 1847, and Jan. 4, 1848; all in Fort Pierre Letterbook (June 17, 1832 to May 9, 1848), Chouteau Collection, MoHS.

¹²⁶ [Unknown], Fort Pierre, June 24, 1849, to Pierre Chouteau Jr. & Co., "Fort Pierre Letterbook," Chouteau Collection, MoHS.

¹²⁷ Honoré Picotte, Fort Pierre, December 18, 1845, to James Kipp, Fort Union, "Fort Pierre Letterbook," Chouteau Collection, MoHS.

10. Sibille & Adams:

Another North Platte trading outfit was that of Sibille and Adams. Free-lancers with years of experience in the trade, Jean Sibille and David Adams received a license in July 1841, and were bankrolled by John Adams (David's brother) and Bernard Pratte, Jr., one of Chouteau's former partners.¹²⁸ The outfit left Missouri in the summer or early fall, and arrived at its destination by mid-November. Sibille and Adams "had been licensed to trade . . . in the vicinity of Laramie as early as 1841, and by Jan. 1842 had started a post they called Fort Adams, apparently upstream from Fort John. They then purchased a new establishment of Lancaster P. Lupton's, called Fort Platte. Thereafter, one hears no more of Fort Adams, and the new owners had finished construction of Fort Platte by Oct. 1842." Employees of the outfit included Jean (John) Baptiste Richard, Joseph[?] Bissonette, Antoine Lucier, and "Chartrain," a clerk.¹²⁹ The new post carried several names. Sometimes it was informally called Bissonette's Fort, sometimes Richard's fort, after one or another of its owners/operators, and sometimes it was called Fort Platte.¹³⁰

Sibille and Adams's new post was the one built by Lancaster P. Lupton late in 1840 or early in 1841 "on the south bank of the North Platte, about a mile and a half north of Fort William and three-fourths of a mile west of the mouth of the Laramie River."¹³¹ Possibly, the new company rebuilt Lupton's post, as indicated by comments made by Lt. Frémont.¹³² Lupton's post is said to have been the first one built of adobe on the North Platte. Possibly also, its architecture inspired the owners of old "Fort William"

¹²⁸ Lupton, "Fort Platte, Wyoming, 1841-1845: Rival of Fort Laramie," p. 86.

¹²⁹ See Spence and Jackson, eds., *The Expeditions of John Charles Frémont*, vol. 1, pp. 146-47 and note. Frémont apparently called Fort Adams by the name of "Fort Bissonette, Laramie Fork" (p. 146).

¹³⁰ Lupton, "Fort Platte, Wyoming, 1841-1845: Rival of Fort Laramie," p. 92, quoting Frémont's associate, Theodore Talbot, in 1843, and p. 94.

¹³¹ Lupton, "Fort Platte, Wyoming, 1841-1845: Rival of Fort Laramie," p. 84.

¹³² Lupton, "Fort Platte, Wyoming, 1841-1845: Rival of Fort Laramie," p. 88.

to rebuild their post in adobe as well. By the summer of 1841, the "Company" was erecting a new adobe post, which would be named Fort John, said to be in honor of its builder, John B. Sarpy of Pierre Chouteau, Jr., & Company.

Competition produced hostility on several occasions, but only seldom did outright violence occur. Late in October 1842 an altercation at Fort Platte between the two companies turned into a murderous set-to. According to partner David Adams, John Richard was at Fort Platte putting together an equipment to be sent to a small village nearby, when James Bordeau showed up from Fort John. Adams' diary notes that Richard "supposed that Burdow had come on a visit as a friend as he had ordnily dun," but Bordeau "cocked his gun and stepped up behind his back and said you dam rascil I intend to kill you and said to the indians that now was a good time to kill these dam dogs." Richard asked Bordeau what he was about, and Bordeau "told him that he intended to rub him and his dam dogs out." Richard told Bordeau that if he had come like a "getl man" to talk over some grievance instead of as a "couard," he would have listened and given satisfaction. Meanwhile, Richard backed up and reached for his gun. Suddenly an "AFCo" man named Kellog "sprung in with 2 or 3 indians and clinched Reshaw and they had a severe scufel." When one of Adams's men, Leclerc or Leclair, tried to break up the fight, he was "shot down by one of them then they all broke and left the fort and run out of reach." Richard fired two or three ineffective shots at the departing ruffians. Richard's man Leclair was apparently dead, and some of the Sioux began to talk about attacking Fort John, but were dissuaded from taking any action. Richard told them that "when their

was eny fus between a parsol of whit men or one cild [they] generly let the big [white] chieaf now of it below." No other records of Leclair's death have so far appeared.¹³³

¹³³ Hanson, ed., The David Adams Journals, p. 44 [date of October 27, 1842].

11. Matt Field at Fort John, 1843:

In 1843 William Drummond Stewart—upon the death of his elder brother he became “Sir William”—financed a lavish trip, the last he would make to his beloved west. Among his entourage was a New Orleans journalist-actor-poet named Matt Field. Like many well-heeled western travellers at that time, Matt Field was a tubercular for whom the trip represented a snatching at the elusive straws of health. (The “cure” did not “take,” and Field died in November 1844, about one year after his return.)¹³⁴ Field referred to Fort Platte as “Richard’s fort” when he arrived on July 5, 1843. The post was so named because three Richard brothers—Jean, Noel, and Pierre—were in charge of its construction. The Richard brothers had engaged in the trade sometime around 1830. On the next day Matt referred to “Richards” post as “the yet unfinished fort of Messrs. Adams and Sibille—100 by 100 feet in extent, strong, but not so complete in any appointment as La Ramee,” and he implied that it was home to “75 mouths in all including squaws and children.”¹³⁵

Also on July 5, Matt described “Fort Laramie” as “a large square structure of mud, strongly knitted with good timber—painted palisades around the parapets—towers—large cavayard—comfortable dwellings—like old low Spanish structures in New Orleans—Dimensions 150 by 125 feet—about 7 years old.” He also noted three grave markers at the post: “‘Maurin, le 24 juin 1837’—killed by the accidental discharge of a gun in a cart—‘David Crow’ killed by the bursting of a cannon—‘Milton Sublette’ rude pine cross, prostrate and broken . . . the graveyard a few hundred yards from the fort.”

¹³⁴ See Kate L. Gregg and John Francis McDermott, eds., Prairie and Mountain Sketches, by Matthew C. Field (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957), p. xlvi [hereafter cited as Field, Prairie and Mountain Sketches].

¹³⁵ Field, Prairie and Mountain Sketches, pp. 79-80.

Milton's brother Solomon, who accompanied Stewart's party and was guiding a party of Jesuits to Oregon, fashioned a new marker for the grave. Oddly, William Sublette was also along on this jaunt, and it would be the last time he came west.¹³⁶

Field noted within the compound a "blacksmith shop, carpenter-shop, fine cattle and horses—squaws and children. 15 men—25 souls in all." He also observed that a portion of the exterior wall was "broken" enough that a Crow warrior attempted to climb into the fort via a long pole leaned against the wall, but when the man reached the top, "Mr. Boudeaux . . . coolly caught the Indian by the neck . . . and with herculean energy hurled him back to the ground!" Over one hundred Crow had just come to trade, but the occupants had "closed and barred" the gates against them. At the time, Pierre D. Papin—the official *bourgeois*—was absent, his place being filled by James Bordeaux. Papin had moved from Fort Pierre to Fort John in 1839, where he served as *bourgeois* until at least 1842. Francis Parkman, as indicated below however, noted that Papin was still the "legitimate" *bourgeois* at Fort John in 1846.¹³⁷

¹³⁶ Field, *Prairie and Mountain Sketches*, pp. xxx, 74-5.

¹³⁷ Field, *Prairie and Mountain Sketches*, pp. 75, 77-8; also William A. Goff, "Pierre Didier Papin," in Hafen, ed., *Mountain Men*, 9: 312.

12. Francis Parkman at Fort John/Fort Laramie, 1846:

Francis Parkman's western classic, The Oregon Trail, offers good information on the North Platte posts in 1846. He noted upon arrival at the post an "impending blockhouse" that stood over the main entrance.¹³⁸ A flight of stairs opposite the entrance provided access to the upper deck, where the best apartment in the fort (usually occupied by the bourgeois, Papin¹³⁹) was given over to Parkman and his guide, Henry Chatillion. Furnished with a "rough bedstead, but no bed; two chairs, a chest of drawers, a tin pail to hold water, and a board to cut tobacco upon." He also noted "a brass crucifix hung on the wall, and close at hand a recent scalp, with hair full a yard long . . . suspended from a nail. The two were offered buffalo robes for their bedding."¹⁴⁰

Within the fort Parkman noted "the square area surrounded by little rooms, or rather cells . . . devoted to various purposes . . . chiefly for the accommodation of the men employed at the fort, or of the equally numerous squaws whom they were allowed to maintain in it." The blockhouse wall facing the post's interior was "adorned with the figure of a horse at full speed, daubed upon the boards with red paint, and exhibiting a degree of skill which might rival that displayed by the Indians in executing similar designs upon their robes and lodges." Parkman tells us the fort's walls stood "about fifteen feet high," that the main entrance had "two gates, with an arched passage

¹³⁸ Francis Parkman, The Oregon Trail (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1946), p. 83 [hereafter cited as Parkman, The Oregon Trail].

¹³⁹ P. D. Papin was then en route to St. Louis via Fort Leavenworth. Accompanied by thirty-six men, Papin conveyed 1100 packs of buffalo robes, three packs of beaver skins and a few other packs of mixed hides. In May 1847, Papin and a party of men from Fort Laramie arrived near Westport, MO, with three wagons carrying about 1100 more packs of "buffalo robes, &c." In April 1849, Moses "Black" Harris arrived at St. Joseph, MO, from Fort John to report that during a "very successful" trapping season the post's traders had "procured a large number of robes, skins, etc." In June 1849, "Mr. Brulet [Rouville Brunet?], a French trader" from Fort Laramie, arrived with "a large train of wagons, laden with packs of buffalo-robes, bound for St. Louis." See Berry, Beginning of the West, pp. 622, 684, 825, 872. (Louis Berry's book offers some rare examples of robe production figures from Fort Laramie.)

¹⁴⁰ Parkman, The Oregon Trail, pp. 84-5.

intervening,” and a “little square window, high above the ground,” that opened “laterally from an adjoining chamber into this passage.” This architectural feature is precisely the same as would have been found at Fort Union and other “Company” posts on the Upper Missouri. It represented a security measure, designed to facilitate trade from the enclosed space delineated by the two main gates. Trade could be safely conducted through the small window with a few Indians at a time inside the entryway passage, though Parkman noted that such practice was “seldom resorted to at Fort Laramie.”¹⁴¹

Parkman described the interior of the post as being partitioned into two areas. The larger one was “surrounded by the storerooms, offices, and apartments of the inmates.” A smaller narrow space, “encompassed by . . . high clay walls,” formed a secure corral capable of holding at least sixty head of livestock. A separate exterior gate provided access to the corral. This must have resembled a similar arrangement featured at Bent’s Old Fort on the Arkansas River, several hundred miles to the south. Parkman also mentioned that the adobe-walled “meat room” stood adjacent to a warehouse for furs.¹⁴²

Also noteworthy is that Parkman encountered James Reed, former leader of the ill-fated Donner Party then en route to California, who had been exiled because he murdered a man during an argument. Parkman refers to “Colonel R___” as “a tall, lank man, with a dingy broadcloth coat” who was drunk at a gathering at Richards’ trade house. Reed said he had been “deposed” by his “mutinous” fellow travellers. This gathering, as described by Parkman, presents a good sample of North Platte society at a time when whiskey flowed in large quantities, available from both traders and passing emigrants who realized they were too heavily stocked: “maudlin squaws stretched out on

¹⁴¹ Parkman, The Oregon Trail, pp. 85-6.

piles of buffalo robes; squalid Mexicans, armed with bows and arrows; Indians sedately drunk; long-haired Canadians and trappers, and American backwoodsmen in brown homespun.”¹⁴³

Parkman noted that “Richard” kept an uncompleted log trade house “belonging to two private traders” seven or eight miles down the Platte from Fort Laramie. This was John Richard, who traded for Sibille and Adams as well as for himself later on.¹⁴⁴ In 1846 John Richard kept “a crude little wooden post on the North Platte eight miles below Fort Laramie” called Fort Bernard.¹⁴⁵ Parkman also noted that a “Navaho slave” at Richard’s place had been “taken prisoner on the Mexican frontier.”¹⁴⁶ John Richard began working for Sibille and Adams in 1842, and soon became a valued employee, helping to move their robes to market at St. Louis. John Richard also made trips to New Mexican settlements such as Taos, or El Pueblo on the American side of the Arkansas River, to purchase whiskey and other commodities for the trade.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴² Parkman, *The Oregon Trail*, pp. 86, 88-9. For a list of employees that Parkman saw at Fort Laramie in 1846, see section 15, “Society at Fort Laramie,” ahead.

¹⁴³ Parkman, *The Oregon Trail*, p. 108.

¹⁴⁴ Parkman, *The Oregon Trail*, pp. 80-1; also Hansen, ed., *David Adams Journals*, *passim*.

¹⁴⁵ Lecompte, *Pueblo, Hardscrabble, Greenhorn*, p. 166.

¹⁴⁶ Parkman, *The Oregon Trail*, p. 81.

¹⁴⁷ For a brief biography see John D. McDermott, “John Baptiste Richard,” in Hafen, ed., *Mountain Men*, 2: 289-303.

13. The Liquor Trade, 1842-47:

Liquor was a much sought-after trade item. It was used extensively throughout the fur trade country at all times, and it played a prominent role in Fort Laramie's early history. Liquor was almost always stocked at the post, but during the middle 1840s, as we shall see, Fort Laramie's liquor trade attracted a great deal of attention. In fact, the post became a principal target of a federal prohibition campaign intended to eradicate the illegal whiskey trade. The process and results of that campaign illuminate some important aspects of the troubled relationship between fur traders and the government.

By the early nineteenth century whiskey, brandy, and other forms of alcohol had been standard trade items for roughly two centuries. As of 1802 the Congress had provided that the President might curtail or restrict its use. In later years the so-called "trade and intercourse laws" placed more restrictions on liquor importation and use, and finally (as mentioned earlier) in 1832 it became illegal to import liquor in any form "*under any pretence*, into the Indian country."¹⁴⁸ This law, and others like it, may have seemed clear, and enforceable. Stiff fines and other penalties—including forfeiture of bonds, revocation of licenses, and civil or criminal court proceedings—looked good on paper, but were practically un-enforceable in the far west, where most violations took place.

Soldiers, sutlers, and overland migrants kept plenty of liquor on hand, but they were exempt from the federal prohibition laws. Likewise, states adjoining "Indian country" were not obliged to cooperate with the federal guidelines, which were only in force at places under federal jurisdiction. Border states, therefore, became important distribution points for liquor that was carried into the west. It should also be recalled that at this time the United States Army was

burdened with alcoholics at all ranks, yet the army implemented no effective measures to correct its own drinking problems before nearly the close of the nineteenth century.

Critics of the fur companies often complained about illegal whiskey flooding the "Indian Country," or denounced illicit manipulations of the larger fur outfits like Pierre Chouteau, Jr., & Company. (Probably the most notorious incident was the liquor distillery set up at Fort Union by Pratte, Chouteau & Company's UMO boss, Kenneth McKenzie, in 1833-34.) Such criticism helped to fuel charges of "monopoly" that were leveled at the big company periodically over the years. Ironically, John J. Astor and his son William, as well as Ramsay Crooks and other high-ranking officials in the "AFCo" worked for some years to persuade their main rival, the Hudson's Bay Company, to agree mutually and voluntarily to cease the liquor trade, at least in some regions. Canadian outfits, especially the North West and Hudson's Bay companies, had grappled with the same issue for years, with little success.

One of the problems in a voluntary cessation, as HBC Governor Sir George Simpson once observed to William B. Astor, was that if the big companies stopped trading liquor, then smaller and less visible outfits would rush in and "milk the cow" while Astor held the head and Simpson the tail. When neither British nor American governments took any action, the traders abandoned their informal prohibition effort. On the other hand, while many prohibition laws appeared on the books, enforcement was ineffectual. The federal government lacked the means (and possibly the will) to police the vast region called "Indian Country." In the 1830s and 1840s, "Indian Country" comprised most of the land claimed by the United States that lay between the Mississippi River and the Pacific coast. Fort Laramie lay practically at its center.

One of Astor's lieutenants (and one of the original "Astorian") was Robert Stuart, who served the "Company" for many years. By 1843 Robert Stuart was the Indian Agent at Detroit,

¹⁴⁸ Prucha, *Documents of United States Indian Policy*, p. 62.

where the liquor trade was also a serious problem. Critics claimed that some treaties negotiated by Stuart favored his former employers. It was Stuart, however, who spearheaded the government's prohibition campaign there, with the complete support of Ramsay Crooks and other AFCo men. "Company" traders mostly agreed that liquor damaged trade prospects, that the liquor trade should be ended, and that the government needed to step up its enforcement program. Indian Commissioner T. Hartley Crawford ordered Stuart to enforce the law vigorously, and Crooks promised his full cooperation. One "Company" man, George Ehninger, asserted that his outfit would rather abandon its business in the Lake Superior district than use liquor. A number of high-ranking officials in the largest company, it seems, were serious about trying to curtail the illegal traffic.¹⁴⁹

Among the least scrupulous traders were those in for the short run, seeking the greatest gain. Most traders of this stripe were under-capitalized, some were inexperienced, but all knew that liquor offered a nearly irresistible trade item that few Indians would refuse. Indeed, in 1835 some Cheyenne at Bent's Fort apparently informed Colonel Henry Dodge that "in arranging the good things of this world in order of rank . . . whiskey should stand first, then tobacco, third, guns, fourth, horses, and fifth, women."¹⁵⁰

Even less willing to abjure alcohol were the traders and their *engagés*, a good many of whom would today be classified as hopeless alcoholics. Driven by greed and abetted by Americans' characteristic suspicion of governmental control over the sacrosanct—sometimes squalid—field of entrepreneurial capitalism ("free enterprise"), many traders ignored the possible consequences of the liquor trade. Whenever competition reached high intensity, liquor

¹⁴⁹ Grace Lee Nute, ed., Calendar of the American Fur Company's Papers Part II: 1841-1849 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1945), letters numbered 13,433, 13,756, 13,790, 13,890, 13,938, 14,044, 14,078, and 14,114, offer supporting evidence for these statements.

¹⁵⁰ Lecompte, Pueblo, Hardscrabble, Greenhorn, p. 88.

was liable to flow in large amounts. Two places where this occurred in the period from 1830 to 1845 were the Upper Missouri and the Platte River regions. Very few traders attempted to exercise moderation under such circumstances.

The illegal alcohol trade at Fort Laramie, and the Platte-Arkansas region generally, continued from about 1830 until well after 1850. When William Sublette and Robert Campbell first built Fort William on the Platte, they clearly intended to sell liquor there, just as they had done at the “other” Fort William at the Yellowstone. In February 1833, six months after the congressional prohibition, Sublette wrote to Campbell with a practical suggestion. Sublette stated: “I have been looking at the acts of Congress as it Respects Spirits—it says there shall be no spiritous liquors Introduced into the Indian Country under no pretensions . . . [but] wine can be taken in as I believe it does not Come under that act and I think we had better take some.”¹⁵¹ At both places they willingly violated federal law. But they were hardly alone.

In September 1841 David D. Mitchell—who formerly, and perhaps still, held a share in Pierre Chouteau, Jr., & Company and who had worked at Fort Union and other Upper Missouri posts—was appointed Superintendent of Indian Affairs at St. Louis. Mitchell replaced Joshua Pilcher, who was sidelined in a patronage squabble that followed the 1840 presidential election. Soon after taking his new position, Mitchell made an estimate of Indian deaths attributable to alcohol consumption. He believed that 120 Indians within his jurisdiction had died in drunken brawls or from accidents that year. In 1842 he boosted his estimate to 500.¹⁵² In the same year, Mitchell decided to, or was told to, initiate a campaign to stamp out the whiskey trade.

While not the first effort to stifle the whiskey trade, it was an important episode, and it is instructive to examine how it worked. In July 1842 Mitchell wrote to an agent at Fort

¹⁵¹ Sublette to Campbell, February 3, 1833, in William Drummond Stewart Collection, MoHS.

¹⁵² Lecompte, Pueblo, Hardscrabble, Greenhorn, p. 90. See note 186 below.

Leavenworth (R. W. Cummins) that "the Government is now determined to use every possible exertion to Suppress this illegal, pernicious traffic . . ." By early October a man was appointed to the position of agent for the resuscitated Upper Missouri Agency, which had been without an agent since 1837 when Pilcher was moved to the St. Louis Superintendency position. The main job of the Upper Missouri agent would be to implement the liquor eradication program. The new appointee was Andrew Drips, a veteran fur trader who had worked for several outfits over many years, though lately his employer had been the "AFCo" of Pierre Chouteau, Jr., & Company. Drips soon set out for Fort Pierre to begin his work.¹⁵³

In August 1842 some dragoons from Fort Leavenworth seized and destroyed eleven barrels of illegal alcohol belonging to John Sibille, who was en route to his post on the Platte. The dragoons also held Sibille in confinement for a spell. On September 10, John Sarpy wrote to Pierre Chouteau (his "cher cousin") to inform him of Sibille's situation. In a letter of September 2, Pierre D. Papin (at Independence) had told Sarpy that "Sybille and Adams are there and are waiting for their wagons (2) to be returned to them in order to continue on their way. They had 11 large barrels of alcohol and several barrels of tobacco. I would very much like to see the arrival of Drips' commission. It is too bad for us that this appointment is so late."¹⁵⁴ But Sibille soon made his way across Kansas, still apparently in possession of several barrels filled with raw alcohol. Strangely, despite the strains of competition, he traveled in company with P. D. Papin, bound for Fort John, reaching his own post in late October.¹⁵⁵

Fort Pierre had become the main distribution point for goods bound for the Platte region after Chouteau's company purchased old Fort William, by now rebuilt and renamed Fort John.

¹⁵³ Barry, *Beginning of the West*, p. 460.

¹⁵⁴ J. B. Sarpy to Pierre Chouteau, Jr., September 10, 1842; Chouteau Collection, MoHS [translation from French provided by the writer].

¹⁵⁵ Barry, *Beginning of the West*, p. 457.

From his vantage point at Fort Pierre, Drips would be likely to draw information from a broad area spanning from the Yellowstone south to the outlaw settlements of retired fur traders near New Mexico. And so he did, for there was plenty of liquor traffic that year, much of it in the Fort John region. Like his boss Mitchell, Drips was in the difficult position of possibly having to choose between two masters—humanitarian selflessness and economic selfishness. Little wonder that numerous critics voiced outrage at what seemed to be a blatant conflict of interest.

Mitchell's instructions to Drips exposed some fatal weaknesses in the proposed program. He informed Drips that "no troops were furnished to enforce (if necessary) a strict observance of the intercourse law, but this only makes it the more necessary for prompt and energetic action on your part." Mitchell directed Drips to proceed to Fort Pierre, "the principal depot for all goods intended for trade in the Sioux country," where he would likely find some "free whites, and well disposed Indians" from whom he might collect information. He then should "push across the country to Laramie's fork of the river Platte, taking the small trading houses that are generally established along the Black Hills, in your way." Mitchell expected Drips to encounter men carrying "quantities of liquor brought in from Santa Fe;" if so, they ought to be dealt with in a "very summary and severe manner." If force were required, Mitchell "doubt[ed] not but that it will be cheerfully furnished by the American traders." Of course, these "foreign" traders were mostly Americans too; some lived outside the jurisdiction of United States law, but others' habitations were within the United States' boundaries. Mitchell wanted Drips to avoid quartering himself at trading posts, to remain in the field during the winter, and to visit Fort Union in the following spring, just at the time when liquor would be likely to arrive for the next season's trade. All of which was, in Mitchell's view, by way of an "experiment." If it showed promise, then Mitchell might be willing to channel funds for a small agency building at Fort Pierre. For

the meantime, however, Drips was on his own, and had really no choice but to stay with his former companions, the fur traders, even as he attempted to undermine a key element of their trade.¹⁵⁶

Writing from Fort Pierre in January 1843, Drips informed Mitchell that he had found no liquor, but he had “no doubts but there is plenty in this section . . . I believe so soon as I sett out for the upper Missouri It will again make its appearance.” He noted that liquor abuse among the Sioux near Fort Pierre had resulted in the deaths of “some hundred of their best people,” and had led to a fragmentation of Lakota society. Instead of living in large aggregations of several hundred they now were dispersed in small bands for greater security. Drips suggested that if the Sioux could be kept free of liquor for “two or three years” then they would “live in harmony with each other as they have been in the habit of doing heretofore.” With regard to liquor traffic on the Platte, Drips noted that “It appears all goes on smoothly with the Traders—no alcohol in circulation.” Perhaps true, but not too likely. Agent Drips also complained that his work was impeded by the fact that he received almost no funding to purchase gifts for Indians or anything else.¹⁵⁷

By the following February (1843) Mitchell had mixed feelings about his project. Drips had traveled some in the Sioux country, giving them what Mitchell deemed “a few lectures on temperance,” but “little or no good has as yet resulted from what may be regarded as an experiment.” Again Mitchell suggested to his boss that some thirty dragoons should accompany Drips. As he noted, it was not likely that any Sioux would risk further discord in their already-stressed situation by trying to harass tribal members into submitting to the alcohol ban. Nor would they “take up arms against their brethren and their traders to carry out a measure—which

¹⁵⁶ Mitchell to Drips, October 6, 1842; in National Archives, Office of Indian Affairs, Letters Received, Microfilm Series 234, Roll 753 [hereafter cited as in: N.A., O.I.A., M234, R753].

they contend was promised, and guaranteed to them by their great father." But no dragoons ever accompanied Drips on his "errand into the wilderness."¹⁵⁸

At roughly the same time, the liquor trade made trouble on the Upper Missouri. An opposition firm, the Union Fur Company (run by Fulton Cutting, John A. N. Ebbetts, and Charles Kelsey) was offering stiff competition to the "AFCo" at Fort Union. The newcomers' principal tactic was to dispense whiskey freely in order to lure new customers to their shanty of a fort just a few miles from the larger post. Indeed, 1843 threatened to be a bad year all around. Texan freebooters were preparing to conquer New Mexico, and some of them would soon murder a wealthy and respected New Mexican trader, don Antonio Jose Chavez. As intense and corrosive competition also disrupted the North Platte area, Sir William Drummond Stewart made ready for his final western tour which, as indicated previously, Matt Field chronicled. Not surprisingly, Stewart's pack horses would carry considerable amounts of wine and other alcohol suitable for making juleps, punch, and the like. This, then, was the year that the Office of Indian Affairs decided to take action on the liquor problem.

In Drips's correspondence with Mitchell there appears a letter from Charles Bent, or one of his clerks, addressed to Superintendent Mitchell and dated January 1, 1842. In it, Bent complained about "several renegade Americans who have built houses on the Arkansas river, at the junction of the Fontaine qui Bouille . . . within the United States." The traders had "fixed themselves there, without license from any authority . . . [and] procure whiskey in the Mexican country, which they keep on hand continually, for the purpose of trading with the Indian in this country." The places in question—the settlements at Pueblo, Hardscrabble, and Greenhorn—were mere "harbor[s] for all Mexican traders, who are continually coming out with whiskey and

¹⁵⁷ Drips to Mitchell, January 2, 1843; in N.A., O.I.A., M234, R753.

¹⁵⁸ Mitchell to T. H. Crawford, February 27, 1843; in N.A., O.I.A., M234, R753.

other articles." Bent noted that the sale of whiskey to Indians caused "a great deal of difficulty between the whites and Indians." Then he added, "the principal men of the Indians, are anxious to stop the trade in that article; but they say, that when it is among them, the young men will have it, and it frequently causes difficulties among themselves." In Bent's opinion, only a military fort at the Arkansas could put an end to the business, and make the area safe. He knew that such a post would lie athwart the trail that led from the New Mexican settlements to the North and South Platte rivers, the same trail over which the traders brought illegal liquor to Fort John/Fort Laramie.¹⁵⁹

While Bent made some good points, and appeared solicitous of Indians' welfare, it must be noted that his company dealt plenty of liquor to Indians. In 1838, when Bent, St. Vrain & Company bought out Sarpy & Fraeb's Fort Jackson, the inventory included two small kegs of "Alcohol," but that was nothing compared to their own stock for the trade. Between 1838 and 1840, Bent's outfit purchased (almost always through Pierre Chouteau, Jr., & Company) at least thirty-two barrels of "alcohol" (twenty-eight barrels in a single line-item contained 1120½ gallons), sixty gallons of "shrub," thirty gallons of "rum," two barrels of "rum," ten gallons of "gin," twelve cases of "claret wine," and thirty-one gallons of "best brandy." Not all of this was sold to Indians, of course, but far more than these amounts must have passed through Bent's Fort over the years.¹⁶⁰ On the other hand, during Drips' prohibition campaign in 1843, the missionary Marcus Whitman passed by Bent's Fort, and applauded the prohibition effort there. Whitman

¹⁵⁹ Bent, St. Vrain & Company, Fort William, to D. D. Mitchell, January 1, 1842; in N.A., O.I.A., M234, R753. A nearly identical letter from Charles Bent to Mitchell is dated May 4, 1843, in the same series.

¹⁶⁰ See entries in Ledger Z (pp. 426-33), and Ledger DD (pp. 76-89), covering May 1838 to July 1840, in Chouteau Collection, MoHS. [note: see also the microfilm edition of Fur Trade Papers roll 10, book FF.] Considering the fact that very few of Bent, St. Vrain & Company's business records have survived, the quantities indicated become truly astonishing.

had "opportunities of seeing much of the operation & c of Bent's people & speaks highly in favor of the good effects produced by their not having any liquor in the country."¹⁶¹

A good deal of the whiskey coming from "Mexican country" was distilled by expatriate Americans, and they probably used equipment imported from the United States. Between 1838 and 1840 Bent, St. Vrain & Company ordered *six* large copper stills of varying capacities. There is no evidence that a distillery ever operated at Bent's Fort. Perhaps the stills were sold to men in New Mexico, where much liquor was made. Simeon Turley of Arroyo Hondo, New Mexico, bought a new still in 1843, making him rather an unlikely purchaser of Bent's equipment.¹⁶² The liquor problems surely did not entirely originate with Simeon Turley, William Workman and John Rowland, famed whiskey-men of Taos, though they must have been among the principal providers of the stuff to traders from the Arkansas settlements. "Taos Lightning," was by no means the only whiskey that flowed into the fur country.¹⁶³

Practically every Indian trader in the west was determined, or at least prepared, to sell liquor. Each outfit that was willing to cease selling liquor risked ruin while others profited. With few inclined to take such a gamble, the potential for a successful prohibition plan was highly questionable. Since it was quite impossible for agent Andrew Drips to stifle the trade single-handedly, he was allowed to hire a sub-agent. Joseph V. Hamilton was appointed to the position. Hamilton had worked as a sutler at Fort Leavenworth from 1835 to 1839. In June 1839 he was appointed Indian agent at Council Bluffs (a substitute for the dormant Upper Missouri Agency), succeeding John Dougherty. In 1843 Hamilton began his work with Drips, which he continued to

¹⁶¹ Benjamin Clapp, St. Louis, March 7, 1843, to Pierre Chouteau, Jr., New York; Chouteau Collection, MoHS.

¹⁶² See Janet Lecompte, "Simeon Turley," in Hafen, ed., *Mountain Men*, 7: 307-08. Bent, St. Vrain & Co.'s stills appear in orders made through Pierre Chouteau, Jr., & Company, 1838-40. See Fur Trade Papers microfilm roll 10, book FF, pp. 78, 86; and Ledger Z, p. 433; MoHS.

¹⁶³ See Janet Lecompte, "Simeon Turley," in Hafen, ed., *Mountain Men*, 7: 301-14.

do until 1846, when he was dismissed as an agent. By 1848 he, like Drips, would take a job with Chouteau's company in the Upper Missouri.¹⁶⁴

In March 1843 a trader named William D. Hodgkiss sent a letter from "Platte River" to Andrew Drips, who was then on the Missouri, probably at or near Fort Pierre. "We have anticipated a visit from you," Hodgkiss wrote, "and the consequence has been that we have all become temperance men—the fact is the temperance society would have gained many members this winter, merely at the name of 'Drips'." Hodgkiss, an opposition outfit employee at Fort Platte, wrote that although competition with the "Am F Co" was stiff, he expected his outfit would do all right because they had held back some of their goods until the Fort John traders were low on supplies. He informed Drips that "Bent & St. Vrain have done nothing, but look to the Camanche trade to bring them out, which if report is true, will do so." He also warned Drips that Charles Warfield had been joined by "many of the Old Mountain Men," and that "their intention is to waylay the Mexican party on their way to the States this Spring" to steal their gold and silver and "render a vast service to the Texian cause." Hodgkiss also mentioned that "Mr. Papin [*bourgeois* at Fort John] received an express from Bridger & Vasquez in the Winter, they had not done much, the petty traders equipped by the HBCoy was a strong opposition to them."¹⁶⁵

In the late summer of 1843 Hamilton took a Chouteau Company employee named Joseph Jouette, who was Drips's interpreter, and a few other men to the Platte River to quash the whiskey trade. Arriving on September 15, they discovered no alcohol at either Fort John or Fort Platte. Sir William Drummond Stewart's luxury tour party had visited the posts five days earlier, and apparently because some of the tourists with the group were soldiers, the whiskey traders

¹⁶⁴ See Barry, *Beginning of the West*, pp. 285, 373, 766.

¹⁶⁵ W. D. Hodgkiss to Drips, March 25, 1843; Drips Papers, MoHS.

“became alarmed and moved their caches away from the Fort.” Hamilton found the empty *caches* at Fort Platte from which the liquor had been recently removed, but was unable to locate any new hiding places. Hamilton must have encountered some ridicule as he searched and asked questions, for he wrote: “They do not deny having liquor but defy me to find it.” Hamilton felt that he had good enough evidence to confiscate everything at Pratte & Cabanné’s post, but he stopped short because “the appointment given me by Mr. Mitchell only authorizes me to destroy Liquor and assist [Drips] in [his] duties.” Still, Hamilton thought it would be possible to frighten Cabanné into cooperation, if Drips was willing to threaten him with the confiscation of his keelboat on the Missouri. William Hodgkiss told Hamilton that “those persons now in charge [of the post] have nothing to loose and do not care for responsibility,” but Cabanné probably would, since he had a lot of money invested in the operation. Hodgkiss was even willing to help Hamilton out. He knew where Cabanné’s liquor was hidden, and told Hamilton that “if Mr. C. will not give it up [Hodgkiss] will put me on the track, provided I will get him a place to stay this Winter and the funds to get to Cincinnati in the Spring. He is disgusted with such Dogs.” Even though “10 lodges of Brewlays” were then at Fort Platte, eager to trade horses for alcohol, John Richard was “afraid to bring it out.” The mere presence of an agent seems to have been an inducement for Richard to obey the law, at least temporarily. Hamilton was prepared to have “a lodge put up close to their Fort and keep a check on them,” and he advised Drips to “keep a look out on the Chian [river] when their goods arrive there.” When Drips heard about Cabanné’s activities, he requested that Superintendent Mitchell initiate an action to revoke Cabanné’s trade license, or at least to collect the \$300 fine that the trade and intercourse laws assessed for illegal importation of liquor.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ Hamilton, Fort John, to Drips, Fort Pierre, September 17, 1843; and Drips, Fort Pierre, to Mitchell, St. Louis, October 15, 1843; both in Drips Papers, MoHS.

Not long after Hamilton arrived at Fort John, there came Alexander Culbertson, one of Chouteau's most reliable men, to take over the operation of the post. Soon after Culbertson showed up around October 12, he encountered Hamilton. The "opposition" had lots of whiskey, and had already traded liquor to Indians for about 100 horses, but "since the search of Maj. Hamilton who has done everything in his power to detect it none has been used." Culbertson thought that Hamilton's search would keep Pratte & Cabanné fearful of using any more liquor "this Winter, but no doubt as soon as he is gone it will be disposed of for Horses." William Laidlaw, at Fort Union, had informed Culbertson that "we were to be confined to but one Trading establishment and not allowed by any means to Trade a Robe elsewhere." Cabanné's license, however, permitted trade at "about ten different places with the Platte Sioux." Perhaps at Culbertson's instance, Hamilton reviewed Pratte & Cabanné's license twice, but found no evidence of tampering. Despite the "unusual quantity of opposition" that artificially inflated robe prices on the North Platte, and the low prices paid that year at St. Louis for those same robes, Culbertson concluded that there was "every appearance of a good trade here this winter."¹⁶⁷

Three witnesses, Oliver Sarpy, J. Loughborough, and John Hill all signed letters indicating that they had seen liquor sold, or had bought it themselves, at Fort Platte. The resident manager of this Pratte & Cabanné post was a "Mr. Bissonnette." Other persons named as employees included John Richard, "William D. Hodgkiss the clerk of said Fort," "Mr. Sigler, Mr. John Smith & Mr. Parisien Traders," "Mr. Montgomery, a person furnishing supplies from Touse to said company," and "Mr. Dubrais, a person acting as steward [steward] for said company." Further testimony from these informants indicated that John Richard and several other men had acted suspiciously when they arrived on about August 15 with "15 pack horses and mules." Dismounting at Fort Platte, Richard left his loaded animals outside and furtively

¹⁶⁷ Culbertson to P. Chouteau, Jr., & Co., October 16, 1843; Chouteau Collection, MoHS.

examined the post to see if any government agents were about. Seeing none, he brought the pack train into the fort, locked the gates, and then proceeded to deposit some 300 gallons of liquor into the store-room. In addition, the witnesses observed men at Fort Platte selling or giving liquor to Brulé Sioux on several occasions. One witness named John Hill, a member of Sir William Drummond Stewart's entourage, admitted that he purchased eighty dollars worth of alcohol himself at Fort Platte. Oliver Sarpy requested Drips to "have such proceedings so instituted as that he [i.e., Sarpy] may receive such compensation as informer as the act of Congress promises . . ." According to federal trade laws, informants in liquor violation cases stood to gain one-half of all "goods, boats, packages and peltries" forfeited by a company that lost such a suit.¹⁶⁸

On the same day that Hill, Loughborough and Sarpy wrote their letters to Drips, he wrote to Mitchell from Fort Pierre. Drips noted on October 15, 1843 that he had "just received from Mr. Hamilton a report of his trip . . . with a letter from Mr. Hill."¹⁶⁹ Drips mentioned that the letters of Hill and Loughborough revealed information concerning Pratte & Cabanné's 300 gallons of liquor. Upon hearing the news, Drips wrote, "Maj. Hamilton sett out immediately with my interpreter for their fort, and has strong grounds for believing that they will succeed in taking it having received a pretty clear account of the manner in which it is concealed. They will arrive there on or about the 15th earlier I am confident than any information of my arrival can be carried." This suggests, among other things, that a trip from Fort Pierre on the Missouri to Fort Platte or Fort John could be accomplished in just about one week. Drips, meanwhile, planned to

¹⁶⁸ Drips to Mitchell, October 15, 1843; O. Sarpy and J. Loughborough to Drips, September 7, 1843; John Hill to Drips, September 17, 1843; all in N.A., O.I.A., M234, R753. The letter from Loughborough and Sarpy, with a few more details, is also in the Drips Papers, MoHS. See also Prucha, Documents of United States Indian Policy, Section 20 of "Trade and Intercourse Act, June 30, 1834," p. 67.

¹⁶⁹ Drips to Mitchell, October 15, 1843; in N. A., O.I.A., M234, R753.

“remain at this place untill the arrival of the Boats of Messrs. Cutting and Siabile [sic]. I will then leave for the different trading posts in this district.”¹⁷⁰

From Fort Pierre Drips wrote to Hamilton at Fort John on November 4, 1843. Drips was “well pleased to hear that you have so far succeeded to put a stop to the abominable Traffick of Alcohol amongst the Indians, but would have been much better satisfied If you could have put your hands on it when you first got there. I still fear that it will be leaking out before next spring.” Drips felt certain that Richard had “brought a good supply into this country” and that it had been “concealed on the Chyenne above the Forks.” Sibille had passed by a few days earlier, and Drips expected he would “Establish himself on the Missouri River below the mouth of Chyenne.” Drips had given the Chouteau company men his permission to establish trade houses “at all the points designated on the License of Messrs. Pratte & Cabenna.” He warned Hamilton to “keep the Traders confined to their posts as much as possible,” adding that “no trader had the right to leave the point or points designated on their Licens to trade in Indian Lodges.” In closing, Drips noted that “there is a company of dragoons stationed at Messrs. Bent & St. Vrains Fort on the Arkansas. I have no doubt for the purpose of stopping those whiskey pedlars from the Spanish country.”¹⁷¹

On December 4, 1843, Hamilton responded to Drips’s letter of the previous month. Apparently one of Adams’s employees named Laroque had carried the letter to Hamilton. (It seems strange that despite ferocious commercial competitiveness and obvious efforts to conceal their liquor-selling, these traders were willing to carry official correspondence from potentially dangerous “enemies” within the government.) Hamilton was glad to hear that Drips approved of his actions, and commented that he thought “the course I pursued had a very good effect with the

¹⁷⁰ Drips to Mitchell, September 7, 1843; Drips Papers, MoHS.

¹⁷¹ Drips to Hamilton, November 4, 1843; Drips Papers, MoHS.

gentlemen of their Fort for they saw from my movements that I was not to be trifled with." At the moment, all was quiet on the North Platte, but Hamilton had word that "the traders on the South Fork (Lupton & Wilson) are selling Liquor to the Indians and there are many peddlers from the Spanish Country trading at that point." He also mentioned that "Mr Metcalf came here some time since with the expectation of getting permission to trade with the Sioux, but I soon gave him his Walking papers, and he has returned to the south fork and sold out to Wilson and is selling liquor for him to the Chyenne Indians." In closing, Hamilton declared that if any illegal traders appeared from "the Spanish Country" he would "most assuredly take their waggons and goods from them and report the same to you immediately."¹⁷² Drips must have received Hamilton's letter quickly, for he wrote back on December 20: "I approve of your plan respecting the Tous [i.e., Taos] Traders—screw them if you can catch them and advise me of the fact as soon thereafter as possible."¹⁷³

Hamilton and Drips's critics argued that the two failed to exercise due diligence when they were supposed to search boats and wagons bound for Chouteau company posts, but this charge appears to be without real foundation. Both men spent a good deal of time in the field, and seemingly made genuine efforts to halt the whiskey trade. Besides, since Chouteau and Sanford had already promised to cooperate with the agents, it may be that less diligence was required in searching their posts (see below for a discussion of this matter). In March 1844 Hamilton wrote to Superintendent Mitchell to update him on the special agents' activities. Drips and Hamilton had visited Fort Pierre in July 1843, where Hamilton heard that "a large quantity of Spiritous Liquors (about 300 gallons) had arrived at this place in charge of a Mr. Reachard one of the partners of Messrs. Pratte & Cabana in the Indian trade, and the Indians are drinking

¹⁷² Hamilton, Fort John, to Drips, Fort Pierre, December 4, 1843; Drips Papers, MoHS.

¹⁷³ Drips, Fort Pierre, to Hamilton, December 20, 1843; Drips Papers, MoHS.

to an excess. Six Indians were killed in consequence of it." Drips had been unable to deal with this problem, since a steamboat carrying goods for Ebbetts and Cutting (the Union Fur Company) was expected imminently. Drips knew that this outfit had brought much liquor the year previous, and wanted to "make a strict examination" of this year's shipment. Hamilton, therefore, proceeded to the Platte, where he, too, made a "strict examination of Messrs. Pratte & Cabana's Fort but failed to find the liquor." It seems that the men at Fort Platte, having been apprised of Hamilton's impending arrival, had *cached* it just prior to his appearance.

Nevertheless, Hamilton was certain that Drips was "in possession of sufficient evidence to prove them guilty of violating the Laws of the Indian Department." Hamilton explained that he had acted out of a desire to "put down a Set of Swindlers, Whiskey Peddlars and men whose sole object is to get the Indians intoxicated and Cheat them out of their horses and robes, and I feel proud to inform you that I have succeeded beyond my expectations in putting a stop to the vending of liquor." He added, "I have driven out of the Country several old offenders who had made it their business for several years past to furnish Liquor to the traders here from Taous in the Spanish country, and in January last I ran out of the Country sixteen Spaniards who had eighteen mules loaded with Whiskey, corn & flour. There is now at this time about 80 Spaniards on the South fork of the Platte Four days travel from here who have a very large quantity of Liquor intended for the Sioux trade, but my being here has put a top to their further Progress. There has been about 700 lodges of Sioux wintering on the Platte, and I can confidently say that not one drop of Liquor has been drank by them since my arrival here in September last." Hamilton finished by noting that the Sioux had made about 1200 packs of buffalo robes this past year, rather than the average of 800 packs in previous years, an increase he attributed to the absence of whiskey.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁴ Hamilton to Mitchell, March 7, 1844; in N. A., O.I.A., M234, R884.

It seems that Hamilton's appointment of July 1843 had, for reasons unknown at present, been revoked shortly thereafter. The new Superintendent of Indian Affairs at St. Louis, T. H. Harvey, thought it should be re-instated, for so he wrote to his superior, T. Hartley Crawford, at Washington, D.C., in July 1844. By that time, Hamilton had already spent a year in the field, and apparently his commission was revived. Harvey approved of Hamilton's actions, and also thought "it is important that there should be an officer of the government on the Platte, to prevent collision between the immigrants & the Indians." By 1844 thousands of overlanders were moving across the "Great Platte River Road," and were liable to get in conflicts with the Sioux and other natives.¹⁷⁵

Agent Drips wrote to Harvey in July also, informing him that "not a drop of Liquor was sold this season by any of the Licensed Traders in this country [the Upper Missouri]." Drips strongly suspected that the Union Fur Company still had "a large quantity concealed near the mouth of the Yellowstone," and he suspected that "Messrs. Pratte & Cabanna have also a quantity concealed near their Fort on the north fork of the Platte River." Noting that it was impossible for one agent to cover the region lying between the Yellowstone and the Platte, Drips "respectfully recommend[ed] that an assistant be granted me to be stationed at the Platte . . ."¹⁷⁶ This statement poses a bit of a puzzle, given that Hamilton had already been at work on the prohibition program, as stated above.

By July 1844 Hamilton was back at St. Louis, where he wrote again to Superintendent Harvey, who had requested further details on the agent's findings. Hamilton had remained at Fort John from September 14, 1843, until May 14, 1844, when he departed for St. Louis. Repeating his charges against "Mr. Richard," he again noted that a drinking spree had led to the deaths of

¹⁷⁵ T.H. Harvey to T. Hartley Crawford, July 9, 1844; in N.A., O.I.A.; M234, R884.

¹⁷⁶ Drips to Harvey, July 6, 1844; in N.A., O.I.A., M234, R884.

seven Sioux, including two men "of high standing in the Sioux nation." Hamilton wrote that he encountered some difficulty persuading the Sioux to quit drinking to "such an extent," but that he ultimately succeeded, thanks in part to "strong support from them." The Sioux, he wrote, now "wished me to break and spill every Keg of Whiskey I could find; their Chiefs told me that no more liquor should come into their village." At the moment, the Sioux were living together in large villages, but Hamilton was told that if liquor again made its appearance, "there were many foolish young men who would drink it if they saw it and this would be the cause of their dividing their villages again." The Sioux were pleased with Hamilton's work, for they desired to continue living in large groups. Hamilton noted also that in mid-winter, "about the time that the Indians get their robes dressed, the Spaniards slip in with Whiskey and trifles to barter to the Indians" and take many robes to the "Spanish country" that would "otherwise come into the United States." This, said the agent, caused "great injury to our own licensed traders." Hamilton, like Drips, suggested that an officer of the government ought to be stationed at the Platte, not only to watch over traders and Indians, but also to prevent the "Oregon emigrants" from trading liquor to Indians. Some emigrants, it seems, "halt[ed] to live with the Indians under one pretext or another; thereby filling the country with free men who set a pernicious example to the Indians." Hamilton finished by noting that the Sioux and Pawnee were at war, and that some Brulé Sioux had recently returned from an attack on a Pawnee village with a woman and two children. The woman recognized Hamilton (he had earlier been that tribe's agent) and implored him to rescue her, but "for want of authority and means I was obliged to leave her and she still remains a slave with her two children."¹⁷⁷

Hamilton returned to the North Platte River in early autumn 1844, where on October 9 he caught up with David Adams. Adams had gone to St. Louis in June to make purchases, and was

¹⁷⁷ Hamilton to Harvey, July 5, 1844; in N.A., O.I.A., M234, R884.

at Independence, Missouri, by August 26, ready to take the trail back to his post with a wagonload of goods.¹⁷⁸ On September 3 Adams encountered Lancaster Lupton, and the two traveled in company the rest of the way to the Platte. Several of the men in this party suffered from malarial “shakes,” including Lupton, Anson [Hanson?], and “J. Roubedow.” One *engagé* named Michel Dubray died along the way of “nurvus fever,” near J. Papin’s post on the Caw [Kansas] River. David Adams’s comments regarding Dubray’s death suggest that even whiskey traders might respond to humanitarian instincts. The party was stalled for five days while Dubray weakened steadily, and Adams sent men out to buy more horses. After Dubray died “a hard and misarabl death” on September 17, Adams noted that he had tried to persuade people in a nearby house (Papin’s?) to shelter Dubray so he would not have to die “all a lone lik a wolf.” The residents refused to honor Adams’s request, but he thought that if Dubray had “a hors or two or had a trunck of good clos or a few dolars in his pocket” he would have been better treated. As it was, Adams and his men “had to rap him in his blanket and mak him a coffin out of bark . . . [and] we beried him the best way that we cold.”¹⁷⁹

On October 9, Adams and his party saw unknown people on the north side of the Platte; they turned out to be Joseph Hamilton and four men on their way to “the forts at the Fk of larama.” On October 13, Adams wrote, Hamilton “got mifed at sumthing and . . . crossed the river.” Perhaps Hamilton and Adams had been discussing the liquor problem. On October 24, after playing hide-and-seek with Hamilton’s party for almost two weeks, the traders arrived at Fort Platte. There they found Sibille and Dan Finch, who had taken their goods up the Missouri aboard the steamer Frolick, which had been chartered by the Union Fur Company, and then come overland from the Cheyenne River, a 300 mile journey. Adams sent out traders to Sioux

¹⁷⁸ Hanson, ed., David Adams Journals, pp. 56-7.

¹⁷⁹ Hanson, ed., David Adams Journals, pp. 57-62.

camps, and warned at least one of his traders on the South Platte to “send in what milk [i.e., liquor] he had for fer [fear] the govt might goe ovr thar.”¹⁸⁰ On December 10, Adams and Sibille heard from one of their traders at Horse Creek, “mr tucker,” that “the tous pedlors had arived thair with corn and flour and lickor and sea shels and spanish blankets.” Sibille suggested that they encourage Drips to go “out to stop the smuglers from trading.”¹⁸¹ A few weeks later, on January 1, 1845, Adams and Drips did discuss this problem (see page 96). This seems to indicate that Drips remained at Fort John for the winter; perhaps Hamilton did as well, though this is only speculation.

Drips and Hamilton were probably doing a creditable job, if the complaints of some traders are any index of their success. It was inevitable that one offended trader or another would tender an objection regarding the agents' zealous diligence, and so it happened. Not surprisingly, the protest came from a recently organized (and rather incompetent) outfit well known for their callous disregard of the law, the Union Fur Company. Fulton Cutting, one of the concern's partners, complained about Drips to Superintendent Harvey at St. Louis on September 16, 1844. “It is a well known fact,” wrote Cutting, “that Major Drips . . . always resided while in the Indian country in one of the forts belonging to the American Fur Co. and is almost identified with them having formerly been a partner in that concern; also that when he visits the Indians it is almost always in company with one of the traders of that company . . .” It should be recalled that Drips did not become a true “partner” until 1848. Cutting also believed that Drips's interpreter, Jouette, was concurrently employed by Chouteau's outfit (this was probably true, but interpreters were usually in short supply and great demand), and that Drips was “using the name and title of Government agent for the benefit of one Company . . . to the real prejudice of all others.” Cutting

¹⁸⁰ Hanson, ed., *David Adams Journals*, pp. 67, 70.

¹⁸¹ Hanson, ed., *David Adams Journals*, p. 74.

finished by requesting the appointment of a new agent who would do his job "without being influenced by the private interest of any parties engaged in the Indian trade in this Country."¹⁸²

Drips's response to these charges appears in a letter he wrote at Fort Pierre on April 6, 1845, that was carried to St. Louis by the "express of the American Fur Company." (who else would be in a position to do so?) Drips had just arrived from Fort John, where he had wintered, "part of the time with the Sioux and Cheyenne." On arrival at Fort Pierre, he found a letter from T. H. Harvey dated December 24, 1844, which outlined Fulton Cutting's allegations. Denying all of the charges, Drips explained that "Mr. Cutting was instigated by malice and revenge; my presence at the Yellow Stone in the winter of 1843 & 44 prevented him from selling spiritous Liquor to the Indians as he had anticipated, and fearing that this season might be attended with the same Effects he thought by having me taken out of the country at the approach of winter, no other agent could arrive here in time to interfere with him."¹⁸³

Drips also commented on his inability to prevent the Sioux from attempting to destroy the Pawnee, noting that a Sioux war party had recently attacked a Pawnee village and returned with "ten scalps, principally of women which they found some distance from the village digging roots." In addition, Drips complained about illicit traders from the Arkansas "in the vicinity of the Mexican Country" who were still trading on the North Platte. He described these men as "a mongrel crew, of Am.[erican], French, Mexicans and half breeds, and generally speaking, [they] are unable to procure Employment for past misconduct; in fact they are no better than outlaws." Finally, Drips again had reason to complain about John Richard, who continued to trade alcohol to the Sioux. The previous winter, one of Pratte & Cabanné's traders sent a keg of liquor to an Oglala camp, with the result that "two Indians were killed in a drinking brawl." In the summer

¹⁸² Cutting, Fort George, to Harvey, September 16, 1844; N.A., O.I.A., M234, R884.

¹⁸³ Drips to Harvey, April 6, 1845; N.A., O.I.A., M234, R884.

of 1844 Richard had taken a wagonload of merchandize from St. Charles, Missouri, to New Mexico, which he exchanged for liquor and other items to trade with the Sioux "on the North Fork of the Platte." There he traded about 600 robes "much to the detriment of the regular Licensed Traders." Drips confronted Richard in the Sioux camp and demanded to see his license; Richard replied that he had none. Drips considered arresting Richard and confiscating his stock, but the whiskey-man's influence among the Sioux was such that Drips concluded "any movement on my part" would have elicited a violent response. Lacking any military muscle to enforce the liquor prohibition, Drips found himself trumped by Richard.¹⁸⁴

The fact that Drips, like Mitchell, had formerly worked for Chouteau is bound to raise questions in the 1990s, just as it did in some quarters in the 1840s, regarding possible biases in the way these men performed their jobs. In order to clarify a few points, it will be useful to review the steps that led to Drips' appointment as prohibition agent. Sometime before July 1842 John F. A. Sanford (Pierre Chouteau, Jr.'s, son-in-law and a savvy lobbyist) had mentioned to Mitchell that Drips would be a good man for the job. Commissioner of Indian Affairs T. Hartley Crawford wrote to Sanford on July 2, informing him that the department had appointed "Mr. A. Drips the Gentleman recommended by Mr. Mitchell and yourself." One week later, Sanford wrote to Drips, who was in St. Louis, that his commission as special agent was forthcoming. Enjoining Drips to secrecy in order to maintain an advantage over the traders, Sanford warned him that within a few days "several expeditions (for trade) will leave this place & the Frontier for the Platte, Arkansas & Missouri Rivers," and suggested that Drips "keep an eye on the movements of these Expeditions." Sanford agreed that "the objects, which we wished to accomplish, when we urged the appointment" were important, adding, "we are in earnest about

¹⁸⁴ Drips to Harvey, April 6, 1845; N.A., O.I.A., M234, R884.

this matter & are willing and anxious to aid in putting a stop” to the liquor trade. In one illuminating passage, Sanford wrote: “we want our Expeditions (Bent, St. Vrain & Co.) to undergo the same rigid investigation & ordeal that the others are subjected to.” Clearly, by this time Bent, St. Vrain & Company constituted something of a subsidiary branch of Chouteau’s outfit. Sanford also mentioned that “John Sybil” would leave St. Louis shortly aboard the steamer Edna, and that he was certain to try sneaking liquor past the authorities. Calling for quick action “at the Commencement,” Sanford said: “There is a large Opposition going up the Missouri & I trust that your efforts & our own, will forever put an end to Whiskey traffic in the Sioux Country.” Sanford appeared to be most interested in the “Sioux traders & the Platte,” but suggested that conducting searches “at the Bluff” would be broadly effective. As a postscript to the letter, Sanford added: “Heretofore, we traders have never thought the Govt in earnest when they spoke about Liquor—I hope you will teach us now that it is no longer a jest.”¹⁸⁵

One is obliged to consider whether, in writing as he did to Drips, Sanford was being absolutely cynical or reasonably sincere. Helpful in arriving at a judgement is the fact that Sanford was not alone in making such statements. Pierre Chouteau, Jr., himself wrote to Superintendent Mitchell on August 23, 1842, using much the same language as Sanford. Chouteau asserted that “We were honest in our intentions, when we pledged ourselves & agents to cooperate with the officers of Government in putting a stop to this traffic.” Then he disclosed a counter-current of self-interest that indicated the limits of his willingness to cooperate, in the event that only his company kept its pledge. “But,” wrote Chouteau, “if no steps are taken & the Country left free & open to evry pedlar & licensed trader to take what liquor he pleases, we will

¹⁸⁵ Sanford to Drips, July 10, 1842; Drips Papers, MoHS. Curiously, just five weeks earlier Drips had been invited to serve as a guide for John C. Frémont, through the good offices of Chouteau & Company. One cannot help but wonder what would have happened with the prohibition plan had Drips taken up Frémont’s offer. See B. Clapp to Drips, May 30, 1842, Drips Papers, MoHS.

be compelled in self defense to pursue the course we may . . . deem best calculated to protect us from our opponents.” Chouteau added a notation intended to show the government just how nasty the liquor trade could be: “since the withdrawal of the agent from that country—say four years—more than five hundred Indians & a number of whites have lost their lives in drunken frolics & brawls pouring out of them.”¹⁸⁶

Given the attitudes expressed by both of these men, it seems doubtful that they were merely paying cynical lip service to the government’s program. After all, they knew that drunken Indians did not prepare many robes, that they presented real danger to other natives and to white men around them and that, ultimately, profits might actually increase if liquor was better controlled or eliminated altogether. Chouteau was quite correct in his opinion that it was an “all or nothing” proposition: if small traders could sneak liquor into the Indian country, then the large outfit must follow suit, or be the loser in the quest for robes.

Chouteau’s view was seconded by the explorer Lt. John C. Frémont. In 1843, while on his first major trip into the far west, Frémont noted that many traders on the North Platte sold liquor, but he made a point of excepting Chouteau’s company from this charge. “While mentioning this fact,” he wrote in ponderous prose, “it is but justice to the American Fur Company to state, that, throughout the country, I have always found them strenuously opposed to the introduction of spiritous liquors. But in the present state of things, when the country is supplied with alcohol, when a keg of it will purchase from an Indian every thing he possesses—his furs, his lodge, his horses, and even his wife and children—and when any vagabond who has money enough to purchase a mule can go into a village and trade against them successfully—without withdrawing entirely from the trade, it is impossible for them to discontinue its use. In

¹⁸⁶ Chouteau to Mitchell, August 23, 1842; in N. A., O. I. A., M234, R753. This figure would seem to be the source for Mitchell’s large estimate of alcohol-related deaths in 1842 referenced in note 152, above.

their opposition to this practice, the company is sustained, not only by their obligation to the laws of the country and the welfare of the Indians, but clearly, also, on grounds of policy; for, with heavy and expensive outfits, they contend at manifestly great disadvantage against the numerous independent and unlicensed traders, who enter the country from various avenues, from the United States and from Mexico, having no other stock in trade than some kegs of liquor, which they sell at the modest price of thirty-six dollars per gallon.”¹⁸⁷ Here was an unusual argument in favor of a large “monopolistic” outfit that practically inverted the standard critique of large companies, a view that asserted that large outfits could too easily defeat their competitors. Frémont received a good deal of support from Chouteau, but no evidence suggests that he conspired with Chouteau or anyone else to hamstring the government’s prohibition scheme.

At the time that Chouteau wrote his letter, liquor was certainly being traded at the North Platte. One of the best sources for the liquor trade at this time comes from one of the participants, in the journal of David Adams, of Sibille & Adams. Adams’s journal covers much of the time from 1841 to 1845. Frequent references in the journal to traders issuing “milk” (their term for alcohol) to white and Indian customers indicate that liquor was usually on hand. Adams and Sibille traded liquor for horses, robes, and meat at their fort on the Platte as well as at a post on the Cheyenne River. Among their employees was Henry Chatillion, who later gained some fame as the man who guided Francis Parkman. One of many items of interest in Adams’s journal is that he sent men to look for camps of Sioux who might have robes to trade. Once found, traders stayed at a camp until trade was concluded. This practice was technically illegal, but all of the traders on the Platte engaged in it.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁷ Spence and Jackson, eds., *The Expeditions of John Charles Frémont*, vol. 1, p. 219.

¹⁸⁸ Hanson, ed., *David Adams Journals*, p. 94 and elsewhere.

Adams was highly critical of the activities of Drips and Hamilton, for he thought they favored Chouteau's men. He also thought that traders from Taos presented a threat to regularly licensed traders. On December 29, 1844, Adams made an entry in his diary that, even with its tortured orthography, makes interesting reading. A "Mr New" from Taos had just arrived "a munset the shians and sous with a waggon and 12 horses loaded with flouar and corn and whiskey These tous pedlars gives us a goodel [good deal] of demig [damage] Government is not doing us justos they send a agnt her to stop licer from being traded to the Indians and what I saw they saw They done nothing only keep shut in the American fur cumpiny fort and don't even try to stop them from trading but tries his best to influenc the indians to give ther robes to the other cumpany he is parshel to that cumpany when he counsels with them [the Indians] he tells them that it is good for them to give ther robes to the big cumpiny and the men that is in his employ and pad by the guvnmnt ar sent out a trading in viliges fr the yous of the Am fur cumpiny sow it a pears that the Guvrment send a agent her only to talk to the indians in ther favor and put them against all others sow I think if govrment has money to spend I think that they had beter put it to sum other yous then paing such men as Mr drips to act as agnt amonst the sus and shians."¹⁸⁹

Adams spoke with agent Drips about "the tous pedlars" on January 1, 1845, while the two were on their way to Adams's fort with Alexander Culbertson. A leading member of Chouteau's company, Culbertson had been requested to go from Fort Union to Fort John in 1843 to tighten up the management of the place. Their object was "to spend the New Year day as we had sum of the drops that livins the sperits of the man." Perhaps that explains why Culbertson and Drips decided to decline Adams's invitation and "rid back to their fort." In the course of discussion, Adams told Drips that he thought the agent was "a dowing us a great ingory [injury]

¹⁸⁹ Hanson, ed., David Adams Journals, pp. 78-9.

as the Am fur cumpiny is nerly run out of gods and that is a prospect of a good trad for us.”

Adams also wrote that two or three Indians had requested Drips to go to Horse Creek, where liquor was being traded, in order to put a stop to it. Asserting the Drips was “their father” and that the “Great father” had promised to end the whiskey trade, the Indians wanted Drips to “go and brak that licur or drive them white men away.” One of the petitioners said three of his brothers were at the drinking fest, and they “ar such big fuls when thay tast licur so I am afraid that they will get killed sow if you ar our farther I want you to dow something fr them.”

According to Adams, Drips temporized, claiming he had no horse at his disposal.¹⁹⁰

Statements such as this one from Adams seem to cast some doubt on the integrity of Drips and Hamilton. On the other hand, Sibille & Adams appear to have been among those traders most willing to use liquor as a major trade item, and they had been caught at it more than once. Still, it is true that both Hamilton and Drips took jobs with Chouteau’s outfit after their government work was curtailed. Drips was relieved of his position in March 1846, and his replacement, a Kentuckian named Thomas P. Moore, lasted barely one year before resigning. In fact, there seems to be no evidence that the new man did any work related to the prohibition campaign.¹⁹¹ Possibly as one of his final acts as Special Agent, Drips forwarded a petition from several Sioux chiefs dated January 14, 1846, in which they complained that overland emigrants were needlessly killing and driving away the buffalo, which forced the Sioux to hunt in enemies’ land, thereby exposing their nation to grave danger. The Sioux requested the “Great Father” to compensate them for losses sustained as a result of the white emigrants’ actions. Harvey

¹⁹⁰ Hanson, ed., *David Adams Journals*, pp. 79-80.

¹⁹¹ Note from the United States Senate re: confirmation of Thomas P. Moore, dated March 31, 1846; N.A., O.I.A., M234, R884.

suggested that the government might pay the Sioux for a right of way through their lands in order to preserve peace.¹⁹²

On April 6, 1847, Andrew Drips signed an engagement contract whereby he became a "*commis tratteur*" ("clerk-trader") with Chouteau's company. For this he was to be paid "*cent piastres par mois*" (\$100 a month). In August of the following year, 1848, Andrew Drips was offered an entire share (one out of six, which made up one-half of the total available) in the newly reorganized Pierre Chouteau, Jr., & Company. Honoré Picotte had left the concern and Alexander Culbertson was to take his place as Agent of the Upper Missouri, and be put in charge of Fort Pierre. Pierre D. Papin also left the outfit, so under the new organization Drips would be in charge of Fort John, unless "Mr. Culbertson should decide otherwise." Fort John, wrote Chouteau, "will require a good and carefull manager and a person well acquainted with land transportation," two qualities that Drips appeared to possess. Drips was to receive no salary, but a single share in the concern was likely to produce several thousand dollars a year. As of April 1849, Drips had already spent some time at Fort John.¹⁹³

Hamilton, too, was now working for Chouteau. It seems that he had been hired prior to May 2, 1846, for on that day Honoré Picotte sent a letter from Fort Pierre requesting that Hamilton "go down with Mr. J. Picotte to Vermillion Post." Hamilton was at this time keeping the books (probably as clerk or *bourgeois*) at what is referred to as [Colin?] "Campbell's" post.¹⁹⁴ In 1848 Hamilton was sent to "C.[ouncil] Bluffs with the goods destined for Fort John, and those intended for Bridger & Vasquez." It is ironic indeed that these two men, who had much to do with Fort John as government agents, would now be working on the "other side of

¹⁹² Drips to Harvey, January 14, 1846; N.A., O.I.A., M234, R884.

¹⁹³ [Unknown], Fort Pierre, May 9, 1849, to A. Drips and to Jos. Desautels, "Fort Pierre Letterbook," Chouteau Collection, MoHS.

¹⁹⁴ H. Picotte, Fort Pierre, May 2, 1846, to J. V. Hamilton, "Fort Pierre Letterbook," Chouteau Collection, MoHS.

the fence.”¹⁹⁵ Even more ironic is the fact that while Drips was working at Fort John in 1850 he ordered, or at least paid for, two small kegs of illegal alcohol—one of brandy and one of whiskey!¹⁹⁶

In January 1848 Hamilton’s name comes up again. He received a letter from Fort Pierre, perhaps penned by Honoré Picotte, that included the following cryptic advice: “Mr. Picotte and Mr. Kipp have intimated to me their intention of Coming up on the Stm. Bt. I have no doubt that your Lady when she hears it, will also wish to come, and as there is every probability of her doing so, would it not be well for you to dispense with the Society of your present Companions. As you have lost Old LaCharite I shall endeavor to find a Substitute to take Charge of the Post.”¹⁹⁷ Then, in February 1848 he had apparently discovered that some opposition traders were selling whiskey, and threatened to turn them in to the authorities. Picotte[?] wrote: “I notice in your letter to [Colin] Campbell the course pursued by LaCharite & B-----[?]; I cannot but commend your zeal in the Liquor affair, but I fear that your proceeding will only excite still greater Animosity against us, and under this consideration must beg you to drop it, until such time as the Agent may arrive, to whom you can make your representation of the case—he can then act as he thinks proper.”¹⁹⁸

By 1848, however, the federal prohibition program had run its course. A few years earlier officers of the Indian Department had more than once declared that the liquor trade had been stifled. In 1843 Mitchell declared that there had been “a wonderful decrease in the quantity of

¹⁹⁵ Drips’s engagement contract is in the Drips Papers, MoHS; see also Pierre Chouteau, Jr., & Company to Drips, August 18, 1848; Drips Papers, MoHS.

¹⁹⁶ “Upper Miss Outfit, 1850,” order for goods to be sent to “Fort Pierre for Fort John,” in Chouteau Collection, MoHS (Fur Trade Collection microfilm, roll 14, book OO, p. 443).

¹⁹⁷ Honoré Picotte[?], Fort Pierre, January 8, 1848, to J. V. Hamilton [place unknown]; Fort Pierre Letterbook, Chouteau Collection, MoHS. In 1848 Hamilton was posted somewhere in the Upper Missouri area. See Berry, *Beginning of the West*, p. 766.

¹⁹⁸ Honoré Picotte[?], Fort Pierre, February 5, 1848, to J. V. Hamilton [place unknown], in Fort Pierre Letterbook, Chouteau Collection, MoHS.

spiritous liquors carried into the Indian country,” and a year later T. H. Harvey believed that “the use of ardent spirits among the Indians . . . is being much reduced.”¹⁹⁹ It is quite true that Drips and Hamilton had some influence in curtailing the trade, but their effectiveness was limited to such time as they actually spent in the country. When federal agents were gone, the trade simply resumed. This fact is clearly evident in letters written in February 1848 by two Indian Agents, Richard Cummins and (rather ironically) Solomon Sublette, one of William’s younger brothers. Both mention that “Santa Fe Traders” were about to leave Missouri with “a large quantity of Spiritous Liquors” and they “bid defiance to the agents.” Just as Drips and Hamilton had complained, the newer agents said that unless a powerful military force was sent to the frontier, enforcement would be impossible. An identical situation was evident in the Upper Missouri country, where competition again grew intense in the late 1840s. Crippled by penny-pinching congressmen who refused to fund enforcement, by a lack of mobile soldiers in the west who could bring coercive force to bear upon the traders, and by businessmen and a citizenry who opposed most forms of government control over commerce, the trade and intercourse laws were essentially doomed to impotence. The failure of government to enforce such laws, or to construct an alternative system that worked, was an important factor in creating unstable conditions in the far west that helped to fuel the so-called “Indian Wars” of the late nineteenth century.

The mixed group of mostly un-licensed traders living on the upper Arkansas, at the settlements of Pueblo, Hardscrabble and Greenhorn, continued to irritate traders at Fort John and elsewhere on the North Platte during the late 1840s. Thomas Fitzpatrick, the former mountain man, became an Indian agent for the Upper Platte and Arkansas region in August 1846, though the war with Mexico prevented him from taking his new assignment until the summer of 1847.

¹⁹⁹ Mitchell to Crawford, September 29, 1843, and T. H. Harvey to Crawford, October 8, 1844; both in N.A., O.I.A., M234, R753.

Fitzpatrick heard that John Richard continued to sell liquor to Indians on the North Platte, and the agent planned a visit to investigate Richard. Fitzpatrick believed that the largest outfits—Pierre Chouteau, Jr., & Company, and Bent, St. Vrain & Company—refrained from selling liquor to Indians, while smaller outfits did not. Among those he most suspected of selling alcohol were the traders from the three small settlements on the upper Arkansas. The men of these settlements, wrote Fitzpatrick, were “Old trappers and hunters . . . mostly Americans, Missouri French, Canadians, and Mexicans.” The total number of inhabitants, he thought, reached “about 150 souls, and of this number there are about 60 men, nearly all having wives, and some having two.” Among the women, Fitzpatrick observed, there were “Blackfoot, Assineboines, Arikaras, Sioux, Aripahoes, Cheyennes, Pawnees, Snake, Sinpach, (from west of the Great Lake), Chinook, (from the mouth of Columbia,) Mexicans, and Americans.” The “American” women were Mormons who wintered at Pueblo before proceeding on to California.²⁰⁰

The Pueblo area traders remained a thorn in the side of prohibition-minded government agents until 1854, when some Utes under Chief Blanco attacked the towns, killing about fifteen settlers during the week of Christmas. Unrelated to the whiskey trade, the Ute attack came as “a culmination of eight years of frustration and misunderstanding in their dealings with the United States government and its contradictory agents, and disappointment in its dishonored treaties and broken promises.”²⁰¹ By September 1855, after several months of harassment by General Garland’s soldiers and Ceran St. Vrain’s volunteers, the “Ute War” was over and the natives sued for peace. But the upper Arkansas settlements were finally done for, and only a handful of potential traders still lived there. Almost no Americans appeared in the upper Arkansas again until 1858, when inflated reports of a major gold strike in the Pike’s Peak area brought in several

²⁰⁰ Lecompte, Pueblo, Hardscrabble and Greenhorn, p. 203.

²⁰¹ Lecompte, Pueblo, Hardscrabble and Greenhorn, p. 237.

thousand prospectors and hangers-on.²⁰² Among the disappointed gold-seekers were men who moved down to the Arkansas and revived the name of Pueblo for a new town.

The whiskey trade on the North and South Platte did not begin with the establishment of Fort Laramie. It started long before the post was built and it continued for many years after it was sold to the army. The original builders, Sublette and Campbell, were prepared to give or sell alcohol to Indians on the Platte, just as they were prepared to do at the Yellowstone a year earlier. Virtually everyone who subsequently operated the post took the same view, and the same situation would prevail at all fur trading posts. William Swagarty pointed out a few years ago that "by the 1830s, liquor had become an important, if not essential item in the trade."²⁰³ True enough, but the liquor trade was every bit as old as the fur trade itself, and ought to be dated to the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries. The same scandalous behavior and the same ineffectual laws and impotent enforcement efforts are evident in the early histories of New France and the British American colonies. Indeed, there is a horrific continuity in what might as well be called the westward expansion of the "liquor frontier" in North American history. Not only did a great many Euro-Americans habitually drink to excess, but evidently a substantial number of Native Americans did as well.

If the government proved unable—as it so manifestly did—to control the whiskey trade, then could anyone else have done so? This query raises another troubling question, one that confronts a deeply held belief in United States culture, and that is: Why was the notion of a trade monopoly never seriously considered as the means to control or diminish the liquor trade? I have referred to this issue earlier in this paper, yet perhaps it bears just a bit more elaboration.

²⁰² Lecompte, Pueblo, Hardscrabble and Greenhorn, pp. 246-53.

²⁰³ William Swagarty, "Indian Trade in the Trans Mississippi West to 1870," in Wilcomb E. Washburn, ed., Handbook of North American Indians, vol. 4 (Washington: Smithsonian Institution/GPO, 1988), p. 371.

Ideological antipathy toward monopoly runs deep in our history. Hatred of the British East India Company's monopoly on tea importation, for instance, was a factor that led loyal colonists from resistance to open rebellion in the 1770s. A half-century later, John J. Astor's attempt to gain control of the fur trade elicited loud complaints from business men and some of their congressional supporters. Likewise, Pierre Chouteau & Company were targeted by opposition traders who used "patriotic" arguments against "monopoly" in their effort to weaken the big company. As a result, fur traders who recognized that the model suggested by the biggest monopoly of them all, the Hudson's Bay Company, might well be an effective means of limiting the liquor trade were reluctant to promote the idea. Had the government sanctioned some kind of a monopoly, however, the ravages of the liquor trade would probably have been much reduced. It seems quite clear that the quantity of alcohol spilling into "Indian Country" was directly related to the degree of competition at any one time or place: the more competitors, the more liquor sold or given away to secure robes.

Denied an official monopoly, the Astor-Chouteau outfits attempted to create an informal one, but they achieved only limited, short term success. With long term interests in the trade, and a great deal of investment to protect, they may truly have supported the idea of the prohibition plan. On the other hand, as they pointed out themselves, if the federal agents were unable to stop the flow of liquor, then the "Company" would be forced to engage in the alcohol trade for self-preservation. Fort Laramie was just one of many places that traded liquor. It was no stand-out in that regard. What is perhaps most significant about its role, and that of the Missouri River-Platte River region in general, is that by the 1830s and 1840s the curtain was about to fall on the old time Indian trade for the last time in North American history. As United States power and sovereignty converged on the plains from every direction, Fort Laramie played out its role in the

final scene of an historic drama that shaped the relationship between nineteenth century Native Americans and Euro-Americans, and it continues to resonate down to the present.

14. Indians and Fort Laramie:

The robe trade at Fort William/Fort John/Fort Laramie could not have been an economic success without the active participation of Native American tribes that inhabited the region. The principal native trading partners at the post were Oglala and Brulé Lakota (almost always called "Sioux" in documents and literature), Arapaho and Cheyenne. The two Lakota bands were members of the greater Teton confederation, which included Oglala, Brulé, Hunkpapa, Miniconjou, Sans Arc, Two Kettle and Blackfoot tribes.

From the standpoint of historical interpretation, the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho were relatively recent arrivals on the plains. All three nations formerly lived near the western Great Lakes, but had commenced a westward migration around the beginning of the eighteenth century. Apparently the Cheyenne and Arapaho preceded the Lakota, but Crow, Shoshone (Snake) and Ute Indians already occupied the North Platte before the newcomers appeared. All the newcomers became equestrian buffalo hunters after acquiring horses sometime in the late eighteenth century, but during the first few decades of the nineteenth century the Lakota became a dominant military force in the region, and were often at odds with neighboring tribes. Some writers, such as Royal B. Hassrick and Richard White, concluded that the Lakota were in the midst of a rapid "imperialist" territorial expansion in the early nineteenth century.²⁰⁴ Fort Laramie lay at the center of the contested territory, which was "bounded roughly by the Missouri, Yellowstone, Powder, and North Platte Rivers."²⁰⁵

²⁰⁴ Royal B. Hassrick, *The Sioux* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964) pp. 61, 71; and Richard White, "The Winning of the West," in *Journal of American History* 65: 2 (September 1978).

²⁰⁵ Robert M. Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue: The United States Army and the Indian, 1848-1865* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), p. 62.

When Edwin Bryant arrived at "Fort Laramie" on June 23, 1846, he observed "about three thousand Sioux Indians . . . encamped in the plain surrounding the fort." The nearly 600 lodges reminded Bryant of corn shocks in an autumn field. Warriors from the camp were preparing to organize a "war party to attack the Snakes and Crows," one of many such incidents in the contest for native domination of the plains in the North Platte region. Bryant considered Sioux women attractive, noting that "many of these women, for regularity of features and symmetry of figure, would bear off the palm of beauty from some of our most celebrated belles. . . . A portion of the Sioux women are decidedly beautiful." Equally impressed with Lakota men, Bryant wrote, "The men are powerfully made, and possess a masculine beauty which I have never seen excelled." Bryant was told there were "about eight or ten thousand" Sioux warriors, and that the nation was "engaged in perpetual wars with their neighbours" over territorial claims.²⁰⁶

Over roughly fifteen years comprising Fort William/Fort John/Fort Laramie's fur trade era (1833-1850) buffalo robes constituted the leading article that Indians exchanged for manufactured goods. Euro-American men hunted and trapped beaver and other furbearers for market sales, but they did not process buffalo robes for market. Indian men hunted and killed bison, and Indian women fleshed and tanned the hides, transforming them into luxurious robes. Many thousands of these robes were traded and then shipped eastward, where they found ready markets in the United States, Canada and Europe. As mentioned earlier in this report, bison robes gradually displaced beaver pelts as a leading money-maker. Between 1835 and 1840 decreased demand by hatters had caused a sharp decline in the price of beaver fur, but the demand for buffalo robes increased.

²⁰⁶ Bryant, What I Saw in California, p. 88.

Buffalo robes were used principally to make hearth rugs, overcoats, sleigh and carriage robes, and mittens. Only after about 1871 was a process developed for tanning raw bison hides in the eastern United States, which led to increased demand for bison leather to drive factory machines, and contributed to the massive decline of bison that took place between 1870 and 1885. Likewise, the United States army actively supported a policy of bison extermination after 1865, arguing that destroying the Indians "mobile larder" would facilitate a military policy of concentrating Indians on reservations.²⁰⁷

This policy coincided with the completion of the first transcontinental railroad (1869), which dramatically reduced the costs of shipping hides eastward from Kansas and elsewhere. It also led to the appearance of a new kind of "hide hunter" who had almost nothing in common with the earlier fur traders. Another significant factor in the near-extinction of bison is the high probability that Texas cattle introduced into the southern plains after the Civil War spread bovine diseases such as anthrax, tuberculosis, and brucellosis. Mortality rates must surely have increased, but these ailments can also cause miscarriages and other health problems for bison that could have resulted in a failure to maintain viable population levels. These several factors may well have played a more significant role in the destruction of bison than the old time robe trade.²⁰⁸

It seems that the number of robes harvested annually during the western American robe-trade era (1830-65) was much lower than figures established for the period during which the United States Army conquered the plains. While fur traders in different places at different times during the 1840s and 1850s began to suspect that the great herds were

²⁰⁷ Consult David D. Smits, "The Frontier Army and the Destruction of the Buffalo: 1865-1883," *Western Historical Quarterly* 25: 3 (Autumn, 1994).

²⁰⁸ See Rudolph W. Koucky, "The Buffalo Disaster of 1882," *North Dakota History* 50: 1 (Winter 1983); Dan Flores, "Bison Ecology and Bison Diplomacy: The Southern Plains from 1800 to 1850," *Journal of*

declining, it appears likely that, quite by accident, the old-time robe trade resembled a "sustained yield" system. Researchers who have calculated the harvests of bison with reference to probable population numbers found that even if two or three hundred thousand robes went to market in a year, natural increase of the herd would easily have replenished the number of animals killed.

The robe trade, to some degree, did pull Indians into the world capitalist economic system, but they were not merely "market hunters" who exchanged a certain value in robes for a certain value in goods. Moreover, Indians were not hapless dupes who were routinely gouged by unscrupulous traders. Instead, they were keen observers of the quality of various goods that traders offered, and sharp traders themselves who knew how to make advantageous bargains. As well, the robe trade was not the first case in which a form of "over-production" appeared in plains Indian life. With reference to pre-contact native trade, John C. Ewers concluded that the "aboriginal pattern of trade must have had the effect of intensifying the labors of the nomads and the horticulturists in their own specialties. In order for the nomadic tribes to enjoy the advantages of a vegetable diet without the necessity for raising crops themselves, they had to kill more wild game, to dry more meat, and to dress and work more skins than would have been the case had they attempted to supply their needs solely by their own labors."²⁰⁹

The robe trade offered a means by which native alliance-trade systems, based on maintaining reciprocal relations through gifts and a sense of indebtedness, were enabled to co-exist and intermesh with a Euro-American economic system based on currency,

American History 78: 2 (September 1991); Kenneth N. and Sally L. Owens, "Buffalo and Bacteria," Montana: The Magazine of Western History 37: 2 (Spring 1987).

²⁰⁹ John C. Ewers, "The Indian Trade of the Upper Missouri Before Lewis and Clark: An Interpretation," Bulletin of the Missouri Historical Society 10: 4 (July 1954), p. 435.

foreign markets, supply and demand, and the like. The robe traders, like their Indian customers, operated within a dual system that served mutual needs and desires, even if they varied widely, and even if the two parties to the exchange did not fully comprehend what the trade “meant” to each other. In order to maintain and nurture this relationship, fur traders and Indians were obliged to construct effective diplomatic ties and links of affinity.²¹⁰

Mary Kay Whelan, writing with reference to the eastern Dakota kin of the Lakota, found that: “Fur traders who established exchange relations with the Dakota were simultaneously establishing kin ties with them because exchange symbolized family relationships . . . the exchange of animal pelts for trade merchandise fit comfortably into the Dakota model of how friendly human interactions should be regulated, and coincided with a Euro-American economic model of trade . . .”²¹¹ This assessment, it seems safe to suggest, would likely apply equally to the Lakota who dwelled farther to the west.

In prosecuting the robe trade, the traders “usurped” certain prerogatives that belonged technically under governmental authority. Traders engaged in informal treaty-making and alliance-building, and they exercised the management of “influence” over some areas of tribal life. All of these things—in a legalistic constitutional sense—properly lay in the domain of the federal government. The federal government, however, made no treaties of consequence with plains Indians until 1851, and projected no substantial military force into the far west prior to the late 1840s, at the time of the Mexican-American War. The traders, out of perceived necessity, simply took action in a setting where they had a great deal at stake. Unlike the government, they did have major

²¹⁰ Mary K. Whelan, “Dakota Indian Economics and the Nineteenth-Century Fur Trade,” *Ethnohistory* 40: 2 (Spring 1993), pp. 46-76, provides an excellent summary and analysis of this system.

investments, expensive facilities, many personnel, and a long-term relationship with Indians. In addition, traders were much more familiar with, and knowledgeable about, Indians than were lawmakers and policymakers in Washington, D.C. Thus, it is not surprising to find that some Indian Agents, soldiers, and opposition traders occasionally groused that certain traders might be exercising undue influence with Indians, or appropriating governmental authority.

By about 1849 the “traditional” southern plains native-white robe trade was already under considerable stress resulting from increased military and civilian traffic on the Santa Fe Trail, and the administrative and political changes that accompanied the American take-over of Texas, New Mexico and California. Meantime, the central plains route to the Pacific also carried throngs of emigrants westward. Bent’s Old Fort and Fort Laramie—the two most important trading posts between the Platte and the Arkansas—would become casualties of Americans’ rush into the west. So, too, would Indian tribal sovereignty over the region.

Against this background, the relationship between Indians and Fort Laramie’s community can be developed. One oft-cited reference on this topic is Remi Nadeau’s Fort Laramie and the Sioux Indians. This piece, while useful in some respects, does not adequately describe Lakota dealings with traders at Fort Laramie. A few examples will illustrate the problem. According to Nadeau, the post sheltered “a permanent society of *white men* [emphasis added] in the heart of the buffalo country,” and it “became a civilized enclave in the wilderness” whose “palisade walls were a barrier against the red man.” The fort’s “inhabitants were not guests but intruders, and its small colony of white

²¹¹ Mary K. Whelan, “Dakota Indian Economics and the Nineteenth-Century Fur Trade,” p. 249.

men lived as their brothers lived in the states.”²¹² None of these assertions are accurate, as other sections of this report demonstrate. Defining the actual relationships among whites and Indians at the post is made difficult by the lack of “Indian” sources, and because traders seldom addressed the topic directly. Nevertheless, scattered references to interactions among Indians, mixed-bloods, and whites at the post and its environs allow some tentative conclusions to be advanced.

Edwin Bryant noted in 1846 that “the Indians have permission to enter the Fort during the day; at night, they encamp in their lodges on the plain.”²¹³ Trading posts’ gates were ordinarily barred and locked by clerks each evening. Certain Indians in a given tribe or village were denoted as “soldiers” whose job it was to assist traders in maintaining order during trade sessions, or when traders brought goods to villages to sell.

The “soldiers,” as Rufus Sage noted, “were of great service in conducting the trade. If any difficulty occurred, they were always on hand to assist in its adjustment, and preserve order and quiet so far as lay in their power. If any visitor became troublesome, they at once ordered him to his lodge, and enforced their commands in case of resistance.” Indians who were caught stealing from the traders usually suffered humiliation and sometimes the destruction of personal property such as weapons. The “soldiers” helped to insulate traders from the wrath of offended Indians who might otherwise kill or injure a trader, if they thought he was the author of their misfortune. In addition, traders were not in a position to use force on their customers, and would have risked injury or death had they attempted coercion.

²¹² Remi Nadeau, Fort Laramie and the Sioux Indians (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967), p. 19 [hereafter cited as Nadeau, Fort Laramie].

²¹³ Bryant, What I Saw in California, p. 109.

On the other hand, "soldiers" gained a measure of status, and an assortment of merchandise, as a result of services they rendered to the traders. According to Sage, "[a]n Indian considers it a great honor thus to receive the confidence of a white man and 'act soldier' for him . . . Some of them have not unfrequently gone so far as to kill those of their people who proved guilty of misusing the traders by whom they were employed."²¹⁴ These sorts of intra-tribal confrontations may have contributed to ongoing conflicts that occasionally erupted into violence, but "soldiers" were important allies for traders, and the relationship illustrates one aspect of inter-cultural cooperation in the robe trade.

A western traveler named Miles Goodyear provided evidence that the Lakota relationship with the post included the idea that its vicinity was a fitting place for them to deposit their dead. Goodyear noted in 1847 that "about the fort are both Indian and white burial grounds."²¹⁵ This suggests that a bi-cultural cemetery might have served to buttress mutual respect, reiterate the reciprocal relationship of Lakota and traders, and help maintain amicable relations at the post.

Anglo-American overlanders, being largely ignorant of the protocols and practices of Indian society, usually misinterpreted the social interactions they witnessed. Still, their comments offer glimpses into what was happening. In July 1847 as an overlander named Elizabeth Dixon Smith Geer approached Fort Laramie, she paused at "a French and Indian residence" nearby, and wrote that "as soon as we corralled, the Indians flocked in, spread their blankets and begged for presents. We gave them meat, flour and beans . . ." The next day, when she reached the fort, she noted that "the Indians

²¹⁴ Sage, Rocky Mountain Life, p. 112.

²¹⁵ See Charles Kelly and Maurice L. Howe, Miles Goodyear, First Citizen of Utah, p. 78 (citation from Mattes files, FOLA).

came as before and set down in a circle and spread a blanket in their midst and begged presents.”²¹⁶

In this case, the “begging” of the Indians did not mean that they were starving or too lazy to go out and hunt or gather food. Instead, requests for presents of food or other goods illustrate the important role that reciprocity played in the structure of Indian diplomacy. White people were crossing their land consuming their grass and game, and such usage required that gifts be tendered to compensate for the lost resources. It also seems that the Lakota, like other Indians, believed the Euro-Americans’ resources were unlimited. Given such apparent abundance, a failure to offer bountiful gratuities would have been deemed extremely selfish.²¹⁷ As well, the exchange of gifts implied that the two parties in question were at peace. (The trade and intercourse laws, it should be noted, prohibited wayfarers from taking game in “Indian Country,” but the unenforceable interdiction was very frequently ignored.) In a second example from Mrs. Geer’s journal, when some of her contingent’s livestock turned up missing, the men of the party paid some Indians fifteen dollars to help search for them.²¹⁸

A number of travelers, missionaries, and traders left comments on Indians’ drinking behavior, most of which are rendered in quite negative terms. A good many overlanders and other observers concluded that Indians simply could not resist liquor, and when they consumed it they became veritable beasts. While it is true that many natives in the nineteenth century drank to excess, not all tribes or all members of a tribe behaved similarly, and not all chose to drink liquor. (It is worth recalling, too, that a great many

²¹⁶ “Diary of Mrs. Elizabeth Dixon Smith Geer, 1847,” Transaction so the 35th Annual Reunion of the Oregon Pioneer Association, June 1907 [citation from Mattes files, FOLA].

²¹⁷ Mary K. Whelan, “Dakota Indian Economics and the Nineteenth-Century Fur Trade,” pp. 254-55.

²¹⁸ “Diary of Mrs. Elizabeth Dixon Smith Geer, 1847” [citation from Mattes files, FOLA].

nineteenth-century Euro-Americans consumed truly prodigious quantities of alcohol, and that their drunken behavior contributed to criminal behavior, riots, and social disorder.)

If one takes a broader look at historical Native American drinking patterns, it seems very likely that the motives for drinking excessively, and the behavior that often followed, did not change substantially from the time liquor was first given or sold to Indians in the sixteenth century. Writing of such early interactions, Cornelius J. Jaenen pointed out that life in the *pay d'en haut* (the "up-country" where the fur trade was conducted) was characterized by "freedom from the supervision of church and state," and "immense hardships, risks, and moral confusion." Inhabitants were "caught between the ebb and flow of two different cultures, never quite certain how much of their ancestral way of life they would be called upon to renounce in the pursuit of their new life."²¹⁹ Natives, unlike most Euro-Americans, were not influenced by Christianity's moral injunctions against excessive drinking. Many drank with the express purpose of reaching a state of inebriation, since it was thought that drunkenness was a function of the supernatural world. Thus, a bout of drinking might seem to mimic the effects of a "vision quest" that ordinarily required days of food deprivation and other rigorous exercises. On the other hand, drunkenness provided a sort of temporary suspension of tribal social and behavioral restraints imposed upon members, since a person was not considered fully responsible for actions taken while inebriated. Still, there was no real consensus on whether or not to drink liquor.

One Brulé Lakota leader named "Brave Bear" told Rufus Sage in 1841 that "My people would drink of the fire-water that their strong hearts may become stronger. It is

²¹⁹ Cornelius J. Jaenen, Friend and Foe: Aspects of French-Amerindian Cultural Contact in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries (Ontario: McClelland and Stewart, Ltd., 1976), p. 115.

good that they should drink it,—it is good that the Long-knife should give it to them.” According to “Brave Bear,” such a gift would be a fair compensation for the white men’s appropriation of Lakota “property” in the form of firewood, game, and the like. “Bull Tail,” another leader of the same band, dissented. He asked his kinsmen: “Why would you drink the fire-water and become fools? Would it not be better that the Long-knife no more bring it to us?” According to “Bull Tail,” liquor only “makes us poor. We fight our own brothers, and kill those we love, because the fire-water is in us and makes our hearts bad!”²²⁰ The Brulé apparently failed to reach a consensus on whether or not to use liquor. As Remi Nadeau pointed out (using Sage as an uncited source), a few days later, Bull Tail seemingly attempted to exchange his daughter to a trader for some liquor, but without success.²²¹

With regard to Indian consumption of liquor at Fort Laramie, an illuminating passage appears in the journal of the opposition trader, David Adams. In November 1841 Adams’s partner John Sibille complained to him that “Bisonette” at the other fort had tried to convince some Oglalas to destroy Sibille’s liquor kegs. Not all Indians wanted liquor in their camps, and some evidently objected strongly to its presence. It seems, however, that this incident related less to the issue of whether or not to use alcohol than to the issue of allegiance to one set of traders over another.

As Adams wrote, “one of the soldiers of besonet,” a warrior named “the left hand” wanted to “brak the cags.” However, a “brav by the name of the smok [Smoke] that was on the sid of mr sebeal . . . went up to the left hand and sad to him senc when you count your self sow brav that you can entr to brak the cags of A whit man.”

²²⁰ Sage, *Rocky Mountain Life*, pp.88-9.

²²¹ Nadeau, *Fort Laramie*, pp. 40-41. See also Sage, *Rocky Mountain Life*, pp.122-23.

Demanding a sword that “the left hand” carried, “the smok” spoke some insults, and then “the smok handed him back his sord and sad to the left hand if I was to dow rit I wold kill you with the sord . . . but my frend I tak pity on you becost you ar A fool.” “The smok” then threatened to kill “the left hand” if he tried to damage Sibille’s kegs, whereupon “the left hand . . . was glad to sneak of as a dog with his tale between his lags.” At this point four Sioux leaders, “Bull Bear,” “LeBorgne,” “Whirlwind” and “the man alone” walked through their village, threatening to kill any Sioux “that hirts A whit man or braks eny of ther barrels.”²²² In this instance, the Left Hand failed to convince his fellows to get rid of the traders’ liquor, which by the 1830s “had become an important, if not essential item in the trade.”²²³

Lakota and other native women surely played crucial roles in the trade, but the exact nature of their influence seldom surfaces in the scanty documentation for Fort Laramie. Recent scholarship on women of other tribes engaged in the trade, and some data collected in the nineteenth century, offers a basis for some general statements. As co-producers of robes, they very likely received a portion of the proceeds from trade. Edwin Denig, a trader at Fort Union, noted that good robe-makers produced twenty to twenty-five robes in a season, and they were often able to split the proceeds of a sale with their husbands.²²⁴ Ojibwa women frequently supplied traders with foodstuffs, and were

²²² Hanson, ed., *The David Adams Journals*, p. 21 [date of November 27, 1841].

²²³ William Swagerty, “The Indian trade . . .” in Wilcomb E. Washburn, ed., *Handbook of North American Indians*, vol. 4, p. 371.

²²⁴ Writing of the Crow nation in the mid-1850s, Edwin Denig noted that in some instances where robes were traded, “the skins are divided previous to selling and either [i.e., husband and wife] trades for what they like best.” John C. Ewers, ed., *Five Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri*, by Edwin Thompson Denig (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), p. 157.

engaged directly in this trade since they collected or produced the commodities; perhaps plains Indian women traded dried meat or other foods in a similar manner.²²⁵

Another obvious means by which native women exerted substantial influence over the trade was through marriage or cohabitation with traders. Again, while difficult to document at Fort Laramie specifically, there is little doubt that Indian-white intermarriage shaped trade, and life, at the post. As Jacqueline Peterson wrote, “tribal people, throughout the fur-trading era, saw intermarriage as a means of entangling strangers in a series of kinship obligations. Relatives by marriage were expected not only to deal fairly, but to provide protection, hospitality, and sustenance in time of famine.” Apart from exercising “economic and political leverage,” she added, Indian wives “used to advantage their symbolic status as links between the two societies by serving as spies, interpreters, guides, or diplomatic emissaries.”²²⁶ Since native women “married” many traders and employees at Fort Laramie, it is probable that they played similar roles there.

²²⁵ See Bruce M. White, “The Woman Who Married a Beaver,” *Ethnohistory* 46: 1 (Winter 1999), pp.109-47.

²²⁶ Cited in White, “The Woman Who Married a Beaver,” p. 128.

15. Society at Fort Laramie:

Considering the number of persons who left commentary on Fort William/Fort John/Fort Laramie, it may seem surprising that records regarding the post's society and social life are scanty. Even at the larger and longer occupied Fort Union, however, a like paucity exists with respect to documentary material dealing directly with the post's social life and structure. Some of the principal characteristics of fur trade society, marriages, and family structure may be gleaned from Jacqueline Peterson's Strangers in Blood, and Sylvia Van Kirk's Many Tender Ties, although both deal with the HBC's society, which to some degree was shaped by policies specific to that company. Unfortunately, no equally useful book on "American" fur trade society has yet appeared. Specific mention of everyday life at Fort Laramie comes from several sources, including Francis Parkman, Rufus Sage and others. Sometimes indirect or inferential reference is the best that can be recovered.

A few general comments on Fort Laramie's society may be in order. Quite probably, most of Fort Laramie's people developed less dense ties to the post and its immediate vicinity than did inhabitants at Fort Union or Fort Pierre. Two factors suggest that this would be the case. First, fur traders occupied Fort Laramie for only fifteen years, while Fort Union and Fort Pierre were occupied much longer. In addition, because the post changed hands several times between 1834 and 1849, its society must have been relatively unstable, and thus lacked the continuity apparent at some other posts. By contrast, some families remained at Fort Union for many years, and in some cases two generations of family members worked at the post. (No post in North America offers more "time depth," and social continuity, than the HBC's York factory, founded prior to

1700 and not abandoned until the 1950s.) While the usual social organization—*bourgeois* and clerks at the upper echelon, a second rank of mechanics, craftsmen and hunters, and a “lower class” of *engagés*—would have been in place, there must also have been numerous changes and shifts in the post’s resident population as new owners came and went.

Ethnically mixed society was absolutely characteristic of the fur trade frontier, and had been since the seventeenth century. Fort William/Fort John/Fort Laramie’s people reflected a continuation of a time-honored tradition. The multi-ethnic population of the fur trade country, in a certain sense, offered the young republic a potential model for amicable inter-ethnic relations that was largely ignored. Fur traders may have been among the most open-minded of contemporary Americans in terms of their willingness or ability to live among people of widely variable cultural and racial types. Indeed, fur traders were obliged to recast their own society in order to make the trade an economic success. Here was a form of assimilation that inverted the one ordinarily prescribed by white Americans with regard to Indians: instead of attempting to transform Indians into white farmers, these white men chose to live much like the Indians.

Men such as William Bent, Andrew Drips, David Adams, and many others basically became expatriates. They married native women, raised mix-blood children, adopted many traits of Indian life and, in numerous cases, never returned to the land of their nativity. Many of the men called “French” in the documentary record were actually *métis*, mix-bloods of French Canadian-Native American or French Louisianan-Native American parentage. *Métis* typically served as interpreters, laborers, canoe and boat men, hunters, and sometimes traders. On the other hand, Pierre Chouteau, Jr., & Company

specifically recruited French Canadian men from parishes around Montréal, just as other companies had done for well over a century, because they were considered hard workers with docile temperaments. At any rate, the American west was home to many French-speaking men and their families. Even a casual glance at maps of the west demonstrates that these men left French place-names all over the landscape.

An argonaut named William Kelly met “a French trapper, clad in a buckskin suit, with a fine rifle over his shoulder” near Joseph Roubidoux’s trading post in 1849. This man, “the son of an old French trapper, from the Hudson Bay settlement,” had married a “daughter of an Indian chief, in whose society he forgot every feeling of desire to visit the crowded thoroughfares of the world.” “Most men,” Kelly went on, “who frequent the hunting-ground of the Indian, either as trappers or tourists, contact a singular liking for their habits of life.” Some “men of independent fortune,” he added, “have forsaken the conventionalities of polished society for the simple, unsophisticated association of those children of nature, demonstrating the inherent tendency of man to the natural in preference to the artificial, wherever free will is left a loose rein.”²²⁷

Kelly’s prose—like his interpretation—is saturated with romanticism, but it does underscore the notion that many men who went to “Indian Country” as employees of fur companies willingly assimilated to native life and stayed there, sometimes, for a lifetime. Bruce Husband had been in the trade for several years when, acting for Pierre Chouteau, Jr., & Company, he executed the sale of Fort John to the army. A cryptic postscript to a letter he wrote in May 1849, a few weeks before the army took over the post, may document the fur traders’ sense of alienation from their own “culture.” Writing to his old

friend Andrew Drips, he observed: "I do not think I shall go back to St. Louis or even to the States again."²²⁸ An earlier traveler, John Ball offered a brief comment on the types of men that he encountered on the Platte River trail in 1832. He saw "cultured men from the city and country down to white men lower than the Indian himself. Men of high-toned morals down to such as had left the country for its good, or perhaps rather for personal safety."²²⁹ Fur traders were a mixed lot, and probably represented a fair cross-section of contemporary male American society.

The traders' social system remained viable until fur traders and Indians alike were overwhelmed by the tide of white American emigration into the west. Government power superseded the informal authority long exercised by traders in "Indian Country." As the traders became marginalized, their limited ability to maintain harmony and influence the course of events declined. Eventually white men with Indian wives were pejoratively labeled as "squaw men," and their "half-breed" children were viewed as "Indian" rather than "white." Racial intolerance and bigotry were among the ideological baggage that the emigrants' wagon trains carried westward, and the fur traders' social system quickly eroded and then vanished under the new pressures. The unraveling of traditional fur trade society on the plains occurred, in the main, between the Mexican-American War (1846-48) and the end of the Civil War (1865). Fort Laramie's social system collapsed in about 1850, while Fort Union's continued until about 1865. Before the collapse, however, Fort Laramie, like other nearby posts, sheltered a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural society, as evidenced by the several comments that follow.

²²⁷ William Kelly, An Excursion to California Over the Prairie, Rocky Mountains, and Great Sierra Nevada (London: Chapman & Hall, 1851; reprinted NY: Arno Press, 1973), p. 153-54 [hereafter cited as Kelly, An Excursion to California].

²²⁸ Bruce Husband, Fort John, May 24, 1849, to Andrew Drips, in Drips Papers, MoHS.

When John Ball traveled west in 1832 as a member of Nathaniel Wyeth's Oregon-bound brigade (which traveled in concert with William Sublette and Robert Campbell), he observed that "whites in [the Indian's] country readily from necessity and convenience, fall into like habits, and soon find but little inconvenience from the same. The Canadian Frenchman seems to adopt their life as readily as though raised in that way, and others the same after a little time."²³⁰

In 1839 F. A. Wislizenus observed some "French Canadians, clad half Indian fashion in leather, and scurrying along on their ponies, bedight with bells and gay ribbons." He also noted that the "Canadian patois" (i.e., French) was commonly heard about the post, and that when he arrived "only five men; four Frenchmen and a German" occupied the post.²³¹ On June 14, 1839, Asahel and Eliza Munger arrived at Fort Laramie and saw "10 men at the fort. 3 of these men had Indian wives—they appeared well—one could speak some English."²³² "At the two Forts in this neighborhood," wrote Rufus Sage in 1841, "were some ten or twelve squaws, married to the white traders and engages of the different fur companies."²³³ He noted that his own contingent of men was comprised of "a choice collection of local varieties,—here was the native of France, of Canada, of England, of Hudson Bay, of Connecticut, of Pennsylvania, of New York, of Kentucky, of Illinois, of Missouri, and of the Rocky Mountains."²³⁴

In 1841 Oregon-bound Joseph Williams stopped at Laramie's Fork, noting that "here is a mixture of people, white, half breeds, French—plenty of talk about their

²²⁹ John Ball, *Autobiography of John Ball*, n.p., from copy at www.xmission.com/drudy/mtman/html/jball.html.

²³⁰ John Ball, *Autobiography of John Ball*, n.p.

²³¹ Wislizenus, *A Journey to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1839*, pp. 67, 69.

²³² "Diary of Asahel Munger and wife (Eliza) 1839;" *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, vol. XIII [cited in Mattes files, FOLA].

²³³ Sage, *Rocky Mountain Life*, p. 181.

damnation but more about their salvation.” He mentioned that he had “passed an old fort below the mouth of the Larrimee [sic] River; & crossing that river, we went up to a new fort that they were building, called Fort Johns.”²³⁵ One overland traveler named William Kelly who visited Fort Laramie in 1849 had expected to find a “bold fortress, perched, in stern solitary grandeur, on a beetling crag,” but was disappointed with the “wretched reality” of the post. He saw only “a miserable, cracked, dilapidated, adobe, quadrangular enclosure, with a wall about twelve feet high, three sides of which were shedded down as stores and workshops, the fourth, or front, having a two-story erection, with a projecting balcony, for hurtling projectiles or hot water on the foe, propped all around on the outside with beams of timber, which an enemy had only to kick away and down would come the whole structure.” At the time of his visit, he wrote, “the trade is exclusively confined to buffalo robes.” He mentioned that Bruce Husband, the *bourgeois* of Scottish origin, was “a most obliging, intelligent, and communicative person” who allowed passersby to use the blacksmith’s forge to shrink their wagon tires. He also noted that there were “besides the governor, a superintendent and ten men employed in stowing and packing robes and skins, who were all greatly in need of clothing of one sort or another.” The *engagés* traded a few premium robes for some of the emigrants’ surplus clothes. The overlanders also donated “a supply of sugar, coffee, tobacco and flour, as they were completely out of these necessaries, and did not expect a supply for a couple of months,” but a good supply of “jerked buffalo-beef” was on hand.²³⁶

²³⁴ Sage, *Rocky Mountain Life*, p. 39.

²³⁵ Joseph Williams, *Narrative of a Tour from the State of Indiana to the Oregon Territory* (New York: Cadmus Books, 1921), p. 38 [cited in Mattes files, FOLA].

²³⁶ William Kelly, *An Excursion to California*, pp. 153-58.

In 1843 the post's occupants were characterized as "mostly French" who had married Sioux women. Johnson and Winter's guidebook, Route Across the Rocky Mountains, described the adobe post in 1845 as having walls "six feet in thickness and fifteen in height," enclosing an area of 150 feet square. "Within and around the wall," the writers continued, "are the buildings, constructed of the same materials. These are a trading house, Warehouse for storing goods & skins, Shops and Dwellings for the traders & men. In the center is a large open area. A portion of the enclosed space is cut off by a partition wall, forming a carell for the animals."²³⁷ In 1846 Edwin Bryant found "Mr. Richard" in charge of Fort Bernard, about eight miles east of Fort Laramie, where some traders from Taos were trading flour with the Indians. He also noted that "a profusion of whiskey" was being traded to several thousand Sioux at Fort Laramie, and that the men at the post raised cattle and poultry and were well supplied with milk from their cows.²³⁸

The elite Bostonian Francis Parkman left a few noteworthy comments on the people he saw in and around the post in 1846. Parkman took a dim view of emigrants on the California-Oregon Trail who headed west from the backwoods of the southern mountains. They were, he thought, "for the most part . . . the rudest and most ignorant of the frontier population." Fearful that the traders were encouraging Indians to attack overlanders, these uneducated frontiers-people believed that the "French Indians, as they called the trappers and traders . . . bore them no good will."²³⁹ Strangely, their attitude may well have been an artifact of the strongly negative views that frontier Americans developed regarding French Canadians during the "French and Indian Wars" of nearly a

²³⁷ Johnson and Winter, Route Across the Rocky Mountains, p. 14 [cited in Mattes files, FOLA].

²³⁸ Edwin Bryant, What I Saw in California (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1848; London: Richard Bentley, 1849), p. 107 [cited in Mattes files, FOLA].

²³⁹ Parkman, The Oregon Trail, p. 92.

century earlier. It is a bit ironic that Parkman, who would devote much of his life to studying this period in American history, himself bore the Franco-Canadians no great love.

Two Mormon emigrants left brief but illuminating notes when they passed in June 1847. William Clayton and Howard R. Egan both arrived at the Laramie River on June 2. Clayton "went up to the remains of an old Fort called Fort Platte which is near the banks of the river, the outside walls are still standing, but the inside is in ruins, having been burned up." Egan noted that "the outside walls are still standing. But the inside is in ruins, having been burned. The walls are built of Spanish brick." Clayton then went to "Fort Laramie about two miles farther west. This latter fort was first built of wood about thirteen years since, and named Fort William, but being destroyed was afterwards built seven years ago with adobes and named John. It stands on the bank of Laramie Fork. . . a stream forty-one yards wide, a very swift current, but not deep."²⁴⁰

Many traders married Indian women and helped raise mix-blood children. Several observers, as already indicated, mentioned families living at Fort Laramie. In 1838 Myra F. Eells, a missionary's wife, met "a number of Indian women . . . neatly dressed and ornamented with beads. Suppose they are wives of white men at the Fort and in the mountains." The next day, May 30, "[t]hree Indian women, wives of Captain Drips, Fontanelle [sic] and Wood, with their children" visited her. Mrs. Eells noted that the

²⁴⁰ "William Clayton Journal, Salt Lake City, 1921" [cited in Mattes files, FOLA]; also Howard R. Egan, *Pioneering the West, 1846 to 1878*, p. 63.

“children are quite white and can read a little.” She thought the post resembled the Connecticut State Prison.²⁴¹

Taking a spouse according to the “custom of the country” allowed for considerable marital flexibility. Both marriage and divorce were simple matters, particularly for men but sometimes for women as well. When the opposition trader John Sibille showed up at his post (Fort Platte) with a new bride on November 27, 1841, his partner David Adams wrote, “she is a betr lucking peas then the furst one that run Away from him thow I don’t now how long this one will stay.”²⁴²

Some traders lived with or married women from New Mexico. One such man was Edward Bartram, who had worked at Fort Laramie as early in 1838 and by 1842 was an employee of Sibille & Adams. Bartram had an Hispanic companion or “wife” whose cross-gender dressing overturned the norms of wifely deportment. According to David Adams, when Bartram was sent to trade with Brulé Sioux, he was accompanied by “a spanish woman by the name of elan she was kep by mr bartram it was lafiabl to sean her when thay started bartram had drest hur in his one [own] a perils and she lucked mor lik a boy of 15 years old then a woman she mounted hur hors a stradl and galoped of lik a gorgy [Georgia?] magr and loked bold as a champion.”²⁴³

In 1846 a member of the ill-fated Donner Party stopped at Fort Laramie and noted that the white men of the fort had Indian wives, and “many children” were at play in the

²⁴¹ “Journal of Myra F. Eells,” Transactions of the Oregon Pioneer Association (Portland, 1889) [cited in Mattes files, FOLA].

²⁴² Hanson, ed., The David Adams Journals, p. 21 (date of November 27, 1841). For an extended discussion of cross-cultural and cross-ethnic marriage, see Sylvia Van Kirk, Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur Trade Society, 1670-1870 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983).

²⁴³ Hanson, ed., The David Adams Journals, p. 46 (date of November 5, 1842).

plaza.²⁴⁴ In June 1847 the Mormon overlander Orson Pratt noted that Fort Laramie was “occupied by about 18 men with their families, under the charge of Mr. Boudeau.”²⁴⁵

Another Mormon who passed in August mentioned that the post was “occupied by some Frenchmen,” adding that “they sell and buy cattle” when overlanders passed by.²⁴⁶ In the same summer the Mormon leader Brigham Young passed by at the fort, stopping there on June 2-4. One contemporary source alleged that there was “an old Frenchman at the fort with a half-breed daughter; to her Brigham took a great fancy, and he tried to get her to join the party. She refused.”²⁴⁷

In 1847, according to Miles Goodyear, “Mr. Papin” was “the chief proprietor of Fort John.”²⁴⁸ Elija Bryant Farnham penned one of the final references to the traders who lived at the post before the army took it over in June 1849. “The inhabitants of this fort,” he wrote, “consist at this time of about 18 to 20 traders and trappers, regular old ‘hosses’ as they term themselves. Some of these have squaw wives living with them here at the fort.” Altogether, he considered the men “a rough, outlandish, whiskey drinking looking set having neither the affections or desires of more civilized men.”²⁴⁹ By July 5, there were “at the fort about 50 men, officers and soldiers. There were several camps of mountaineers, trappers & Indians just outside the fort.”²⁵⁰

²⁴⁴ Eliza P. Houghton, Expedition of the Donner Party (Los Angeles: Grafton Publishing Company, 1920), p. 27 [cited in Mattes files, FOLA].

²⁴⁵ Orson Pratt, Exodus of Modern Israel, date of June 1, 1847 [citation in Mattes files, FOLA].

²⁴⁶ Jesse Crosby, “The History and Journal of the Life and Travels of Jesse W. Crosby (Mormon),” Annals of Wyoming, 11: 3 (July, 1939), p. 176 [citation in Mattes files, FOLA].

²⁴⁷ Nelson, Fifty Years on the Trail, p. 88 [citation in Mattes files, FOLA].

²⁴⁸ Charles Kelly and Maurice L. Howe, Miles Goodyear, First Citizen of Utah [citation from Mattes files, FOLA].

²⁴⁹ Citations from Mattes’s typescript excerpts of E. B. Farnham ms. journal, June 16, 1849 [Mattes files, FOLA].

²⁵⁰ Oliver Goldsmith, Overland in '49, journal date of July 5, 1849 [citation from Mattes files, FOLA].

While it is obvious that the populace of fur trading forts was ethnically diverse, some Anglo-American “mountaineers” such as Sage displayed blatant bigotry in their characterization of some groups. Among those most frequently singled out for abuse were Hispanic men from New and Old Mexico. In a description of some New Mexican traders, Sage noted that “some of them were as black as veritable negroes, and needed only the curly hair, thick lips, and flattened nose, to define the genuine Congo in appearance. A more miserable looking gang of filthy half-naked, ragamuffins, I never before witnessed.”²⁵¹

Numerous “Mexicans” or “Spaniards,” most of them undoubtedly from New Mexico, found work at fur posts from the Yellowstone to the Arkansas. They were almost universally recognized as the best horse-breakers, mule-packers and herdsmen around. Even the bilious Sage admitted that a “large number of Mexicans are employed at the different trading posts in this vicinity. They prove quite useful as horse-guards, and also in taking care of cattle and doing the drudgery connected with these establishments. . . . Their wages vary from four to ten dollars per month, which they receive in articles of traffic at an exorbitant price.”²⁵² What Sage fails to mention in his commentary is that in the early 1840s the average fur company *engagé*—of whatever ethnicity—who was hired at St. Louis received about \$140 per year, or less than twelve dollars per month. Hundreds of *engagé* contracts held in collections of the Missouri Historical Society files attest to this fact. Since the New Mexican populace was predominately an isolated and impoverished one, it is not too surprising that they would work for less money than was paid to workers hired at the bustling, economically healthy city of St. Louis.

²⁵¹ Sage, *Rocky Mountain Life*, p. 211; see also pp. 42-3 for a diatribe on the “Mexican” character.

²⁵² Sage, *Rocky Mountain Life*, p. 212.

According to overlander William Kelly, mastering the techniques of tying packs on recalcitrant mules “required a long head to remember and a strong hand to execute,” for “such is the variety and eccentricity of hitchings and twistings according to the Mexican mode, in which nation the science of packing animals ranks amongst the learned professions.”²⁵³ Clearly, handling mules and horses was a demanding job that required a great deal of both aptitude and experience.

Sage’s rather vicious bigotry, particularly his anti-Catholicism and hostility toward Hispanic economic and social systems, probably helps to explain why he chose to accompany Charles Warfield’s band of thugs on their feeble attacks on peaceable New Mexican citizens in the summer of 1843. Like many Americans, Sage considered native southwestern tribes such as the Pueblos and Navajos to be superior in almost every respect to Hispanic New Mexicans. Sage joined up with Warfield’s “Texians” under the pretense of conquering land claimed (entirely illegally) by the Republic of Texas. Their campaign of invasion resulted in but one raid on the small village of Mora, New Mexico, where they inflicted several civilian casualties and made off with a quantity of livestock and food. A few weeks later Lt. Philip St. George-Cooke ran the ruffians out of New Mexico.

The standard diet at Fort Laramie consisted largely of meat—usually bison. Meat was served fresh, dried, or frozen. Low status employees—the *engagés*—usually received meat and “grease” (lard) with corn, peas, or the like as their everyday fare. Higher status employees were likely to eat better quality foods in greater varieties. At the largest fur forts, such as Fort Union, variable foods and dining arrangements underscored

²⁵³ Kelly, An Excursion to California, pp. 160-61.

the social differences between low grade hired hands and the upper rank of employees. While meat was undoubtedly the dietary mainstay at Fort Laramie, visitors at the post as well as some inventories and manifests indicate that other foods were available.

In 1834, while Sublette and Campbell's workers were building the original post, the missionary Jason Lee had noted in his diary that some employees were planting corn nearby.²⁵⁴ In 1839 F. A. Wislizenus noted that "No attention is paid to agriculture, although the ground seems suitable for it. Hunting is the sole reliance for food. All we found in stock at that time was dried buffalo meat."²⁵⁵

Matt Field, who visited Fort Laramie in 1843, noted that on July 8 he bought "30 pounds of Toas[sic] meal," as well as "butter from Fort La Ramee," and "plenty of rich milk."²⁵⁶ He also mentions eating "fried dried meat, coffee, milk, crollers, fried eggs, butter and cheese!" as well as "bread and butter—milk & tea" at Fort Laramie.²⁵⁷ Field makes no reference to vegetables, but it is clear that dairy cows and poultry were on hand.

In 1845 men planted a field of corn at Fort Laramie, but it failed due to drought.²⁵⁸ A Mormon named Howard R. Egan who passed the fort in June 1847 noted, possibly also referring to the year 1845, that the "first year corn was planted there it done very well, but none could be raised since for want of rain as it had not rained for two years there until a few days ago."²⁵⁹ Edwin Bryant, who passed by the fort in 1846, wrote that "timber in the vicinity is very scarce," adding, "Not a foot of ground around the fort

²⁵⁴ Cornelius J. Brosnan, Jason Lee, Prophet of the New Oregon (New York: Macmillan, 1932), p. 53.

²⁵⁵ F. A. Wislizenus, A Journey to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1839, p. 69.

²⁵⁶ Field, Prairie and Mountain Sketches, p. 85.

²⁵⁷ Field, Prairie and Mountain Sketches, pp. 75, 79.

²⁵⁸ Lecompte, Pueblo, Hardscrabble, Greenhorn, p. 170.

²⁵⁹ Howard R. Egan, Pioneering the West, 1846 to 1878, p. 63.

is under cultivation. Experiments have been made with corn, wheat, and potatoes, but they either result in entire failures, or were not so successful as to authorize a renewal.”²⁶⁰

Bryant also commented on the personnel and their food: “I was invited by Mr. Bordeau and other officers of the American Fur Company to dine with them. The dinner consisted of boiled corn beef, cold biscuit, and milk. These gentlemen (and some of them are gentlemen in manners and intelligence) informed me that this was their usual fare, when they could obtain flour, which was not always the case. In the absence of bread, they subsist on fresh buffalo-meat, venison, salt beef, and milk.”²⁶¹

Perhaps no “official” vegetable garden was ever planted at early Fort Laramie. Most of the other large “AFCo” posts such as Fort Pierre and Fort Union regularly planted vegetable gardens, with varying success. No seeds or other garden supplies appear in extant inventories or requisitions from Fort Laramie, although a “Watering Pot” is listed in some. By comparison, men at Fort Union at the Yellowstone and Missouri rivers ordered packets of seeds and planted crops for a number of years.

Turning to the manifests and inventories, one finds evidence of other food-related items. The 1845 inventory for “Fort John” includes “1 Fishing Net” as an “article in use,” which meant that the item was a semi-permanent part of the post property rather than one meant strictly for sale. Likewise, under “Kitchen Furniture” one finds a variety of iron and tin kettles and frying pans, as well as coffee boilers, “grid irons,” “Sugar Bowls,” “Cream Pots,” “Coffee Mills,” a “Milk Pitcher,” and a butter churn. Livestock inventoried included “Indian Horses,” mules, oxen, cows, “Yearlings,” and “Calves,” but

²⁶⁰ Edwin Bryant, What I Saw in California, p. 109.

²⁶¹ Edwin Bryant, What I Saw in California, p. 110.

smaller barnyard creatures such as chickens, dogs and cats are not mentioned.²⁶² The 1845, 1846, and 1847 inventories include two "Bake Ovens," presumably those usually called "dutch ovens."²⁶³

Shipping lists from 1848, 1849, and 1850 disclose additional information regarding foods as well as medicinal preparations sent to Fort Laramie. In the 1849 list the following items appeared: "Lemon Syrup," rice, dried apples, molasses, flour, navy and pilot bread, "Pepper Sauce," raisins, sugar, and "ass[orte]d Candy." The 1850 lists include these items as well as three boxes of Young Hyson tea.²⁶⁴ Some of these products, no doubt, were slated for trade, but the post's residents probably consumed some as well.

All large fur posts kept some medical supplies on hand, and Fort Laramie was no exception. In general, it seems that the "mountain men" and traders enjoyed relatively good health. Fort Laramie's founders, Sublette and Campbell, were both tubercular, and they were certainly not alone in going west to seek a cure. Many early "health-seekers" found that plains travel brought a temporary or permanent cure for their ailments. Thinking of the men with whom he traveled in 1832, John Ball wrote, "Some made the season's trip from the miasmatic air of the Mississippi [valley] and its city follies to

²⁶² "Inventory of Stock the property of Upper Missouri Outfit 1844 remaining on hand at Fort John, 26 May, 1845 . . .," in Chouteau Collection, MoHS (Fur Trade Collection microfilm, roll 11, book JJ, pp. 224-227).

²⁶³ "Inventory of Stock the Property of Upper Miss Outfit 1844 remaining on hand at Fort John 26 May 1845 transferred to Upper Miss O 1845," in Chouteau Collection, MoHS (Fur Trade Collection microfilm, roll 11, book JJ, pp. 224-27); "Inventory of Stock the property of Upper Missouri Outfit 1845 remaining on hand at Fort John, April 25, 1846 . . .," in Chouteau Collection, MoHS (Fur Trade Collection microfilm, roll 11, book JJ, pp. 313-322); and "Inventory of merchandise the property of P. Chouteau Junr & Co, Upper Miss Outfit 1846 on hand at Fort John April 16, 1847 . . .," in Chouteau Collection, MoHS (Fur Trade Collection microfilm, roll 11, book JJ, pp. 434-39).

recuperate their bodily and mental derangement. And it proved a great specific. This mountain-pure air and ever-shining sun is a grand, helpful thing for both soul and body, especially when feeding on only meat and water.”²⁶⁵ Perhaps Ball overestimated the virtue of a “meat and water” diet, but he was correct in averring that the high, dry atmosphere was healthier than the disease-wracked Mississippi River Valley. Still, residents at Fort William/Fort John/Fort Laramie had their share of health problems.

Broken bones, burns, and frostbite were fairly common occurrences; gunshot wounds among the white traders were rarer. Some men at each post would probably have contracted gonorrhea, referred to at Fort Union (and perhaps elsewhere) as the “Blackfoot Sqwaw complaint.”²⁶⁶ Smallpox and cholera outbreaks occurred in the late 1840s, at the end of the fur post’s career. Oddly, the deadly smallpox epidemic that swept through the Upper Missouri in 1837 seems to have elicited no comment from residents at Fort Laramie.

No extensive listing of medical goods at Fort Laramie has appeared, but a few shipping list items indicate that some were definitely on hand. In 1848 Fort Laramie’s *bourgeois* ordered several medical items, such as opodeldoc, “Turlington’s Balsam,” peppermint, Epsom salts, a quart of “Sp[anish?] Camphor,” “Lees Pills,” “2 doz. Mustard” (possibly plasters), paregoric, and laudanum. The last two items are tincturated forms of opium used as painkillers. The requisition called for two dozen units (bottles presumably, but the capacity is not specified) of paregoric and two ounces of laudanum.

²⁶⁴ “Upper Missouri Outfit 1849: Fort John,” in Chouteau Collection, MoHS (Fur Trade Collection microfilm, roll 14, book OO, pp. 170-73, 218); “Upper Missouri Outfit 1850: Fort John,” in Chouteau Collection, MoHS (Fur Trade Collection microfilm, roll 14, book OO, pp. 363-65).

²⁶⁵ John Ball, *Autobiography of John Ball*, n.p.

²⁶⁶ Charles Larpenteur’s ms. journal, June 8, 1835, in Larpenteur Family Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

This was probably an insufficient quantity to justify Sage's claim that the "AFCo" regularly sold drugged liquor to Indians.²⁶⁷

Camphor, like saltpetre, was used as an antaphrodisiac, a substance reputed to quell sexual desire. Opodeldoc had more than one meaning: it could imply a sort of plaster used on wounds, or it might be an ointment composed of Castile soap dissolved in alcohol with perhaps the addition of oil of rosemary and/or tincture of opium. Nitre may mean saltpetre, allegedly used as an antaphrodisiac, and may also mean a substance used as an emetic to relieve constipation.²⁶⁸ Seidlitz powder, comprised of tartaric acid and bicarbonate of soda, was likewise used as an emetic or possibly for indigestion, rather like modern-day Alka-Seltzer. Epsom salts originated from the waters of a famous curative spring in the town of Epsom, England. Consisting of hydrated magnesium sulfate, the result of evaporating the spring water, it too was used as a cathartic or an emetic. Given the preponderance of emetics in the fur traders' pharmacopoeia, it seems likely that their dependence on a meat-heavy diet may have created digestive problems. Perhaps the "Pepper Sauce" regularly ordered was used as a sort of digestive aid as well as for spicing up the monotonous buffalo meat diet.

In 1849 more medicinal goods and dyestuffs were ordered. On this list appears Chinese and American vermilion, "Chrome Yellow," and verdigris, all probably intended for sale to Indians. Also included were peppermint, Epsom salts, "Lees Pills," sugar of lead, Seidlitz powder and a "Box for Medicines."²⁶⁹ In 1850 another half-dozen units of

²⁶⁷ "Upper Miss. O 1848: Fort John," in Chouteau Collection, MoHS (Fur Trade Collection microfilm, roll 14, book OO, pp. 34-38).

²⁶⁸ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, citing a late sixteenth century source, nitre may be a "decoction of the meat of the Gourde, with a little honnie and Nitre, and that drunke doth loose gently the belly."

²⁶⁹ "Upper Miss. O 1849: Fort John," in Chouteau Collection, MoHS (Fur Trade Collection microfilm, roll 14, book OO, pp. 170-73).

Seidlitz powder arrived.²⁷⁰ Sugar of lead (lead acetate) was a compound used as eye-water (or eye-wash), presumably to alleviate irritation of the eyes.

Games and amusements played an important role in fur traders' society. No doubt they helped pass time during slack seasons, and they might also have helped to solidify or maintain relationships among traders and Indians. One commentator on this topic is Rufus Sage, who worked for Lancaster Lupton in the early 1840s. While Sage makes relatively few direct references to Fort Laramie, it is reasonable to assume that employees there engaged in the same sorts of pastimes as those at the nearby opposition post. According to Sage, employees at Fort Platte enjoyed "story-telling, ball-playing, foot-racing, target-shooting, or other like amusements." (One cannot help but wonder if fur traders, and possibly their native neighbors, played a game that resembled baseball.) He also noted that in the spring of 1842, some men formed a "club for forensic debate," surely a rare occurrence in "Indian Country" at the time. Native people engaged in varied forms of gambling, with heavy betting on horse races, the "hand game," and "bandy," a native ball game resembling lacrosse.²⁷¹ The game of "hand," a simple guessing game, was popular among natives and traders alike. In many instances the game continued until one or more players lost everything they owned, though sometimes the winner would return items to a loser. In March 1845 Indian women from Fort John and David Adams's opposition post played a game of "bandy." In tortured orthography, Adams described the event: "this aftr noon the squaws from the outhter fort came down and bantred our squs for a game of bandy which the bet was mad and thay went at it but the upr fort out du our

²⁷⁰ "Upper Miss. O 1850," in Chouteau Collection, MoHS (Fur Trade Collection microfilm, roll 14, book OO, p. 443).

squaws on a count that thair was sum of our squaws that was tou fat and clumsy and diant run fastr then a taripin sow the outhur squaws tuk the purs.”²⁷²

Identifying personnel at the post is a challenge. Records are scanty, and it is not possible to reconstruct a complete roster of employees. Still, a search of Chouteau company records discloses a number of names of men who worked at the post in given years. The lists are almost certainly incomplete, yet they still offer insight into the social composition of the post. Plainly, the majority is of French origin, which squares precisely with a general assessment of fur post populations: most hired hands and some elites were indeed French Canadians. In 1840 the following men were UMO *engagés* assigned (at least for part of the year) to “Laramie”: Clément Chatillion, Henry Chatillion, Thomas Pitre[?], Louis Cataland, Louis Menard, Vincent D. Guion, Joseph Arpin (probably a corruption of “Arpent”), Olivier Buisson, Pierre Langelier, Charles Rémond, and George Bousquet.²⁷³

In 1842, the names J. Lee, Manta, A. Montgomery, and P. D. Papin turn up. (If I am not mistaken, below the name of A. Montgomery appears the word, “Dead.”)²⁷⁴ The account books for Fort John personnel in 1843 include: Joseph Bourdeau, Rouville Brunot, Basil Clement, George Goulais, F. X. Delorier, J. V. Hamilton (who must have made purchases at the post while acting as prohibition agent), Bernard Janis, Thomas

²⁷¹ Sage, *Rocky Mountain Life*, pp. 180-81.

²⁷² Hanson, ed., *The David Adams Journals*, p. 96 (date of March 10, 1845).

²⁷³ Fur Trade Papers microfilm, MoHS; roll 8, book CC, pp. 236, 238, 241, 250, 275, 288.

²⁷⁴ Fur Trade Papers microfilm, MoHS; roll 10, book II, pp. 1, 51, 55, 56, 92.

Daurion, Maxent Deroin, William Wilson, Louis Dohlam [?], Henry Collins, William Sylvain, Pierre Bernabé and Oscar Sarpy.²⁷⁵

Men listed in 1844 include: Eugène Flotran, Simon Dupéré, Firmin[?] Douville, Andrew Drips (serving as a government agent), Louis Trudeau and Toussin Dagneau.²⁷⁶ In 1845 the following names appear: William Tucker, Charles Papiche, Pierre Deroin, William P. May, François Barbin, Joseph Picotte, Paul Daurion, Eugène Montalant, William Tison, Henry Clermon, Louis Lejeunne, and (very interestingly) Léon Laramé. Perhaps Laramé was related to the man whose name was given to the creek.²⁷⁷

For 1846 only two names have so far surfaced; probably a closer examination of Chouteau company records (in the Fur Trade Papers microfilm set) would disclose more. They are William Lacerte and Eugene Guerin.²⁷⁸ Fortunately, Francis Parkman left a fairly lengthy list of men he encountered at the post in 1846, among whom are names already noted. They include: "Bordeaux," the bourgeois and his wife "Marie;" "a trader named McClosky;" Paul Dorion, a "Dahcotah from the Missouri, a reputed son of the half-breed interpreter, Pierre Dorion, so often mentioned in Irving's 'Astoria';" "Vaskiss and May," and [Eugène?] "Monthalon," traders who were "the only persons then in the fort who could read and write." Monthalon was "the clerk," and Bordeaux was the acting "bourgeois" although Papin was considered "the legitimate bourgeois." Parkman also mentions "Tucker [and] Simoneau," as well as a blacksmith named "Roubidou" (probably Joseph, at the nearby non-affiliated post). Personnel mentioned only in passing included: Raymond, Deslauriers, Reynal and his wife Margot, as well as "Gingras the

²⁷⁵ Fur Trade Papers microfilm, MoHS; roll 10, book II, various pages.

²⁷⁶ Fur Trade Papers microfilm, MoHS; roll 10, book II, various pages.

²⁷⁷ Fur Trade Papers microfilm, MoHS; roll 10, book II, various pages.

²⁷⁸ Fur Trade Papers microfilm, MoHS; roll 10, book II, pp. 261, 299.

trapper” and “a trader named Bisonette.” Parkman also saw a black man, apparently a former slave who had run away from his master on the frontier in 1845 and joined “the party of Richard,” the opposition trader.²⁷⁹

In 1847 the following names appear (though there were undoubtedly others):
Auguste Raboin, John Brouliard, Joseph Baudoin, Antonio Lamore, William Leveque,
Hebert Ayott, and J. V. Hamilton.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁹ Francis Parkman, The Oregon Trail.

²⁸⁰ Fur Trade Papers microfilm, MoHS; roll 10, book FF and II, various pages.

16. Sale of the Post to the Government, 1849:

By 1849 the volume of traffic on the overland trails to California and Oregon had grown vastly. New Mexico, Texas, and California had been wrested from Mexico's weak grasp, and now the news of gold discoveries on the strangely-named "American River" spread like a prairie fire, luring thousands of men mostly, the bulk of them unschooled in frontier life or travel. Mormon families and individuals continued their westward exodus to the new Zion in Utah, now ironically a part of the United States they had sought to escape. Civilian and military traffic on the Santa Fe Trail was likewise booming. Meanwhile, many Indian tribes were rapidly growing nervous about the immense number of passersby who killed their game and drove the buffalo away, and whose livestock grazed their grass. Making matters still worse, in 1849 cholera followed in the wake of the overlanders' wagons. Under a variety of pressures, the days of the old-time Platte River fur trade were fast drawing to a close, and the western plains seemed like a powder keg set for an explosion. It was within this context that the United States Army became interested in acquiring the post.

Soldiers first came to Fort John in 1845. Members of the 1st U.S. Dragoons serving under Colonel Stephen Watts Kearny "were directed to proceed to the Great South Pass of the Rocky Mountains, partly to protect the emigrants thus far upon their route, and likewise to ascertain the military resources of the country." They were also to determine the "strength, manners and customs, and mode of warfare, of the different

tribes of Indians that lay in their way:—together with their disposition towards the whites—their method of subsistence, &c, &c.”²⁸¹

On June 15 the dragoons came to Fort Platte and Fort John. Lieutenant James H. Carleton noted that: “The mouth of the Laramie River, where these two forts are, is the great centre to which all the bands of Indians round about, come to trade away their buffalo robes and other peltry; and from which the hunters are sent out into the lands to procure a sufficient supply of meat for the numerous employees of the two rival establishments.”²⁸² One of the dragoon officers, Lieutenant Phillip St. George-Cooke, wrote that: “The fort swarmed with women and children whose language—like their complexions—is various and mixed,—Indian, French, English, and Spanish; they live nearly exclusively on dried buffalo meat, for which the hunters go at least fifty miles.”²⁸³

John Charles Frémont and Francis Parkman were among the first to suggest, in printed media, the utility of transferring Fort Laramie to the government for use as a military post, but they were not alone. Thomas Fitzpatrick, the former mountain man who took a job as Indian agent for the Upper Platte and Arkansas agency, shared their views. “My opinion,” he wrote in 1847, “is that a post at, or, in the vicinity of Laramie is much wanted, it would be nearly the center of the buffalo range, where all the most formidable Indian tribes are fast approaching and near where there will eventually (as the game decreases) be a great struggle for the ascendancy [sic].” Fitzpatrick believed that a military post at Laramie would “keep the Pani in check by being above them and thereby limit their range, and cut off all hope of a retreat into the wild in case of an apprehended

²⁸¹ Louis Pelzer, ed., The Prairie Logbooks: Dragoon Campaigns to the Pawnee Villages in 1844, and to the Rocky Mountains in 1845, by Lieutenant J. Henry Carleton (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), p. 157 [hereafter cited as Pelzer, ed., The Prairie Logbooks].

²⁸² Pelzer, ed., The Prairie Logbooks, p. 247.

attack.” He also thought that two or three additional posts, including one at the fur post of Fort Hall, would protect the entire overland route between Fort Leavenworth and the Columbia River.²⁸⁴

In the same year, the Secretary of War had decided that “two more of the chain of posts along the route” to Oregon should be established. One of them would be “at or near Fort Laramie, a trading station of the American Fur Company, some three hundred and fifty miles west of Fort Kearney,” while the other would be at Fort Hall or “somewhere on Bear River or its tributaries, near enough to the Mormon settlements.” During this time, soldiers were moving west onto the plains in greater numbers than ever. Their main job was to protect overlanders and Indians from each other, but they also kept a watchful eye on the Latter Day Saints, who were in the midst of their exodus to the vicinity of Great Salt Lake. Elements of the Mounted Riflemen, the 1st Dragoons, and the 6th Infantry were among the first military units to probe the far western reaches of “Indian Country.” By the summer of 1849 two companies of the rifle regiment and one of the 6th Infantry reached Fort Laramie. The annual report of the Secretary of War for 1849 included the following statement: “After an examination of the country within sixty miles, the site of Old Fort Laramie, situated on the northwest bank of the Laramie river, one mile from its junction with the Platte, was decided to be the most eligible position for a military post, there being building materials, good water, grass, and fuel, within a short distance. This post is regarded as of great importance, being in the midst of several

²⁸³ Pelzer, ed., The Prairie Logbooks, p. 290, n.50.

²⁸⁴ Thomas Fitzpatrick, Fort Leavenworth, January 6, 1847, to Colonel C. Wharton, NA, RG 75 [citation in Mattes files, FOLA]. Note that Parkman’s Oregon Trail was published serially in the Knickerbocker magazine in 1847-49, whereby it may have helped to shape opinion as to the post’s suitability for military use. See James C. Olson, Red Cloud and the Sioux Problem (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 5, n. 4.

powerful tribes of Indians, the principal of which, the Sioux and the Crows, have never been friendly to the whites. The Pawnees also have shown a hostile disposition on various occasions, but more recently by murdering two mail carriers on the road between Fort Kearney and Fort Laramie."²⁸⁵ These statements were not entirely accurate. Fur traders had generally gotten on well with the Sioux, both in the Upper Missouri and the Platte regions, though from time to time squabbles and some violence did occur. The Crow were famed horse thieves, a propensity that caused the traders some discomfort, but violence between the Crow and the traders was very rare. The Pawnee frequently demanded "tolls" from passing traders and overlanders, occasionally ran off horses or other livestock, and had killed a few passers-by, but they had never declared war upon the whites. At this time, however, according to agent Fitzpatrick, more and more Sioux were moving toward the Platte and Arkansas rivers where buffalo and other game seemed to be more abundant than elsewhere.

Within two years the army was prepared to negotiate for the purchase of the post, and Pierre Chouteau, Jr., was willing to sell it. On June 12, 1847, Chouteau sent Secretary of War William L. Marcy a letter containing a proposal to sell Fort John. Noting that he "understood that it is the intention of the Government to establish a Military Post at or near Fort Laramie," he called Marcy's attention to Frémont's recent favorable report on the post. Chouteau then mentioned that he wished to "curtail our business in the Indian Country," and that he was "desirous to dispose of the . . . establishment." Chouteau requested Marcy to empower an officer to "purchase said Fort Laramie, now called 'Fort John,' provided he shall find it advisable and advantageous to

²⁸⁵ Report of the Secretary of War, 1849, Senate Executive Documents, 1st session: 31st Congress, vol. 1, pp. 185-86 [citation from Mattes files, FOLA].

the Government to do so.” “If you think proper to give such instructions,” Chouteau concluded, “and that you do us the honor to advise us of it, we shall be represented by a person, at the time the troops may reach there, fully empowered to act in our behalf.” By July 29 the army engineer department indicated its conditional approval for the deal.²⁸⁶ Perhaps Chouteau thought that Fort John’s economic value was diminishing; perhaps, too, he believed that once the army arrived on the North Platte the trade was liable to be seriously disrupted. At any rate, the army considered the proposal for two years before making a decision.

Fort Laramie would be the first private fur post purchased by the army, but not the last. In 1849 the army was beginning to grapple with the problem of how to move men and supplies to posts in the distant plains. On April 23, 1849, Brevet Major General D. E. Twiggs mentioned the supply problem to Adjutant General R. Jones, and suggested a possible solution. “The American Fur Co,” he wrote, “have a trading post called Fort Pierre, on the Missouri, 1500 miles from its mouth, which is estimated to be not more than 250 miles from Fort Laramie. The establishment of a depot post at that point would greatly reduce the land transportation, though it is by no means certain that this advantage would not be . . . counterbalanced, by the long and difficult river transportation, and other attendant inconveniences.”²⁸⁷ The army’s purchase of Fort John established a western terminus for military operations, but supplying the post remained somewhat problematic, even as military activity in “Indian Country” increased over the coming years. In 1855, in

²⁸⁶ Pierre Chouteau, Jr. & Company, St. Louis, June 12, 1847, to William L. Marcy, Washington, D.C., from a copy in Chouteau Collection [6-12-1847], MoHS.

²⁸⁷ D. E. Twiggs, St. Louis, April 23, 1849, to R. Jones [Washington, D.C.?], Fort Meyer Archives [citation from Mattes files, FOLA].

the midst of General William H. Harney's punitive campaign against the Sioux, the army would also purchase Fort Pierre from Pierre Chouteau, Jr., & Company.

On April 20, 1849, the assistant adjutant general of the 6th Military Department, headquartered at St. Louis, wrote to Lt. D. P. Woodbury as follows: "The Commanding General of the Department directs me to say to you, that, should the position of the Indian Station at Fort Laramie be found the most eligible for the military post to be established in that vicinity, you are authorized to purchase the station of its owners; provided it can be done at a reasonable price say not to exceed two thousand dollars."²⁸⁸

Bruce Husband would be the Chouteau company representative with whom the soldiers would seal the bargain for the post. Husband was aware of the army's approach and apparently took measures to spruce up the fort. He penned a letter from Fort John on May 24, 1849, to Andrew Drips at "Kansas" that mentions his preparations. Drips must have left Fort John quite recently, for he was still there in late April. Two men named Robinson and Burke had been "whitewashing the rooms, repairing chimneys, etc." Meanwhile, the men at the post made money ferrying Mormon emigrants over the swollen Laramie Creek, though trade was slow. "It is a great pity," Husband complained, "you left no robes here as I could sell inferior robes very freely to emigrants at 3 & 4 dollars each." But he had "no robes, no blacksmith to work & no oxen or horses (all of which would be more than ordinarily profitable)." Husband heard from some emigrants that "the freemen who are with the Sioux at Ash Hollow, scare people from having any thing to do with us. Mr. Roubidoux is particularly mentioned as having told them that we were all damned rascals & cheats at this place." Husband, sniffing the winds for future

²⁸⁸ Asst. Adj. Gen. D. C. Buell, St. Louis, April 20, 1849, to D. P. Woodbury [citation from Mattes files, FOLA].

profits in a rapidly changing west, noted that "a fortune in two or three years can be made by taking seven or eight thousand dollars worth of good serviceable merchandise into Salt Lake Valley next autumn or even next spring."²⁸⁹

On June 27 Major W. F. Sanderson and Lieutenant D. P. Woodbury of the "Engineer Department" arrived at Fort John/Fort Laramie with some troopers. Sanderson and Woodbury had been sent out to make the deal for the post, should it turn out to be suitable. Woodbury had been specifically authorized to do so on March 23, 1847, by the Secretary of War, and in August 1848 Congress had appropriated a sum of money to cover the costs of building a new post. The two officers "made a thorough reconnoissance of the country, in the neighborhood of this place, having passed up the Ridge or Mountain road, as far as Boise, (or Big Timber Creek) and returning by the river road." Wrote Sanderson, "This was found to be the most eligible for a military post, and was purchased at my request, on the 26th inst. by Lieut. Woodbury at a cost of four thousand Dollars from Mr. Bruce Husband, Agent of the American Fur Company." Soon Sanderson's men were cutting and hauling timber, burning lime for mortar and coal for forges, and cutting and baling hay for their mounts.²⁹⁰ By early August news of the sale had reached Fort Pierre. Alexander Culbertson wrote to Pierre Chouteau, Jr., that "During my absence letters were received from Mr. Husband who was left in charge of Fort John, stating that he had sold the same to the Government in Compliance with instructions received from you for \$4000." Culbertson added, "there has been an immense emigration to California passing Fort John this season and Mr. Husband has done a profitable

²⁸⁹ Bruce Husband, Fort John, May 24, 1849, to Andrew Drips, in Drips Papers, MoHS. Papers in the collection indicate that Drips was at Fort John on April 23.

²⁹⁰ Albert Watkins, ed., *Nebraska State Historical Society Publications*, vol. ix (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1922), p. 201; also Maj. W. F. Sanderson, Fort Laramie, December 1, 1849, to Adj.

business.” In a separate letter Culbertson, or another unidentified writer, noted that the company had sold Fort John “on very advantageous terms.”²⁹¹

One month later, Lieutenant Aeneas Mackay, deputy quartermaster, praised the “water of the Laramie” as “one of the finest streams emptying in the Platte;” it was “excellent and [was] used for all purposes.” He observed that plenty of firewood was available; both the Platte and Laramie offered both live timber and abundant driftwood. Mackay saw “bottom lands on the rivers . . . covered with excellent pasture, where animals can be herded and fed the whole season.” He noted with satisfaction that in the past six weeks Major Sanderson, “with the aid of only one third of his command, has cut and is duly hauling into the post upward of sixty tons of hay,” adding “tho he may fail in the cultivation of corn, he feels no apprehensions of being able to produce Oats, Barley etc.” Sanderson confidently expected to “sustain all the animals required at the post both summer & winter without any expense to the Government other than those of supplying the necessary means of cultivating the soil by the details from his command.”²⁹²

Evidently, the prospect of buying Fort John displeased some army officers. Lieutenant Mackay noted that he was “much more favorably impressed with the advantages of this station than I had ever expected to be.” Mackay thought the “prejudices which appear to have existed in the minds of everybody in regard to [Fort John], have unjustly deprived it of the credit of many recommendations to which it is entitled.” He believed the site to be “far beyond” that of Fort Kearney “in respect to almost every requisite.” With the new post under the care of the “persevering and

Gen. R. Jones, Washington, D.C.; records of the War Dept., U.S. Army Commands, RG 98 [citation from Mattes files, FOLA].

²⁹¹ Alexander Culbertson, Fort Pierre, August 2, 1849, to Pierre Chouteau, Jr., & Company; also letter to James Kipp dated August 31, 1849; both in “Fort Pierre Letterbook,” Chouteau Collection, MoHS.

discreet" Major Sanderson, Mackay had "no doubt that in another season it will become a most comfortable and desirable station."²⁹³

On September 12, Lt. Woodbury explained why he had apparently exceeded his orders in completing the acquisition of Fort John. Writing to General Joseph Totten, chief of the engineer corps at Washington, in rather labored language, Lt. Woodbury argued that he needed no "special authority . . . for the purchase of Fort Laramie any more than a special authority is necessary for the purchase of a store house, a sail vessel, or any other purchase necessary for the operations of a work of a nature to fulfill the object of the appropriation." General Twiggs (commanding officer of the 6th Military Department) had authorized Woodbury to spend no more than \$2000 for the fur post. The lieutenant "found, however, that the purchase could not be made for less than \$4000.00," and he "gave that sum, being convinced that the interest of the post required it." He also reasoned that, due to the nature of the case, he "could form a better opinion of the proper price than any person at a distance."²⁹⁴

On November 15, Woodbury again wrote to General Totten to verify the army's opinion that at Fort Laramie, only "buildings only have been purchased. The land is still owned by Indians." "The American Fur Company," he added, "legally owned no land and never had authority to purchase land." Woodbury was correct, of course; trade and intercourse laws prohibited private citizens from buying land outright from Indians. Presumably, fur trade posts were to be considered as temporary in nature, even if they did

²⁹² Lt. Aeneas Mackay, Fort Laramie, July 31, 1849, to Maj. Gen. Thomas Jessup, Washington; Fort Meyer Archives [citation from Mattes files, FOLA].

²⁹³ Lt. Aeneas Mackay, Fort Laramie, July 31, 1849, to Maj. Gen. Thomas Jessup, Washington, D. C. [citation from Mattes files, FOLA].

²⁹⁴ Lt. D. P. Woodbury, Fort Kearney, NE, September 12, 1849, to Gen. Joseph G. Totten, Washington, D.C. [citation from Mattes files, FOLA]. Woodbury submitted 21 vouchers to the Chief Engineer, General Totten with this letter. Voucher # 17 was for the purchase of "Fort Laramie."

remain in business for many years. Fortunately, Woodbury took this opportunity to offer some measurements of the post as it then stood. "The old fort," he wrote,

consists in the main of 19 rooms, varying in size from 12 feet square to 12 by 29 feet, and running round an open space 80 feet by 72 feet. Two of the 19 rooms belong to a two story building having two rooms in the second story, making 21 rooms in all.

The outside walls are 3 feet thick at bottom, and diminish, by two off-sets on the inside, to less than 2 feet at the top. The partition walls are generally two feet thick.

Adjacent to the open space above mentioned, and connected with it by a passage of 8 feet wide, is another open space about 80 feet by 45 feet, surrounded on one side by buildings already described, on another by a barn 25 feet square and a stable 12 feet by 18 feet, on the third by a 3 foot wall about 15 feet high and on the fourth by a similar room.

The rooms will average about 8 feet high, the roofs are covered with earth sloping about 1 foot in four. There are towers 6 feet square at two of the angles and another over the principal entrance.²⁹⁵

On December 1, Maj. Sanderson wrote to Maj. Gen. R. Jones to offer "more definite information concerning the purchase of this Fort." He noted that Lt. Woodbury had paid Bruce Husband, "Agent of the American Fur Company," \$4000 "for the buildings and improvements." He observed that "this section of Country . . . is claimed by the Sioux, the Arapahoes, and the Cheyennes," adding, "the Chiefs of the several Bands are to assemble at this post in the Spring, at which time it is proposed to purchase the ground."²⁹⁶

In June 1849, just before the army moved into the post, an overlander named Elija Bryant Farnham stopped briefly at Fort John. Farnham was among the last overland travelers to visit the post before its conversion, though by the summer of 1849 thousands of emigrants and argonauts clogged the trail. Jettisoned furniture, household goods, food,

²⁹⁵ Lt. D. P. Woodbury, Fort Kearney, NE, November 15, 1849, to Gen. Joseph G. Totten, Washington, D.C. [citation from Mattes files, FOLA].

²⁹⁶ Maj. W. F. Sanderson, Fort Laramie, December 1, 1849, to Adj. Gen. R. Jones, Washington, D.C.; records of the War Dept., U.S. Army Commands, RG 98 [citation from Mattes files, FOLA].

wagons, and hundreds of dead, strayed, or abandoned livestock along the way made maps utterly unnecessary. Truly, emigrants had merely, and literally, to “follow their noses” to California. Farnham’s party pitched its tents next to Maj. Sanderson’s detachment on June 14. The following day Farnham caught up with and passed a large “Government train,” and that evening found him only eight miles from Fort John. On June 16 his party waited with “quite a number” of other trains to cross the Laramie River. As Farnham wrote, “all was excitement to get across. Something was ahead, it seemed like a gala day as a convention, 4th of July, or such time was at hand to which we were going to have a recreation.” Perhaps all the emigrants who forded the Laramie shared Farnham’s jubilation, for the river crossing marked the end of plains travel and the onset of mountain travel. But this was certainly a special day. Suddenly, there came “the sound of the cannon, that was fired to greet the arrival of Major Sanderson, came booming from the fort. The hills around echoed the report, one from another, and it dwelt long among them before it would die away. It was soul stirring; the sound of these successive reports in this expansive wild.” Stirring indeed, for it marked the symbolic, and actual, transfer of a certain kind of authority in the central plains from private fur trading entrepreneurs to soldiers representing the government and citizens of the United States.²⁹⁷

Readers who suspect that the symbolism involved in the post’s transfer has been overblown in the preceding passage might consider the testimony of an eyewitness to the event, a California-bound Ohioan named Samuel Rutherford Dundass. More philosophical than most overland journalists, Dundass waxed poetic on June 16, 1849, when he noticed that “from a point in the wall, our national flag waves high, inspiring the

²⁹⁷ Citations from Mattes’s typescript excerpts of E. B. Farnham ms. journal, dates of June 14-16, 1849 [Mattes files, FOIA].

wearied emigrant with new emotions of patriotic regard for the land of his birth; a country that even in these western wilds, has planted her colors, and has made provision for the security of her citizens." Soon after lauding the "generous eagle" of the "Republican Empire," Dundass pondered the darker meaning of this day. "This fort," he wrote, "with its munitions of war, involves a fact not very complimentary to our civilization, that the rights of the poor Indian have been so invaded, and his combative passions so aroused in consequence of the encroachment, as to create a necessity for this defensive establishment on the great highway to the Pacific shores."²⁹⁸ Few westward-bound Americans, it seems, shared Dundass' solicitude for the native people of the plains. And in the fullness of time—just a few short years ahead in actuality—the plains would be plunged into a three-decades-long war over who would control the west. The final act of this conflict would be played upon a windy, snow-drifted, and bloody stage at the Wounded Knee massacre site in 1890.

Offering a few final notes regarding the post's future under army control seems in order, even though it lies beyond the scope of this report. Robert Campbell, one of the fort's original builders, came back to play a role later in its history. Because of his earlier association with the post, it seems reasonable to include these bits of information. Campbell had created a partnership with "Major" John Dougherty for the purpose of shipping freight to Fort Laramie after the army bought it. Dougherty's son, Lewis, spent about ten years sutling at forts Kearney and Laramie.²⁹⁹

Several letters written in 1849 indicate that Campbell and Dougherty were angling to receive a contract for shipping goods to Fort Laramie. On April 2, 1849,

²⁹⁸ "Journal of Samuel Rutherford Dundass," date of June 16, 1849 (Steubenville, OH: Printed at Conn's Job Office, 1857) [citation from Mattes files, FOLA].

Campbell wrote that he had placed a bid to ship goods to the post at ten cents per pound, noting that “my impression is that we can make money on this contract very fast.”³⁰⁰ A short time later Campbell informed Dougherty that he would “probably engage Eugene Montalant at \$600 per annum to go to Fort Laramie in case we get the sutlership—he was formerly in the employ of Chouteau as clerk at Laramie and they want him again.” He added that he had “spoken both to Col. Loring and VanVliet and other officers on the subject of the sutlership and I think all will lend their aid for our success.”³⁰¹

A few days later Campbell suggested to Dougherty that he “spend nearly all [his] time at the Fort [Leavenworth] and endeavor to get the sutling for Laramies as that will be the profitable point both for Emigration and Indian trade.” He also mentioned that Montalant would be suited for the position “as he knows the Sioux, speaks their language and is I am told a good and faithful clerk.” Apparently, Campbell was certain that his friendship with David D. Mitchell, who was “now Sup’t. Ind. Affs.,” would help him secure the sutlership, for Campbell told Dougherty he could proceed to “trade without apprehension.”³⁰²

There seems to have been some confusion as to who actually was going to receive the sutlership, but Campbell and Dougherty appear to have made some deal with the bidder who was awarded the contract. In late April Dougherty wrote to Campbell that “Messrs. Tutt and Wilson” had “obtained the sutlership of that post [Fort Laramie] before I knew what officers were to be stationed there.” Tutt and Wilson proposed to cut Dougherty and Campbell in on the deal, and Dougherty was “inclined to accept of this

²⁹⁹ See biographical notes on the Dougherty family in John Dougherty Papers, MoHS.

³⁰⁰ Campbell, St. Louis, to Dougherty, April 2, 1849, in John Dougherty Papers, MoHS.

³⁰¹ Campbell, St. Louis, to Dougherty, April 14, 1849, in John Dougherty Papers, MoHS. Officers referred to were Capt. Stewart Van Vliet and Bvt. Col. W. W. Loring.

offer.”³⁰³ By August the two men were indeed shipping goods to Fort Laramie, which seems to indicate that their agreement with Tutt and Wilson proceeded as anticipated.³⁰⁴

By December 1850 Andrew Drips was in the process of relocating the trading post on the Platte. A writer from Fort Pierre noted that “the Major [Drips] was engaged in moving his Fort and calculated to be in comfortable quarters before the Cold weather . . . there is not the least doubt that he will do a profitable business with the emigration.”³⁰⁵

³⁰² Campbell, St. Louis, to Dougherty, April 19, 1849, John Dougherty Papers, MoHS.

³⁰³ Dougherty, Fort Leavenworth, to Campbell, April 27, 1849, John Dougherty Papers, MoHS.

³⁰⁴ Campbell, St. Louis, to Dougherty, [Fort Leavenworth?], August, 1, 1849, John Dougherty Papers, MoHS.

³⁰⁵ [Unknown], Fort Pierre, December 4, 1850, to Pierre Chouteau, Jr., & Company, “Fort Pierre Letterbook,” Chouteau Collection, MoHS.

17. Significance of Fort Laramie:

Le Roy Hafen and Francis Marion Young's Fort Laramie and the Pageant of the West offered a useful analysis of its career as a fur trade post, but some revisions of interpretation seem appropriate. The fur trade era, one might say, really was a vibrantly exciting time, filled with colorful frontier characters, more than a few of whom exhibited almost super-human endurance and determination. Fur traders' individual achievements as explorers, their outrageous tall-tales, and so on, ought not eclipse other important aspects of the trade. A building, or a building-site such as Fort William/Fort John/Fort Laramie, can be a very useful vehicle for interpretive purposes. Because it symbolizes a community of people—many of them nameless and faceless—rather than one or more well-recognized names, the post can encapsulate a large range of experience having multiple outcomes, and multiple facets of significance.

Fort Laramie was, in certain respects, a post of secondary rather than primary significance to the western robe trade. Neither as large, as elaborate, nor as long occupied as posts such as Fort Pierre or Fort Union, it served from 1836 until 1849 as a "place holder" for Pierre Chouteau, Jr., & Company's interests while that company attempted to gain or maintain supremacy in the region. Chouteau's company utilized the post to secure two main objectives. One involved the supplying of goods to subordinate outfits and free trappers in the Rocky Mountains between 1835 and 1840. Using an overland route that linked Fort Pierre, a large supply depot, to Fort John /Fort Laramie, Chouteau's company was in a position of move goods rapidly and relatively inexpensively from the Missouri River to the mountains, as well as to bring goods to the profitable Lakota trade zone on the North Platte. This factor, in combination with the company's purchase, recruitment,

or elimination of small outfits that had engendered a chaotic supply system from roughly 1832 to 1835, buttressed the big company's generally superior position.

A second reason why Chouteau's company operated Fort John/Fort Laramie is that by so doing it was able to limit, to a large degree, the impact of unwanted competition on the North and South Platte Rivers. Because of the Chouteau company's business relationship with Bent, St. Vrain & Company to the south, and its occupancy of Fort John/Fort Laramie, the big company continued to play a dominant role in the robe trade. Still, the company held the post for only about a dozen years before selling it to the army. By the late 1840s it had become evident that the trade was liable to be adversely affected by the combination of a hugely expanded emigrant traffic, increased military activities, and rising tensions among the native tribes. Chouteau & Company continued to do business at Fort Pierre until 1855 and at Fort Union until 1865, but perhaps had concluded that the post on Laramie Creek had outlived its utility. It would seem that the company essentially abandoned its trade on the contested Oregon-California Trail in favor of the more "traditional" robe trade that remained viable for another decade or so farther to the north.

Fort Laramie's fur trading-era history repeatedly illustrates the dangerous or disruptive consequences of hyper-competition in a limited theater of operations. Sublette and Campbell originally built Fort William because fierce competition in the Upper Missouri area threatened their chances for economic success. They only established the post on Laramie River after they had worked out a deal with the larger company, Pratte, Chouteau & Company, to divide operations in a large region so that both outfits could

realize higher profits by wasting less manpower and fewer goods in their profitless battle with each other.

Within one year after its founding, the post was sold to other competitors who united members of two outfits (RMFCo and Fontenelle & Drips) that had proved incapable of standing alone against the "AFCo." By 1835-36 more posts dotted the banks of both the North and South Platte Rivers. Lancaster P. Lupton's outfit, Bent, St. Vrain & Company, Bridger & Vasquez, and several smaller concerns jostled each other as they tried to tap into the robe trade between the Arkansas and the Platte.

Throughout the 1840s Fort John reflected the continuing determination of Pierre Chouteau, Jr., & Company to lock up as much of the plains trade as possible. Chouteau had crafted a non-interference pact with a potentially powerful rival, Bent, St. Vrain & Company, much as Sublette and Campbell had done with Chouteau years earlier. Despite that deal, competition from other opponents—including some from areas totally outside United States jurisdiction—reached such a high pitch during the 1840s that the government was moved to undertake a prohibition program intended to end the whiskey trade. Even with sincere cooperation from Chouteau & Company (by far the largest, wealthiest, and most committed to the region), the campaign was eminently unsuccessful.

Evidence strongly suggests that Drips and Hamilton were not merely Chouteau's stooges, yet they failed utterly either to stifle or even to contain the distribution of illegal alcohol. It is neither necessary nor very useful to fix blame for that failure on the government, on Chouteau's company, on the smaller competitors, or on Native Americans themselves. Indicting one or another of the parties connected with the trade will not change its outcomes, and no simplistic assessment of blame can explain why

liquor was so popular, or why the liquor trade's historical ramifications continue to have resonance today. For interpretive purposes, the liquor traffic at Fort Laramie might best be discussed both at a site specific level, and with reference to the larger context of the continental fur trade spanning roughly 250 years of native-newcomer interactions in North American history.

Evidence presented in this paper demonstrates that no trading company ever achieved a true monopoly in the Platte River area (or anywhere else west of the Mississippi). Intense competition, often with destructive side effects, marked the closing years of the "traditional" western fur and robe trades. One important aspect of that competition was an illegal liquor trade that defied all attempts at curtailment. The liquor trade produced countless tragic events for Native Americans but many natives remained eager to trade for the stuff.

Regrettably, this must be reckoned a significant legacy of places such as Fort Laramie. If social scientists are correct in affirming that modern Native Americans suffer from dramatically higher than average rates of alcoholism—and other social ills that alcoholism entails—then the genesis of that problem is traceable to fur trade posts. As the foregoing pages indicate, liquor did not only flow from trading posts. But because Fort Laramie was designated a National Historic Site, while virtually all of its contemporary Platte River peers have disappeared, it presents both a challenge and an opportunity to those who interpret its history.

On the one hand, the post symbolizes an epoch—the overland migration era—which inspires pride in many Americans due to its association with national expansion and American success. On the other hand, Native Americans feel, with considerable

justification, that a shallow patriotic celebration of, and veneration for, sites such as Fort Laramie comes largely at their expense (insofar as Indians are commonly the “implacable adversaries” of “heroic” soldiers), and that its interpretation is one-sided and inaccurate. Most reasonable persons would probably agree that the United States’ take-over of much of western North America was neither an unmitigated good nor evil. A fair and reasonable interpretation of the meaning of Fort Laramie in western American history calls for balance. The good must take its place beside the bad if the NPS fulfills its commitment to disseminate an honest, credible history of Fort Laramie or other fur trade posts.

Such an approach offers several benefits. First, by including all participants in the story no group emerges as “victorious” and no other group must be cast as a “loser.” Secondly, if history is freed of its obligation to serve as a narrowly defined “hand-maiden of civics” (as was once so popular), then its main purpose is to lay out a forthright, value-neutral account of the facts, and an assessment of the meaning of those facts. Put another way, if the civic polity is expanded to include both native and non-native persons, then Fort Laramie’s fur trade history can still offer useful lessons derived from the past that may help to explain the present and shape the future. In this effort, Fort Laramie provides a fine vehicle because it can “tell” a big story, and may inspire visitors to grapple with important, if uncomfortable, issues of enduring significance.

Appendix A: Organizational Chart and List of Companies at Fort Laramie

Fur Companies Referenced in the Organizational Chart for Fort Laramie

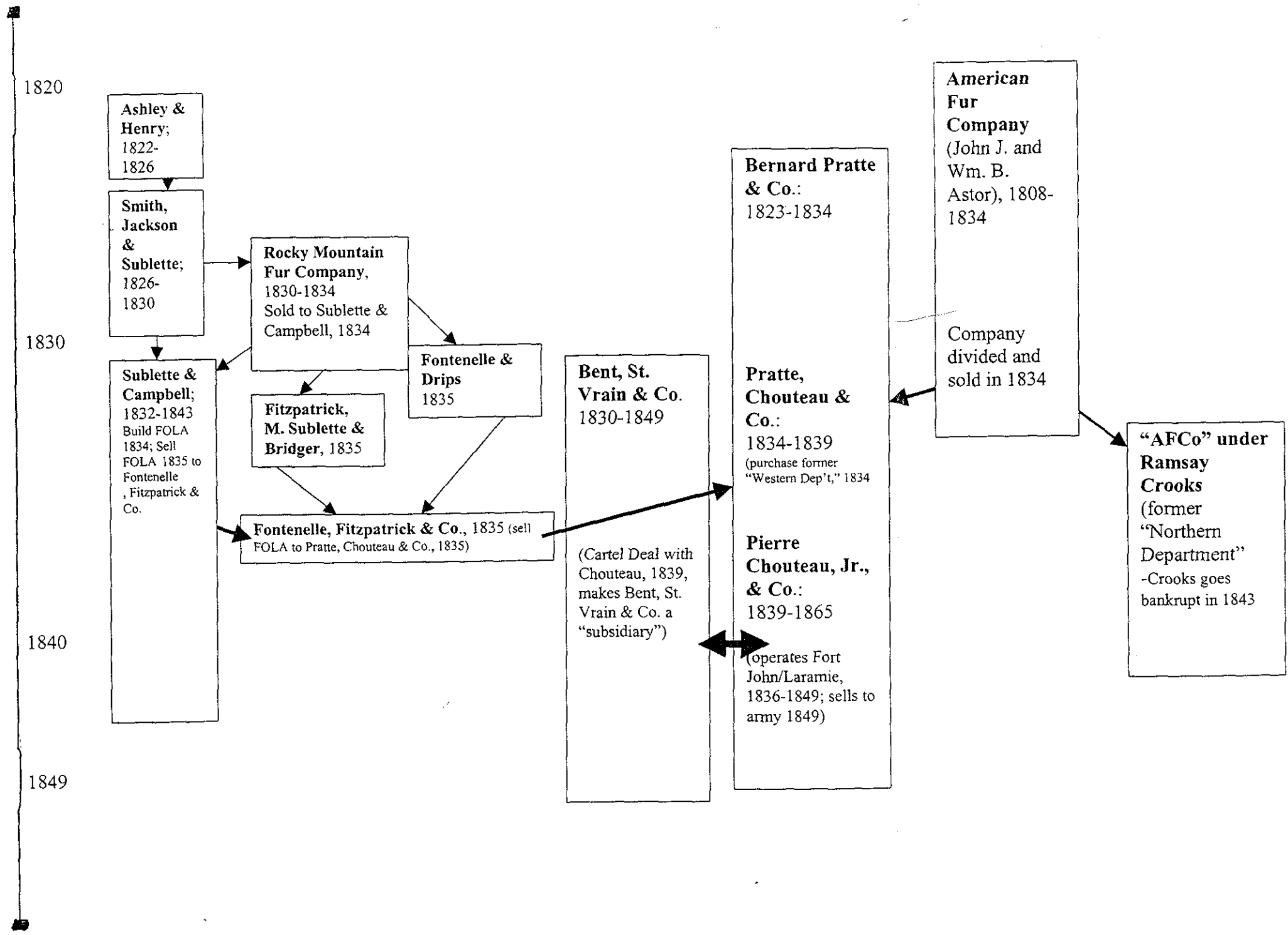
- 1) Ashley & Henry (1822-1826): Begun by two Missourians, "General" William H. Ashley and "Major" Andrew Henry, with their famous advertisement calling for 100 "enterprising young men" in 1822. Ashley is credited, rather inaccurately, with initiating the mountain men "rendezvous system." Perhaps true with respect to the central Rockies, Ashley's plan was more an adaptation of a long-established practice initiated by French and British Canadians many years earlier. After making good money for four years, despite some heavy losses, Ashley and Henry sold out in 1826 to their protégés, Jedediah S. Smith, David Jackson, and William Sublette.

- 2) Smith, Jackson & Sublette (1826-1830): Begun by three of the most energetic and savvy "Ashley Men," Jedediah Strong Smith, David Jackson, and William Sublette. This outfit operated for four years, and also made good money. By 1830 Jed Smith had decided to retire from the fur trade and engage in the Santa Fe trade, but Comanches killed Smith on the Santa Fe Trail in 1831.

- 3) Sublette & Campbell (1832-1843): Robert Campbell and William Sublette, two "Ashley Men," formed this partnership in 1832, soon after the famous "Battle of Pierre's Hole." Failing to gain a foothold in the Upper Missouri trade, they sold their post, the first "Fort William," at the mouth of the Yellowstone on the Missouri, to Pratte, Chouteau & Company in 1833, having made a deal to divide the country between the Missouri and the Platte rivers. Sublette & Campbell then built the second "Fort William," later called Fort Laramie, at the junction of the Laramie River and the North Platte River in 1834. They sold the post to Fontenelle & Fitzpatrick in 1835.

- 4) Rocky Mountain Fur Company (1830-1834): James Bridger, Milton Sublette, Thomas Fitzpatrick, Jean-Baptiste Gervais, and Henry Fraeb bought out Smith, Jackson & Sublette in 1830, and attempted to gain a major market share of the Rocky Mountain beaver trade. Lacking sufficient business savvy, and adequate financial backing, this outfit fell under the domination of Sublette & Campbell, who bought out the RMFCo in 1834. When the outfit folded, two other companies were formed: Fitzpatrick, Milton Sublette and Bridger remained in business for only about one year, 1835. Fontenelle & Drips likewise operated for about one year, 1835.

- 5) Fontenelle & Drips (1835): This outfit, a spin-off from the RMFCo, consisted of Lucien Fontenelle and Andrew Drips, both experienced "patrons," or brigade leaders who had worked for the Missouri Fur Company earlier.



6) Fitzpatrick, Sublette & Bridger (1835): The second spin-off from the failed RMFCo, this outfit stayed in business for only about one year before joining Fontenelle & Drips.

7) Fontenelle, Fitzpatrick & Company (1835): Of very brief duration, this outfit resulted from the merger of two other outfits, the spin-offs from the breakup of the RMFCo. Fontenelle, Fitzpatrick & Company purchased Fort William from Sublette & Campbell in 1835, held it for a very short time, and sold it (and their own outfit) to Pratte, Chouteau & Company in 1835. Finding themselves unable to compete effectively against the larger and better organized Pratte, Chouteau & Company, Fontenelle, Fitzpatrick & Company sold out to them in 1835

8) Bent, St. Vrain & Company (1832-1849): Founded by Charles and William Bent, and Ceran St. Vrain, this outfit became the biggest and most successful trade company in the southern plains. Their business involved the fur trade, the Indian trade, and trade on the Santa Fe Trail into New and Old Mexico. Bent's Old Fort, their principal post, was built in 1834 on the north bank of the Arkansas River, the dividing line between the United States and Mexico. Their position was much strengthened in 1839, when they made a cartel agreement with Pierre Chouteau, Jr., & Company, successors to the earlier Pratte, Chouteau & Company. The agreement stipulated that Chouteau's company would have free reign in the area north of the North Platte, while Bent, St. Vrain & Company would enjoy that privilege in the region south of the North Platte, thus dividing the trade region between the South Platte and Arkansas rivers.

9) Pierre Chouteau, Jr., & Company (1839-1865): The dominant outfit based in St. Louis. Chouteau came from a multi-generational fur trade family with deep roots in St. Louis. Chouteau had been the driving force in two companies that preceded the rise of his own: Bernard Pratte & Company (1822-1834), and Pratte, Chouteau & Company (1834-1839). Chouteau made a deal with John Jacob Astor in 1827 that led to a close association with the American Fur Company. When Astor sold his company in 1834, Chouteau bought the former "Western Department," which he continued to operate until 1865, when he was denied a trade license by the Republican administration of Abraham Lincoln. Technically, Chouteau had no legal claim on the name of Astor's company, but this fine distinction was disregarded, and Chouteau's outfit was customarily referred to as the "American Fur Company."

10) American Fur Company (1808-1834): Developed by German immigrant John Jacob Astor in 1808 (and chartered by the State of New York), this company was a dominant force in the United States' fur trade. Astor patterned his organization, to a considerable degree, on the model of the North West Company, Canada's most aggressive fur company, which merged with the Hudson's Bay Company in 1821. Astor sold his company in 1834, having divided it into two parts: The "Western Department" was bought by Pratte, Chouteau & Company, while the "Northern Department" went to one

of Astor's former partners, Ramsay Crooks. Partly due to the depression of the early 1840s, Crooks went bankrupt and sold his outfit in 1843. Crook's company was the only one legally entitled to the use of "American Fur Company," but it operated mainly in the Great Lakes and Upper Mississippi regions.

11) Sibille & Adams (1841-1846?): John Sibille and David Adams entered a partnership in 1841. Adams had been trading at the Laramie and Platte rivers since sometime in late 1838 or early 1839, from a post called "Fort Platte." The two later made a business arrangement with Lancaster P. Lupton to share his "Fort Platte," and bought the post from Lupton in 1842. Sibille & Adams were closely associated with the "opposition" firm of Pratte & Cabanné between 1843 and 1846, when the latter outfit was discontinued.

Appendix B: Avenues for Further Research:

The microfilm collections used in this study contain an immensity of data. Further examination of them would likely yield more precise rosters of employees who worked at the post, and perhaps data on their wages, things they purchased, and so on. Research time for this project was somewhat limited, considering the range of materials consulted. While I spent many hours viewing microfilm, the aggregate is so large that I am confident more data can be gleaned from those multiple thousands of pages. In addition, the index is pretty thorough, and a sustained effort to examine the microfilm over time would probably be productive.

The Missouri Historical Society holds other collections than those cited in this report that would probably bear upon Fort Laramie, though again, I think that I covered the main collections, and I have not noticed significant collections cited by other researchers that I missed. The Seth Ward Papers at the Denver Public Library contain nothing very useful for the fur trade era, but would be quite useful in studying freighting during the early military period.

Determination of the exact location of Fort William constituted a line of inquiry of great interest to the park. Unfortunately, the documentary sources offered nothing on this topic that was not already known. Possibly further archeological investigation can produce a more definitive answer to this query.

One area of "missing data" concerns the numbers of fur and robes actually traded at Fort William/Fort John/Fort Laramie. I attempted to locate such data, but found little that could be described as definitive, and none that came close to a complete series for even one year. One problem here is that, evidently, almost no records of the Sublette-

Campbell year have survived. For this, there may be no solution. Fontenelle & Drips, as well as Bridger & Vasquez, appear occasionally in the Chouteau Collection materials, but I lacked the time required to make a thorough search of production figures for these outfits. It is possible that the microfilm collections, or the Chouteau Papers at MoHS, contain more information concerning records of sales derived from "Fort Laramie" than I have been able to uncover. From what I have seen, the collection generally lacks specific indications of where the robes that Chouteau & Company traded came from. This does not mean that no such data exist, though I believe it somewhat unlikely that detailed data of this type will emerge.

Another area calling for more attention is what I would describe as the "culture memory" of Fort Laramie retained by Native Americans since the old days. I would hope that an ethnographic study will address this topic, which would greatly enhance the site's interpretation.

Appendix C: Bibliography:

Note on Sources:

Much of the documentary material cited in this report originates in the vast collections of the Missouri Historical Society at St. Louis, MO. The massive Chouteau Collection, comprising some sixty-five archival boxes, contains letters, invoices, requisitions, inventories, letter books from Fort Union and Fort Pierre, sales books and account books. Many items deal directly or indirectly with Fort Laramie. Other collections at the Missouri Historical Society also proved invaluable, especially the Robert Campbell Papers, Sublette Papers, and Andrew Drips Papers. An important microfilm publication, the "Papers of the St. Louis Fur Trade, Part 2: Fur Company Ledgers and Account Books, 1802-1871," reproduces thousands of pages of American Fur Company records, including inventories of Fort John/Laramie for several years in the 1840s, as well as records that shed light on individuals and business associations connected with the post. I should note that, while the "Fur Company Ledgers and Account Books, 1802-1871" are in collections at the Missouri Historical Society, the microfilm was produced by University Publications of America. The set I used was graciously loaned to me courtesy of Fort Union Trading Post NHS, Williston, North Dakota.

The St. Louis Mercantile Library Association, now located at the University of Missouri at St. Louis, holds the Robert Campbell Family Papers. This immense collection mainly includes materials spanning from the early 1830s to about 1880. Also microfilmed by University Publications of America, it is entitled "Papers of the St. Louis Fur Trade, Part 3: Robert Campbell Family Collection-From the St. Louis Mercantile

Library Association." Unfortunately, the collection offers practically nothing of great value in relation to Fort Laramie. Only a few scattered references to Campbell and Sublette's business interests in the West, and some information on Campbell's relationship with Sir William Drummond Stewart, have been useful to this study. No hitherto undiscovered "gems" of information on early Fort William surfaced during this investigation. While this result is somewhat disappointing, it has the virtue of indicating that the contents of the collection will not materially affect our knowledge of the trading post. Since no comprehensive biography of Campbell had appeared in print by the time I began my research (although I recently discovered that the University of Missouri published one in May 1999), it was necessary to look into his papers. On the positive side, it should no longer be necessary for researchers to wonder what materials on Fort Laramie might be hiding in that collection.

Federal records, namely letters and related materials having to do with the Office of Indian Affairs, have also been important to this study. Of especial value was a sheaf of correspondence dealing with Andrew Drips and Joseph V. Hamilton's prohibition campaign during 1843-47. These documents are found in the National Archives, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Office of Indian Affairs, Record Group 75, Letters Received 1824-1881, St. Louis Superintendency, 1824-1851; and Upper Missouri Agency, 1836-1851. The records are accessible on microfilm, listed as Microfilm Series M-234, Roll 753, "St. Louis Superintendency, 1842-1845," and Roll 884, "Upper Missouri Agency, 1836-1851."

I should also like to note my conclusion that the historians Dale L. Morgan and Eleanor Towles Harris, who co-edited William Marshall Anderson's diary, did a truly

splendid job. They provided abundant supporting materials for the journal, but also treated in some depth the key players and events at the time of Anderson's western trip, and in succeeding years. Suspecting this, I deliberately avoided an undue reliance on their work, preferring to do a good deal of my own sleuthing on Fort Laramie. My intention was to try to avoid merely echoing their conclusions by a too-close association with, and repetition of, their work. While the books of Bernard DeVoto (Across the Wide Missouri) and Don Berry (A Majority of Scoundrels) also hold up quite well after fifty-six and thirty-eight years respectively, both are rather too journalistic and sometimes offer what I think are unwarranted findings. As a general source brimming with amazing specifics, Louis Berry's The Beginning of the West is uniquely valuable. As well, Merrill J. Mattes' Platte River Narratives: A Descriptive Bibliography of Travel Over the Great Central Overland Route to Oregon, California, Utah, Colorado, Montana, and other western states and territories, 1812-1866 has been very useful in arriving at proper bibliographic citations and for general research purposes. I have cited reference numbers in Mattes' bibliography for some of the sources used in this report.

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Chouteau Collection

Drips Papers

Gamble Papers

Sublette Papers

Vasquez Papers

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