Fort Union Society



### Overview

Daily life at Fort Union Trading Post reflected the social and economic relationship between and within American Indian and European cultures associated with the 19th century fur-trading empire.

### Background

Between 1828 and 1867, Fort Union was the most important fur trade post on the Upper Missouri River. Denig wrote in his journal that Fort Union was the “vastest of the forts the American Fur Company has on the Missouri.” Fort Union was a bastion of peaceful coexistence, the post annually traded over 25,000 buffalo robes to St. Louis. The trade could not function unless a certain number of people lived at or near the trading posts. Western North American trading posts served strictly economic objectives and generally had nothing to do with military affairs. No genuine “siege” ever took place at Fort Union.

At Fort Union, Blackfeet, Cree, Assiniboine, Crow, and the Three Affiliated Tribes: Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara exchanged buffalo robes and smaller furs for goods from around the world. According to a clerk who worked at Fort Union, Rudolph Kurz, there were twenty species in the pressroom, hides ranging in size from mouse to grizzly bear.

Only two other 19th century posts within the United States were of comparable significance:

* Bent’s Old Fort on the Arkansas River (1834-49)
* HBC’s Fort Vancouver on the Columbia River (1825-49)

Fort Union outlived both.

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| Management | Bourgeois | $1,000: managed the fort and partner in the company |
| Management | Clerks | $800-$1,000: knew tribal languages, could read and write, and kept inventories and accounts. A top hat and suit of clothes were included in their yearly salary |
| Skilled Labor | Traders, Interpreters, Hunters | $350-$600: well versed in tribal languages and customs; most were French-Canadian or Metis |
| Skilled Labor | Craftsmen | $250: skilled workers: tinsmiths, blacksmiths, tailors, coopers, carpenters, rock masons, and boat builders |
| Manual Labor | Engages | $140: unskilled workers; they did all the heavy lifting and hauling. |
| Skilled Labor | Women | Paid in trade goods. Created trade relations between traders and their tribes, spoke various languages and served as interpreters. They were essential to the fur trade. |

**Diversity in the American Fur Company**

It was not difficult to identify American Fur Company personal by rank. Bourgeois wore a top hat and tails and traders wore Scots hats. Common workers dressed in caps with white broadcloth shirts, while driving carts, handling boats, and carrying axes. Upon arriving at Fort Union in June 1833, Prince Maximilian observed "people of all nations gathered here, Americans, Englishmen, Frenchmen, Germans, Russians, Spaniards, Italians, about a hundred in number with their mostly Indian or [Metis] wives and children." In 1851, Rudolph Friedrich Kurz heard "English, French, Spanish, and German," spoken as well as "Assiniboine, Crow, Herantsa, Cree, Mandan and even Blackfeet." Rudolph Kurz noted the different nationalities he encountered at Fort Union, "Canadians, Americans, Scotchmen, Germans, Swiss, Frenchman, Italians, Creoles, Spaniards, Mulattoes, Negroes and half-Indians."

**Management**

The "upper class" of educated and literate residents consisted of partners of the Company,**Bourgeois** (manager), **traders**, and **clerks**. The Clerks’ work involved personal and operational management, record-keeping, day to day store-keeping functions, and diplomacy with Indian tribal leaders. A Bourgeois had to be tough and cool headed in order to maintain control over his rough and rowdy engages, of which all of whom were "armed and though not courageous in general, was nevertheless, touchy and revengeful." His authority also depended upon the loyalty of the clerks for moral and, if it came to it, physical support. The Bourgeois house served as the residence for the Bourgeois, his clerk, a few craftsmen or "mechanics" and any distinguished visitors who happened to be on hand. The building looked as though it might have been plucked out of St. Louis and dropped over 2,2000 river miles away. The lower story was comprised of four large rooms divided by a central hallway. The largest room on the eastern side sheltered the superintendent, and a smaller adjoining room served as the business office. The western side contained a roomy mess hall and clerk’s quarters. Upstairs, a large attic provided guest rooms, a tailor shop and a saddle and tack room. A German prince named Maximilian of Wied-Neuweid remarked that the original bourgeois house was "quite nicely built, like all the other houses of cottonwood lumber, for no other building wood is available here." Rudolph Friedrich Kurz’s assignment to paint the exterior of the bourgeois house included painting a profile of the company president, Pierre Chouteau, Jr., on the peak pediment of the two-story porch. He underlined the portrait with a garland and the year 1851.

In the Clerk’s Office, Kurz painted a banner featuring a golden eagle clutching a peace pipe in a blue trade cloth field, to which was sewn alternating red and white cloth strips. Kurz made studies of a live eagle, which was kept in a cage behind the post’s powder magazine. The attractive 15 foot flags were marketed to the Upper Missouri Plains Indians as a status object or the prohibitive cost of 20 buffalo robes.

Servants under the rank of clerk and trader were lodged adequately during their tenure with the American Fur Company, which averaged three years for all employees on the payroll in 1829. A clerk had to be literate and possess some mathematical skills. Bookkeeping and keeping a close eye on engages balances at the retail store, lest a man’s bill out ran his wages. When that happened, an engage would be most liable to desert. Providing backup for the boss when he dealt with drunk or troublemakers was another aspect of the clear’s apprenticeship. Clerks also ran errands, took inventories, wrote requisitions, and locked and unlocked store-room doors and the fort’s gates.

Clerks customarily took orders from above, passed them along to lower workers, and were expected to see that the work was properly performed. Clerks communicated daily with bourgeois and engages, and at Fort Union their lodging were next door to quarters of the rank and file. When Indian band came to Fort Union, clerks were especially busy because they had to deal with trade, entertainment, squabbles, and crowd conditions inside the post.

Distance from St. Louis courtrooms and lawyers rendered access to regular legal system impossible, but Fort Union did not tolerate anarchy. Instead it was governed by a system of informal law common throughout the Upper Missouri. Transgressors who violated certain standards of behavior that were acknowledged as vital to the community’s welfare were punished, sometimes severely. Sometimes Upper Missouri Plains Indians assisted fur traders when trouble was afoot. Whenever natives visited fur posts, certain Indians designated as "soldiers guarded goods and protected traders. This practice minimized the potential for violence and made violence a rarity. Upper Missouri Plains Indians who served in this capacity gained states and received rewards to ensure their continued good efforts.

Congress passed laws in abundance, but they were easily ignored or subverted. Indian agents, virtually impotent in a land where personal power was meaningful, were frequently viewed with contempt by traders and Indians alike. American soldiers in the region before the 1860s were too few and too inexperience to impress either Indians or fur traders. Basically, residents at Fort Union were left largely to themselves, and they took a strong hand in maintaining their own society.

**Skilled Laborers**

**Traders** did the actual trading and received $800-$1,000 a year. They also received a top hat and suit of clothes as part of their yearly salary. They lived in the dwelling range, but they ate the first table with the bourgeois. To see a video about the trade scene go to http://www.nps.gov/fous/photosmultimedia/multimedia.htm

When a band of Upper Missouri Plains Indians (usually Assiniboine, but also Crow, Cree, and Blackfeet) arrived to trade, the chief and his head men were usually brought into the Reception Room to meet with a trader, one or two engages (laborers), and, if necessary, an interpreter. Upon their arrival the Upper Missouri Plains Indians found a fire blazing in the huge fireplace and coffee and buffalo stew or corn mush boiling in large kettles. After everyone was seated, bowls of steaming food were distributed, along with cups of sweetened coffee.

After the meal, pipes were brought forth, with the trader offering tobacco so that everyone could fill his pipe bowl. After the smoke, the trader stood and made a speech. In his remarks the trader emphasized a central theme: friendship and peace. The chief had probably been bringing his band to Fort Union for years, and he and the trader may have become good friends. The men of the fort commonly married Indian women, so they also may have been related. When the trader finished his speech the chief spoke in his turn, repeating many of the same things that the trader had said. He also told how his people survived the winter, and described any recent hardships.

Gifts changed hands after the speech making. The trader might give the chief some black powder, coffee, sugar, tobacco, beads, or maybe even a musket. In exchange, the chief might present the trader with a bow and arrows in a skin quiver, a rawhide parfleche (storage bag), or a beaded quilled pipe bag.

Finally the two men got down to the matter of trade negotiation. To do so before this moment would have been rude. At a sign or word from the chief, one of his followers spread out a buffalo robe and some other furs for the trader to examine. These were represented as typical of the type and quality of furs brought to Fort Union. The trader examined the furs- especially the buffalo robe- with great diligence, paying careful attention to the quality of fur and tanning.

While the trader examined the skins, the chief and his men talked about the furs. They told the trader how the men had scouted many long days for the herds of buffalo, how they lost good ponies in the hunt, or how the women worked tirelessly to skin the animals and tan the hides.

After the trader examined the skins, he ordered an engage to retrieve a few items from the Trade Shop. These would be some of the newest items to arrive on the summer steamboats. As the chief and his men examined the goods, the trader praised them. He might brag that the new wool blankets were much better than those of the previous year, or assure the Indians that the bottom of the tin cup would not fall off after steaming hot coffee was poured into it. Once both parties had examined each other’s wares, serious negotiations began. The chief conferred with his men, asking them what they thought of the new trade goods. The trader, in turn, conferred with the clerks. When this was concluded, the trader and the shrewdest negotiator among the Indians- who may or may not have been the chief- began haggling over the value of the skins and goods. This process could last for hours. The chief was setting the price of furs for all his tribe, and the trader is negotiating for Fort Union’s profit.

Once everyone was pleased with the values set on the robes and the trade goods, the trade began. The chief and his men traded first, acquiring all that they desired before returning to camp. There, the chief announced to everyone that trading could now commence. On this news, the people made their way to the fort to trade. The band then visited old friends and family in the fort, feasted and relaxed. After a week or so, the entire band, having acquired all they needed or wanted, broke camp and returned to their traditional homeland. After a few parting salutations, the band disappeared until next year.

Craftsmen and hunters, valuable to the fort and difficult to replace, held a social status between engages and the elites. Hunting and meat processing were year-round, labor-intensive activities that kept individuals and some families continually employed. Carpenters, blacksmiths, tinsmiths, gunsmiths, boat-builders, and tailors found work year round. Traders, interpreters, and hunters received from $350 to $600 annually and a new suit of clothes.

Good blacksmiths were indispensable at Fort Union. Blacksmiths forged functional and decorative hardware, repaired traps, made tools and equipment, and undoubtedly did gunsmithing as well. At some point before 1843, a blacksmith and a tinsmith worked together designing and fabricating two large decorated weather vanes to adorn Fort Union’s bastions, a galloping buffalo and the other an eagle with outspread wings. Fort Union’s first tinsmith arrived in December 1833. With soldering irons, sheet iron and tin, and various tin-smithing tools, tinsmiths fabricated kettles and other tin work and made repairs as well. Coffee boilers, basins, cups, funnels, candle molds, plates, lanterns and nutmeg grinders. It was cheaper to bring up sheets of tin, iron, or other metals to make into trade items because it saved room in the steamboats.

Maximilian observed dwelling shacks between the cross bracing of the palisades were for both Euro-Americans and Upper Missouri Plains Indians. They consisted of carpenters and tailors’ apartments, a forge, rooms for employees, a warehouse for furs, and a stable. He also saw at the center of the open space within the fort, three Assiniboine buffalo hide lodges inhabited by several whites and their families. A variety of small rooms were built beneath the overhanging braced framework which supported a promenade or gallery running along the palisades. In a shop near the bourgeois house, coopers fashioned barrels and crates to store or transport trade goods, food and other materials.

**Unskilled Laborers**

**Engages** were the unskilled, typically illiterate manual laborers. Engages carted stones, chopped and hauled timber from sawyers or surrounding timber. They cut the timber into planks in saw pits outside the fort. Most of Fort Union’s populace were engages, an all-male contract labor force, mainly Canadians of French extraction, hired for one or two year stretches. Employees came from contract offices in St. Louis and Montreal. By 1831 most contracts were written for 18 months terms. "Creoles" (French who remained in North America after the fall of New France), Metis (mixed-blood of European-Native American descent), and French Canadians built forts, maintained, stocked them and kept them supplied.

Engages who were qualified in the mercantile line or in languages and prove to be honest and shrewd might in time be promoted to interpreters, clerks, or bourgeois as they worked their way up the corporate ladder. Skilled laborers in St. Louis and other Midwestern cities expected decent treatment and honest pay for honest work. So did company engages. Engages were expected to remain on the job until the day of their contracted expired. The company paid the cost of transportation back to Missouri but no further. Generally the company took seriously its responsibility for providing food and horses or boats for all parties bound for St. Louis, even if the employees were held in very low esteem and were not to be rehired.

In 1829, an average engage’s annual wage was roughly 140 dollars. In the 1830s common engages received from $200 to $260 for an 18 month stint in the Upper Missouri. Their salary included a three-five month upriver travel to Fort Union and a shorter return journey to St. Louis the next summer. Before departing from St. Louis, each engage received a small advance called an "equipment" the cost was deducted from his annual wages. This included three-point blanket, one and one half yards of stout blue woolen shroud cloth, a butcher knife, silk handkerchief, rough checkered shirt, and a few pounds of tobacco. All worth seven dollars.

The bourgeois and clerks encouraged hard workers to reengage when their contracts ran out. On the other hand, slackers were sent on the next available keelboat or steamer headed down the Missouri, forfeiting whatever wages stood unpaid in ledgers. Bourgeois kept lists of men whose engagements had expired sometimes as a means of warning company agents at Saint Louis against rehiring certain individuals. Their rosters include notations such as "a great villain," "lazy, not worth half wages," "a Great Skulker," "very so so," "of no use for this post." Poorly rated men would likely be passed over in favor of those who received compliments such as "good man," "very good man," or rarely, "excellent."

**Women and the Fur Trade**

Fort Union’s employees developed marriage ties with women from a variety of tribes. Consequently, the traders faced the challenge of balancing business affairs, diplomatic relations with Upper Missouri Plains Indian nations, and the welfare of the men, women and children who lived at the fort. Euro-Americans and Upper Missouri Plains Indians alike had reoriented themselves in response to the trade. Mixed-race marriages had always been permitted, even encouraged. 19th century fur traders were among the most racially tolerant Americans of their time. Women and children were always part of everyday life at Fort Union, and native wives played an important role in shaping relationships between the traders and their customers. Women usually performed the bloody job of skinning and butchering the animals and then cutting the meat into sheets to dry in the sun.

Upper Missouri Plains Indian women worked for the Fur Trade by: washing clothing, making moccasins, scrapping hides, lacing snowshoes, making pemmican, and picking berries. Gathering wood was an important job. Vast amounts of wood went into fireplaces for heating and cooking. If firewood failed, buffalo chips supplied a ready alternative fuel source.

Tailoring was another skill in constant demand. Upper Missouri Plains Indian and Metis women made and sold moccasins and other leather items such as shirts, trousers, and coats. "Country-made" clothing, a product of a blended Euro-American tailoring and textiles with Upper Missouri Plains Indian construction and decorative techniques to create beautiful garments adapted to Upper Missouri life. November 1851 Rudolph Friederich Kurz bought a winter suit of buckskin trousers and coat made "with hood, ‘metis fashion,’ and sewed throughout with sinew." Men who hunted bison and women who tanned robes each benefited from the trade. Kurz, while at Fort Union in 1851, mentioned that women robe tanners received "a share in the dressed skins, which they exchanged for clothes, ornaments, and dainty tid-bits."

### Additional Reading

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