

# Fort Union Trading Post

## FORT UNION SOCIAL LIFE

### FUR TRADERS AND INDIANS

With a sketch and a journal entry, Swiss artist Rudolph Friederich Kurz provided this delightful look at Fort Union society in 1851: One night, some employees went to a ball at the neighboring trading post and returned “as merry as it is possible for people to be who have indulged in such gaiety.” In the brilliant moonlight, hunter Charles Morgan fired his pistols. Owen McKenzie, son of Fort Union founder Kenneth McKenzie, rode so fast his wife, seated behind, had to “anxiously clasp him round!” Riding one horse, Bourgeois Edwin Denig’s younger wife and another woman challenged Kurz to a race. This glimpse of Fort Union’s social life reveals much about Upper Missouri society—it was diverse, energetic, and volatile, at times.

### POPULATION, EMPLOYMENT & CLASS

A commercial enterprise, the post had a society in which each man’s background, education, and income determined his place. The upper class was comprised of the **bourgeois**—French for “manager”—and his chief clerk and clerk-traders.

The following salaries are representative of 1851: A partner in the company, the bourgeois earned \$1,000 a year, plus a share of the profits. He and the chief clerk lived



Riding Home in the Moonlight – Rudolph F. Kurz, 1851

in the bourgeois house. Most members of upper management were of Scottish or English origin.

**Traders** did the actual trading; **clerks** kept inventories and accounts, took care of tools, meat, the press room, and supervised laborers. Many were European and most could read and write. Those who knew Indian languages made \$800 to \$1,000 a year. Included in their salary was a suit of clothes and a top hat. They lived in the dwelling range but ate at the head table with the bourgeois.

**Interpreters** were paid \$500 a year. They signed on for eight and a half months, the length of the buffalo robe trading season. Most were French-Canadian and **Metis**, which means “mixed blood.” **Engagés** (laborers) did the work of the fort. Craftsmen, such as tin-smiths, tailors, and blacksmiths, made items to trade; carpenters and rock masons helped construct and maintain the fort. Some built the mackinaw boats that took furs to the States. Most craftsmen were paid \$250 a year, and ate at the lower table. Unskilled laborers, who earned \$120 a year, loaded and unloaded boats, hauled timber and stone, baled furs, cut ice, guarded horses, and manned the mackinaw boats.

**Hunters** who provided the meat for the fort earned \$400 a year and lived in the dwelling range. They were entitled to keep the hides of the animals they killed.

Fort Union society was highly diverse: six Indian languages and ten European languages were spo-

ken here. Most of the engagés were French Canadian (the American Fur Company kept a recruiter in Montreal to hire them). Eventually, many engagés were mixed bloods, sons of earlier employees and their mixed-blood wives. Black men—some slaves—also worked here.

Although society was highly stratified, employees could and did rise through the ranks. Charles Larpenteur started as an engagé and finished as Fort Union’s last bourgeois.

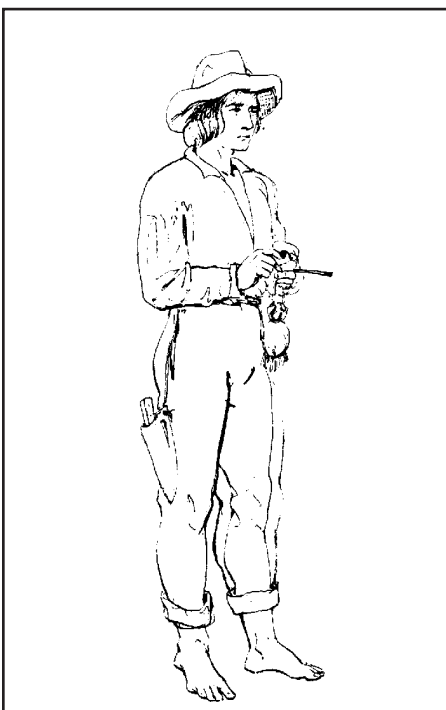
### FOOD & DWELLINGS

Fort Union was a kind of company town, with the company supplying food and housing. Status determined where an employee lived and what he ate. Food at the head table was exceptional: a good selection of meat and bread, often butter, cream or milk, pie on Sunday, soup and sometimes canned oysters, dried fruit, preserved herring, capers, chocolate, and almonds. At the lower table, the engagés ate buffalo meat and biscuit, and drank coffee.

Living arrangements were affected by Fort Union’s purpose and Indian custom. Unlike trappers, the fort’s employees had permanent housing. Some engagés lived in the dwelling range, where three or four families might share an apartment; others lived in their shops; others in their wives’ tipis.

### FAMILY LIFE

From bourgeois to engagé, nearly all of the men had Indian wives; Edwin Denig himself married two



Fort Union Engagé  
Rudolph F. Kurz

sisters. Some saw these marriages as permanent, committed relationships. Bourgeois Alexander Culbertson took his wife Medicine Snake Woman with him when he retired to Peoria, Illinois. Others—some with wives in the States—were more callous, abandoning their Indian families when they left Fort Union.

Children also lived at Fort Union. One family in the 1830s had 12 children. There is no indication that Fort Union ever had a school; some men sent their children to the States to be educated.

Marriage gave men and women the cultural advantages of two worlds. The women's cooking and sewing allowed the men to have better food and clothes than the company provided. Women enjoyed increased security and the convenience of industrial products. In some cases, they and their children received advanced education they would never have had otherwise.

## LAW AND ORDER

In such a diverse group, conflict was inevitable. Kurz said every man was armed "and, though not courageous in general, ... touchy and revengeful." This was especially challenging because they were more than 1,800 miles from the nearest law.

The bloodiest conflict involved the Deschamps, a particularly belligerent Metis family who lived in a stockade outside the fort. They fought with other employees and eventually murdered one. The victim's friends retaliated and killed Old Man Deschamps. On June 28, 1836, the family decided to avenge his death by killing their enemies in

**Study of women and children at Fort Union. Swiss artist Rudolph F. Kurz worked as a clerk at the trading post in 1851-52. His sketches, drawings and journal were of vital importance in its reconstruction.**

Fort Union. Learning of the plan, the employees took a cannon, attacked the stockade and burned it, slaughtering eight members of the family.

Much of the crime occurred because of drunken behavior. On Christmas night in 1838, one of the hunters, bested in a fight, was thrown into a fireplace and left for dead; he survived.

Without an organized government or court system, the community had to rely on itself to respond to crime. A tailor and carpenter were tried and sentenced to hang for fighting, but were given a more merciful sentence of 39 lashes instead.

## ENTERTAINMENT

Cultures blended especially in entertainment. For example, when the company or engagés gave a dance, Indian ornaments were hung among the mirrors, candles and furs decorating the dining room. The dancers dressed in European fashions, such as the "rose-colored ball gown" from St. Louis that Edwin Denig's wife wore to one dance. The women especially liked the waltz and the cotillion.

Music was another part of fort life. For one dance, Denig played the violin, and Kurz beat the drum. Alexander Culbertson played the



violin and clarinet, and Denig had a bugle, as well as a triangle. A jaw harp was found during an archeological dig at Fort Union.

Entertainments also included a magic lantern, fireworks, and, in the 1840s, an "electrifying machine." No one described it, but some scholars suspect it was a device that someone pedaled to produce sparks or to shock unsuspecting persons. Popular parlor games included cards, various Indian dice games, and an Indian game similar to "Who's got the button?"

Indians added their culture to the social mix. In 1835, one band of Assiniboines held their Medicine Lodge ceremony at Fort Union.

People preferring more sedentary activity could read. In the 1830s, the fort's reading matter included texts on medicine, chemistry, natural philosophy, Spanish, and mixing dyes from porcupine quills. *Boy's Everyday Book*, *Don Quixote*, and the risqué classic *Fanny Hill* were popular choices. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* caused much discussion at remote Fort Union when a newspaper published it in serial form.

Most fur trading posts had diverse cultures, and Fort Union was no exception. Trading furs in an isolated region, the men eased their hardships by taking Indian wives and adopting many Indian customs. A frontier brand of rough justice and relative conviviality allowed the cultures to blend and even flourish for 39 years.



Trader.  
Rudolph F. Kurz