



Trade, Tribes, and Transition on the Missouri

The fur trade, America's first fashion-driven industry, stimulated Euro-American exploration of the Missouri River Valley several decades before Lewis & Clark. Beaver was most important, the dense undercoat being used to make felt hats. The entire world used furs, from wolf to muskrat, for warm clothing in this era before synthetic insulating materials.

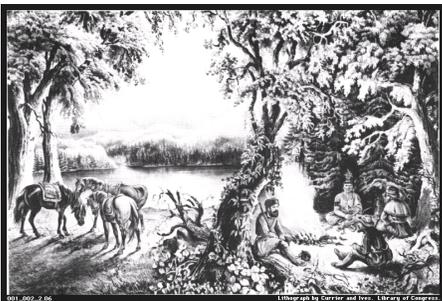
Trade was nothing new to the Plains Tribes; the various cultures that occupied this land at different times had exchanged produce, dried meat, tools, and weapons for thousands of years. By the mid 1700s, the Ithanktonwan Nakota (Yankton Sioux) hosted a trade fair near the confluence of the James and Missouri rivers. This annual event was a forerunner of the flea markets and swap meets of today.



Beaver Pelt

Fort Union Association photo

Early Outsiders



Early riverside trade scene *Library of Congress*

European traders brought manufactured goods that were new to the American Indians. These products included metal cooking pots, knives, guns, coffee, sugar, fabrics, and beads and ornaments. Competition became keen and sometimes violent among British, French, and Spanish companies. There are accounts indicating that French traders visited the Big Sioux Valley before 1700, with British Canadians following early in that century, reaching present-day Nebraska by 1773. Spaniard Juan Munier traded on the Missouri near the Niobrara River a few years later. A French expedition under Jacques D'Eglise reached the Mandan villages in present-day North Dakota in 1790 and brought back stories of British trade in the area.

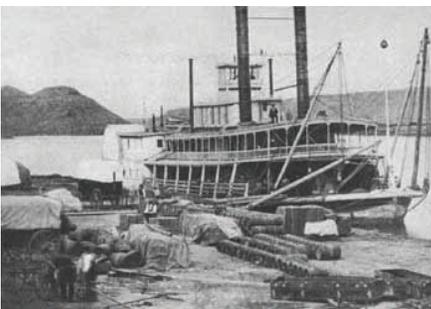
In response to these incursions, the Spanish government financed The Commercial Company for the Discovery of the Nations of the Upper Missouri, known as the Missouri Company, and sent three expeditions intended to reach the Mandan villages. The first, led by Jean Baptiste Truteau only reached a point a few miles upstream of what would later be the site of Fort Randall where they built the first constructed post in the future Dakota Territory.

The second expedition was no more successful, ending at a Ponca village where trader Antoine Lecuyer took "not less than two wives... and wasted a great deal of the goods of the company." The company's third expedition under James MacKay and John Evans successfully reached the Mandan villages eight years before Lewis & Clark's better-known American expedition.

One of the earliest trappers and traders in the Yankton area was Pierre Dorion, Sr., who married into the Yankton tribe around 1785 and was a short-term member of the Lewis and Clark Expedition in 1804. He served as liaison and translator for the council near Calumet Bluff.

In these early days, independent traders and small parties were at risk of being relieved of their goods by tribes that chose raiding over trading. Later, large companies built impressive posts that not only offered protection, but projected an image of permanence that led to long-term trade partnerships. In some instances, the posts were established at the express request of one or more tribes.

Big Business



Montana Historical Society

Steamboat unloading at Fort Benton

In the early 1800s, the demand for beaver pelts for hatmaking remained strong. Between 1807 and 1812 Spaniard Manuel Lisa established posts from the site of today's Omaha to the mouth of the Bighorn River in Montana. Ultimately unsuccessful, Lisa abandoned all of them by 1820. In 1822 a group of North West Company managers, shaken out in a merger with Hudson Bay Company, formed the Columbia Fur Company. Within five years their company had Missouri River posts operating near the Niobrara, Vermillion, and Big Sioux rivers. At that time, John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company bought out Columbia and made it the Upper Missouri Outfit of the Western Department of the giant American Fur Company.

First keelboats, then steamboats brought tons of goods from around the world to dozens of remote trading posts and forts; beads from Italy, metal ornaments from Germany, vermilion pigment from China, and iron axe heads, guns, and other tools from America's foundries. The boats left the posts loaded with bales of pelts and hides harvested by the

American Indian men and tanned by the women. As the beaver population dwindled and fashions changed from beaver felt hats to silk hats, the fur companies' focus changed from beaver pelts to buffalo robes. These were tanned bison hides with the fur on, marketed as lap robes for the carriage or buggy, as rugs, and as bed coverings. The fur companies shipped other tanned pelts, such as otter and fox, as far as Russia and China, placing the American Indians at one end of a global supply network.



Buffalo Robe

NPS photo

Cultural Exchange



NPS photo by Linda Gordon Rokosz

Trade reenactment at Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site

In the fur trade, two radically different cultures came together to do business, usually peacefully. Traders took on the American Indian custom of trade as a social event to include the exchange of gifts and the sharing of a pipe, food, and news before the start of negotiations. Fur company employees, from the *engagés* (laborers) to the *bourgeois* (managers), often took American Indian or *Métis* (mixed blood) wives. It was not unusual for a chief to try to match his daughters to fur trade employees, for traders had easy access to goods and could offer the family the protection of a trade fort. The mixed-blood sons of these unions often found themselves outcast by both white and Indian cultures and sometimes found acceptance and opportunity only in the fur trade.

Through the fur trade, American Indians acquired the conveniences of Euro-American technology. This cultural mix generally led to an easier lifestyle for the natives. They quickly incorporated trade goods into utilitarian, decorative, and ceremonial articles. Metal pots replaced buffalo hide cooking containers, steel knives replaced stone, and

rifles and muskets replaced or supplemented the bow and arrow. Clothing became more colorful with the introduction of European fabrics, and glass beads replaced or supplemented porcupine quills. They also incorporated beads into items such as knife sheaths, arrow quivers, and moccasins, and added red ribbons to ceremonial bundles and prayer offerings. They even decorated muskets, rifles and traditional weapons with brass wire, silver ornaments and paints purchased from the traders.



Fort Union Association photo

Pockamogons, weapons utilizing trade goods

Dependency & Disease

Not all of the traders' influence was beneficial, however. Dependence on imported goods sometimes led to a more materialistic attitude and wasteful hunting. Traditionally, Plains Indians took only the game they needed for their own food, clothing, and shelter, and in some cultures thanked the spirit of the animal for its sacrifice. The desire for more manufactured goods demanded more pelts and hides. This need for more conflicted with traditional values.

In addition, American Indians were introduced to alcohol and inadvertently exposed

to deadly diseases to which they had no immunity. Four years before Lewis and Clark's expedition, three quarters of the Ponca tribe died of smallpox. Another epidemic of this disease, carried by a steamboat passenger in 1837, killed 10,000 to 20,000 Plains Indians, including over 90% of the Mandan Nation. As a result of these epidemics, some tribes were left too weak to defend themselves from other tribes and outside invaders. This sometimes resulted in alliances of former adversaries, as decimated tribes banded together for protection against stronger nations.

End of an Era



Yellowstone National Park photo collection

Bison bones to be shipped as fertilizer, 1890.

The fur trade did not end all at once; the decline of trade moved up the river as the tribes were relegated to reservations and their access to buffalo became limited. The American Fur Company found more profit in shipping reservation and military supplies than in trading for hides and pelts. Locally, American Fur Company's Fort Vermillion and Ponca Post both closed in the 1850s as trade dwindled. Shortly after the departure of American Fur, a representative of Frost, Todd, & Co. began trading from a tent near the site of Yankton.

By 1859 the Yankton Sioux and Ponca tribes had moved to reservations and been provided with annuity goods and farm equipment in accordance with their treaties; most of their hunting ceased, and Frost, Todd, & Company conveniently became a townsite developer. The remaining free-roaming tribes continued

to hunt and trade buffalo robes into the 1870s as change and settlers swept inexorably up the river. Although a half century of trade-related American Indian hunting had a serious impact on the bison population, it took non-Indian commercial hunters only a decade to bring the species to the brink of extinction. By 1890, the remaining free Plains Tribes had been confined to reservations, and the era of intercultural private enterprise came to an end.

While the fur trade and its goods brought changes for both the better and the worse, it was the force of the U.S. Army and the settlers' demands for land that left the Plains Tribes restricted to reservations and struggling to maintain their pride, traditions and languages in a world that was no longer their own.