

Beads, Bangles, and Buffalo Robes:

The Rise and Fall of the Indian Fur Trade Along the Missouri and Des Moines Rivers, 1700–1820

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THE OMAHA, PONCA, OTOE, AND IOWA TRIBES migrated westward from the Ohio valley in prehistoric times and camped on the banks of the tributaries of the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers in present-day Iowa and Nebraska. Originally part of a series of mass migrations, these prairie Sioux had splintered into several tribes before they first encountered Europeans. The Otoes occupied the area beyond the Missouri around the mouth of the Platte River. North of them on the Missouri lived their allies, the Omahas and the Poncas (a secessionist Omaha band). The Iowas occupied the Des Moines River valley to the east. Other Siouan tribes—the Osages, Missouris, and Kansas—lived west and south of them. The Omahas and their allies frequently warred with these other nations as well as with the Yankton Sioux and the Caddoan-speaking Pawnees.

From very early times the Siouan tribes had participated in trade networks that stretched across great distances. "Trade" was essentially gift exchange, since it involved ritual reciprocity; goods changed hands as a means of establishing fictive kinship. Items traded were generally products of the harvest or the hunt and were quickly consumed by their buyers without any accumulation of surplus "wealth."

The introduction of European goods transformed native American trading patterns. European goods were mostly imperishable commodities: tools, weapons, cloth, and items of adornment that provided status and allowed for the accumulation of

new wealth. Such a situation created a consumer society in which many items were sought for the status they gave their owner rather than for the physiological needs they filled. As Europeans introduced new products and methods of trade, and as Indians became dependent on European technology, middlemen—individuals or bands who could acquire large amounts of goods for their followers at low prices—could exert influence over other tribes. The four Siouan tribes along the Des Moines and Missouri waterways took advantage of their location in the early years of the fur trade, but their influence declined as fur-bearing animals disappeared from their lands.

This pattern of tribal rise and fall repeated itself across North America as the European frontier moved west. As John C. Ewers has pointed out in a provocative article, the "fur trade" was an Indian trade. Indian societies were more actively involved in the fur trade than European societies, and it had a more lasting effect on the lives of Indians than it did on the remote European settlements: whole generations of Indian people—men, women, and children—felt the influence of the fur trade on their lives from birth until death, and they became the major victims of its decline. The fur trade altered relationships between individuals within a tribe and between tribal communities. It worked as a mechanism for cultural change and as the primary vehicle for contact between Indians and Europeans.¹

By 1700 Peoria Indian traders had visited the villages of the Siouan tribes, bringing them their first guns at about the same time that they acquired horses from the Comanches.² These innovations in technology altered the culture of these tribes. Traditionally horticultural groups occupying earth lodge villages along the Missouri, the Omahas, Poncas, and Otoes developed customs typical of nomadic plains Indians. The use of buffalo hide tipis in the summer months, the development of religious symbolism related to the buffalo, and the evolution of a system

1. John C. Ewers, "The Influence of the Fur Trade Upon the Indians of the Northern Plains," in Malvina Bolus, ed., *People and Pelts: Selected Papers of the Second North American Fur Trade Conference* (Winnipeg, 1972), 1-2.

2. G. Hubert Smith, *Ethnohistorical Report of the Omaha People* (New York, 1974), 16-29.

of graded war honors and warrior societies became as characteristic of the prairie Sioux as of the Yankton and Teton Sioux who roamed the Great Plains further west.

The Siouan peoples' horticultural economy and their annual buffalo hunts in the summer overlapped and depended on one another, both economically and metaphysically. According to Siouan traditions, corn and buffalo were created together: without the spiritual presence of buffalo, the corn would not grow; and if the ceremonies for planting were improperly observed, the buffalo would not offer themselves to tribal hunters.³ Denied either corn or buffalo, the tribes would suffer physical and spiritual catastrophe.

In this world of cause and effect, the arrival of European goods and horses was greeted as a spiritual and material boon. The goods made life easier and more luxurious, but they also endowed the Omahas and their neighbors with *wakan* (power). Middlemen who could acquire powerful talismans like horses, guns, steel tools, and other products of the white men wielded not only economic but also spiritual power over their people.⁴

The introduction of European goods altered relationships within tribes. In prehistoric times hunting and horticulture were community activities dedicated to *Wakanda* ("The Power Above"), which produced institutionalized social equality.⁵ Buffalo hunters used the buffalo pound method; the hunters worked together to herd the buffalo into an earth-and-log corral, then they shared the results of the kill. After the arrival of horses and European goods, however, an individual hunter could maneuver within a buffalo herd to kill animals and claim for himself the animals he killed. The procuring of robes and pelts in this new way was not dedicated to *Wakanda* and was not surrounded by moral demands for tribal apportionment. The meat was shared as in the old way, but the surplus available in

3. George F. Will and George E. Hyde, *Corn Among the Indians of the Upper Missouri* (Lincoln, Nebr., 1964), 205; Alice Fletcher and Francis LaFlesche, *The Omaha Tribe* (Washington, D.C., 1911), 614.

4. Fletcher and LaFlesche, *Omaha*, 271-83; Polly Pope, "Trade on the Plains: Affluence and Its Effects," *Kroeber Anthropological Society Papers* 34 (Spring 1966), 53-61.

5. Alan Klein, "The Political Economy of Gender: A Nineteenth Century Plains Indian Case," in Patricia Albers and Bea Medicine, eds., *The Hidden Half: Studies of Plains Indian Women* (Washington, D.C., 1983), 151.

the new trade created a desire for wealth and a new ethic. This ethic stressed accumulation and enterprise in the world of reciprocity, thus creating new social tensions that altered tribal societies.⁶

The protracted buffalo hunts weakened village life, and the need for workers introduced new tensions between the sexes. A buffalo hide required ten days to tan, but in one hunt one man could easily kill enough buffalo to furnish one woman with eight hides—the equivalent of nearly three months work. As women spent more time cleaning hides, men sought additional workers. Polygyny became common among the middle Missouri tribes as one solution to this problem; the acquisition of Apache and Pawnee slaves was another.⁷

The introduction of European goods also altered the relationships between middlemen and their followers by introducing differential wealth. Since a successful hunter possessed a surplus of robes for trade, he could barter them for goods and thereby accumulate surpluses of other items. "Giveaways" became more elaborate as rich men vied for prestige by distributing part of their goods to their followers. Fees could be charged for the use of sacred bundles and their ceremonies and for ritual tattooing.⁸ Since wealthy men had horses and robes available for trade, they became richer while their neighbors became dependent on them.

Trading areas expanded as wealthy middlemen sought more riches. Omaha traders (often in league with the Poncas and Otoes) traveled up the Missouri to participate in trade fairs sponsored by the Arikaras and Mandans. Besides providing corn and buffalo hides, the Omahas and their neighbors brought French trade goods purchased from Peoria and white traders. The Arikaras and Mandans provided English goods that the Assiniboine and Cree middlemen brought overland from Hudson Bay. The nomadic tribes of the northern plains came to

6. Regina Flannery, *The Gros Ventres of Montana* (Washington, D.C., 1953), 152; Klein, "Political Economy," 152-53; Fletcher and LaFlesche, *Omaha*, 614.

7. Pope, "Trade on the Plains," 57; Fletcher and LaFlesche, *Omaha*, 615-16; John Upton Terrell, *The Plains Apache* (New York, 1975), 164.

8. Fletcher and LaFlesche, *Omaha*, 614. Sacred bundles and the rituals that controlled their use were owned by individuals. These bundles controlled success in war, hunting, and the cycle of agriculture.

Beads, Bangles, and Buffalo Robes

these fairs to barter pemmican, buffalo robes, beaver pelts, and horses for the agricultural products and European trade goods that the farming tribes offered them.

Omaha and Oto middlemen also attended trade fairs at the Taovayas villages on the Red River. At these fairs the farming tribes bartered agricultural products and French goods with the Kiowas, Comanches, and other southern plains tribes for war captives, Spanish horses, and buffalo robes. While the southern plains tribes could not deal directly with Europeans, they could expect to barter on an equal basis with middlemen at their trade fairs. The Omahas, Otoes, and Iowas also visited white traders at Prairie du Chien, where they exchanged buffalo robes and other pelts for a variety of goods.⁹ Iowa middlemen provided other goods through the Peorias and Potawatomis, who held fairs on the southern shores of Lake Michigan. The presence of a French post, Fort d'Orleans, at the mouth of the Grand River, provided indirect trade through the Little Osages and helped Iowa and Otoe middlemen increase their influence.¹⁰

This extensive trade network rested on the ability of the Indian middlemen to procure the *wakan* European goods for their Indian customers in exchange for buffalo robes, fine furs, and horses. However, the tribes that served as middlemen faced a variety of problems. They were unable, for example, to stockpile a large surplus of goods due to the Europeans' high prices and their own limited means of transportation. Even though middlemen regularly marked up the prices of their goods several hundred percent, the increase barely paid for the cost of presents their Indian customers demanded as a preliminary condition of trade. Gift exchange dominated the Plains trading pattern since most goods were given away. These "giveaways" created a bond among potentially hostile tribes and established the useful fiction that traders were brothers.

9. A. P. Nasatir, "The Anglo-Spanish Frontier in the Illinois Country During the American Revolution, 1779-1783," *Journal of the Illinois Historical Society* 21 (October 1928), 352-55; John C. Ewers, "The Indian Trade on the Upper Missouri Before Lewis and Clark," in John C. Ewers, ed., *Indian Life on the Upper Missouri* (Norman, Okla., 1968), 14-33.

10. Fletcher and LaFlesche, *Omaha*, 612.

THIS COMMERCIAL SYSTEM was maintained on the Great Plains as long as European traders remained at a distance. With the collapse of the French empire in North America in 1763, however, the Louisiana territory was transferred to Spain. The government of Carlos III assumed responsibility for defending the Missouri valley from foreign encroachment. Spanish officials persistently feared that British traders visiting the Indian villages on the Missouri were spies who would not only incite Indian uprisings, but also would lead a British invasion of California and New Mexico. British traders of the Mackinaw Company were active among the Iowas, Sioux, and Omahas after 1770. In the years after the American Revolution, Spanish officials believed that the British commercial penetration of central Iowa threatened their nation's hold on upper Louisiana. Recognizing the importance of the Indians, Spanish authorities began sending traders to the western tribes to secure their allegiance to Spain.¹¹

Because of the Iowas' proximity to the trade centers in Illinois, they were among the first tribes west of the Mississippi to deal with the British in Illinois. Under the chieftainship of The Thief, the Iowas used their location on the Des Moines River as a center for Mackinaw traders traveling overland from Green Bay. The Thief stored the Big Knives' (British) goods in his town and traded them to the Poncas, Omahas, and Otoes.¹²

By the 1780s buffalo had begun to disappear from the Iowas' lands, forcing them to hunt along the Kansas River with the Otoes.¹³ Fear of the Omahas, however, confined most of the Iowas to the Des Moines valley. The valley's rapidly diminishing fur supplies were further threatened when Sac and Fox tribesmen began to settle along the Des Moines River and usurp the Iowas' hunting grounds. Fearful of offending these powerful easterners who appeared to be good friends of the Big Knives,

11. A. P. Nasatir, "Anglo-Spanish Rivalry on the Upper Missouri," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 16 (December 1929), 359; Louis Houck, ed., *The Spanish Regime in Missouri*, 2 vols. (Chicago, 1909), 1: 11-12.

12. Abraham P. Nasatir, "The Anglo-Spanish Frontier on the Upper Mississippi, 1786-1796," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* 29 (April 1931), 156-57; Lawrence Kinnaird, ed., *Spain in the Mississippi Valley, 1763-1794*, 3 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1945), 1: xvii.

13. Kinnaird, ed., *Spain*, 1: 160-66; Lyman Draper and R. G. Thwaites, eds., *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 21 vols. (Madison, Wis., 1903-1915), 17: 414.

The Thief allowed them to stay. Iowa, Sac, and Fox hunters scoured the Des Moines valley searching for fur-bearing animals. The resultant overtrapping of the Iowas' hunting grounds seriously depleted the already declining animal populations in central Iowa and threatened all three tribes with destitution.¹⁴ By 1790 the Iowas had been reduced to the status of provisioners for the British traders who now passed up the Des Moines toward a portage to the Missouri. The Iowas also bartered corn and squash to the Poncas, Omahas, Otoes, and Little Osages, whose chiefs now became the middlemen in the fur trade.

Indian middlemen ignored Spanish entreaties to cease trading with the British. The frustrated lieutenant governor, Manuel Perez, failing either to secure permission from authorities in Spain to barter with the Indians or to provide sufficient gifts to impress visiting chiefs with the wealth and power of Spain, tried a different tactic. As the Siouan tribes north of St. Louis continued to trade with the British, Perez recommended that Spain build forts and open trade with the Indians in an effort to curb British influence.¹⁵

In response to Perez's suggestion, a Franco-Spanish syndicate in St. Louis received a royal charter in 1794 to carry Spanish goods to the tribes of the upper Missouri. The new firm, called the Commercial Company for the Discovery of the Nations of the Upper Missouri (afterwards known as the Missouri Company), gave commissions to individuals, granting them a monopoly on the trade with some individual western tribe. From its inception, Indian middlemen met the Missouri Company's representatives with hostility. The poor quality of Spanish goods and the persistent refusal of royal authorities to sanction the gun trade offended the Indians. Since *fusils* constituted the largest single item in the trade, the failure of Spanish traders to provide more than a handful of contraband guns doomed the hopes of a Spanish-Indian commercial alliance. Furthermore, the Missouri

14. Martha Royce Blaine, *The Ioway Indians* (Norman, Okla., 1979), 81-82; Phillipe de Neve, Commanding General of the Provincias Internas, to Governor of Texas Domingo Cabello y Robles, 30 July 1784, in Bexar Archives, Barker History Center, University of Texas Archives, Austin, Texas.

15. Nasatir, "Upper Mississippi," 169-75; Jacob Van der Zee, "Fur Trade Operations in the Eastern Iowa Country under the Spanish Regime," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* 12 (July 1914), 364.

Company's agents continually fought among themselves for control of the trade with various Indian tribes. As a result, charters were granted and withdrawn with alarming frequency, and new officials eagerly collected fees and bribes from new traders regardless of the effects on the Indian trade. The Omahas, for instance, had at least seven different traders in the 1790s. Other tribes suffered similar changes.¹⁶

Just as the Indians were irritated by the Spaniards' failure to provide permanent traders who could be treated as kinsmen, the white men's desire for direct trade made competitors of their prospective trading partners. The Omahas and Poncas recognized that direct Spanish trade with the tribes farther upriver would ruin their own commercial importance as middlemen. Encouraged by British traders, who also hoped to keep Spanish agents away from the upper Missouri tribes, the Omahas and Poncas refused to allow Spanish traders to pass by their villages and regularly plundered those Spanish pirogues that tried to avoid them while en route to the Mandans and Arikaras.¹⁷

By 1791 British traders had begun to visit the Otoes and Omahas regularly, enhancing those tribes' roles as middlemen. Robert Dickson, a leading Green Bay trader, annually brought thirty canoe-loads of goods up the St. Peter (Minnesota) River and then portaged overland to the Big Sioux valley.¹⁸ Dickson, whose Indian customers included Omahas, Poncas, Brules, Dakotas, and Yanktons, was able to procure enormous quantities of fine pelts and buffalo hides. In exchange he provided the Omahas with goods that could be passed on to the Otoes, Pawnees, and Comanches.

With more goods now available to them, the Otoes and Omahas expanded their trading empire to include robes and horses from the Cheyennes, Arapahoes, Kiowas, and other no-

16. "Petition of Sanguinet, New Orleans, March 14, 1801," in A. P. Nasatir, ed., *Before Lewis and Clark: Documents Illustrating the History of the Missouri, 1785-1804*, 2 vols. (St. Louis, 1952), 2: 630-31; Van der Zee, "Fur Trade Operations," 364-65.

17. Alexander Henry and David Thompson, *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest: The Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry and David Thompson, 1799-1814*, ed. Elliott Coues, 2 vols. (Minneapolis, 1965), 2: 778.

18. David Lavender, *The Fist in the Wilderness* (Albuquerque, N.Mex., 1979), 35-38.

madic tribes to the northwest. The Omaha villages became the sites of trade fairs as Indians from the Platte and Niobrara River valleys brought robes and skins to barter for British guns, cloth, and hatchets. Attempts by Spanish officials to stop this "illegal trade" proved futile because the Indians would not allow the Spaniards to interfere.¹⁹

In an effort to provide trade goods to win over the Indians, the Missouri Company sent Jean Baptiste Truteau, one of the company's partners, to visit the Omahas and Poncas as well as the Mandans and Arikaras. When Truteau and his men reached the Oto village at the mouth of the Platte in the summer of 1794, Medicine Bundle (Le Sac de Medicine), the Otoe's chief and a firm friend of the British, refused to allow Truteau's party to proceed.²⁰ Medicine Bundle and the Spaniards finally reached a compromise; the traders agreed to travel upstream no farther than the Omahas' villages. Truteau's pirogue nevertheless continued its journey and managed to slip past the Omahas at night, but the Yankton Sioux captured the Spaniards a short distance upstream, plundered their goods, and refused to let them continue upriver.

Forced to return to the Omahas' territory, the Spaniards established a temporary post on the banks of the Missouri about ten leagues above the Poncas' village.²¹ Truteau's men attempted to hide the trade goods they had left, but a party of Omahas surprised them before the goods could be buried. Big Rabbit, the second-ranking Omaha chief, assured Truteau of his love for the Spaniards and demanded that the white men reciprocate his goodwill by giving his followers trade goods on credit. Guns and ammunition were especially in demand, Big Rabbit explained, since the last Spanish trader the Omahas had visited had not had enough of either to satisfy the tribe's requirements. Truteau's claim that the Yanktons had stolen most of his goods failed to satisfy Big Rabbit's followers, who took what they could not buy from the Spaniards.²²

19. Kinnaird, ed., *Spain*, 3: 410-11.

20. "Journal of Truteau on the Missouri River, 1794-1795," in Nasatir, ed., *Before Lewis and Clark*, 1: 262.

21. *Ibid.*, 1: 279.

22. *Ibid.*, 1: 280-81.

Five weeks after Truteau established his post, the "great chief" of the Omahas, Washingguhsahba, or Blackbird, arrived to meet the Spaniards. Blackbird was greatly respected by his people as well as by his Oto and Ponca allies, who paid him an annual tribute. Although Truteau charged that Blackbird poisoned his enemies to maintain his position, his real power came from his ability as a master trader who forced whites to give him the largest amount of merchandise for the lowest prices. During the winter Blackbird stockpiled hides and pelts from his followers and the allied tribes and, when the whites arrived, he bartered off his merchandise in return for European goods. He then distributed his purchases among those Indians who had provided him with his supply of furs. Blackbird was not opposed to intimidation as a means of asserting his authority over recalcitrant partners. In 1792 the Poncas had raided the Omahas for women, thereby threatening the fragile commercial peace. Blackbird's warriors attacked Ponca hunting parties and destroyed corn fields until the Ponca chief, Kitchetabaco, sent his beautiful daughter with a calumet to make peace. Blackbird accepted the offer of peace and kept the pipe and the young woman.²³

The Omaha chief refused to haggle with whites, forcing traders instead to accept his prices. On the pretext of correcting unfair trade practices, he often confiscated part of a trader's supplies and divided them among his followers. Blackbird also flaunted his independence of Spanish authority by openly entertaining Sac traders who brought English goods to him under the Spaniards' noses.

Blackbird's actions impressed his people. Many of them accompanied him to visit Truteau's post, where Blackbird informed Truteau that the Omahas regarded all whites as liars and scoundrels who attempted to cheat and rob the Indians. He complained that Spanish guns often failed to fire, and that their hatchets were not made of durable iron. Other items were just as bad. In addition, the Spaniards often proved dishonest, giving the Indians short measure as well as shoddy goods. The

23. *Ibid.*, 1: 283; Edwin James, *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains performed in the Years 1819 and 1820*, in R. G. Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels, 1748-1846*, 32 vols. (Cleveland, 1904-1906), 15: 104-21.

Omahas, according to Blackbird, retaliated by attacking traders and plundering their supplies. Having pointed out the Omahas' grievances and predilection for revenge, Blackbird coerced Truteau into granting credit to his followers. Unable to defend his men against the hostile Omahas, Truteau agreed to give Blackbird what he wanted.²⁴

The Omahas made frequent visits to Truteau's hut during the winter of 1794-95 and often pilfered goods from the whites, threatening to kill them if they did not give the Indians presents. After allowing this to continue for a few minutes, Blackbird always rescued the white men from the mob. After ordering his followers to leave his "white friends" alone, Blackbird then demanded gifts from the traders for saving their scalps.²⁵

When Blackbird's people departed for their annual buffalo hunt in the spring, the Poncas quickly replaced them as a nuisance to the Spaniards. The Poncas had seized a supply of guns that Truteau's lieutenant, Jacques D'Eglise, had brought upriver the previous autumn. When Truteau remonstrated, they took several small items from the Spaniards' stock of supplies and then threatened to kill the whites. Kitchetabaco, the Poncas' chief, arrived in time to save the Spaniards' lives. He berated his warriors for stealing from the white men, but allowed them to keep what they had taken. At Truteau's insistence, Kitchetabaco agreed to meet with Truteau at the Poncas' village and to try to convince his people to return the stolen guns.

Within a few days Truteau and several of his men followed the Poncas' trail to their village. Kitchetabaco welcomed them but refused to return the Spaniards' merchandise or to force his people to pay for what they had taken. He explained that his warriors needed the guns to protect themselves from their enemies, the Arikaras and the Brule Sioux. The Poncas then confiscated Truteau's supply of cloth and blankets, plus a quantity of powder and shot, and paid in exchange only thirty-three hides. Kitchetabaco responded to

24. "Journal of Truteau," in Nasatir, ed., *Before Lewis and Clark*, 1: 288-92; Pierre Antoine Tabeau, *Tabeau's Narrative of Loisel's Expedition to the Upper Missouri*, ed. Annie H. Abel (Norman, Okla., 1939), 167.

25. "Journal of Truteau," in Nasatir, ed., *Before Lewis and Clark*, 1: 283-84.

Truteau's protests by reminding him that the Omahas had treated the Spaniards much worse.²⁶

After the Poncas searched through Truteau's few remaining goods and assured themselves that he had hidden no *fusils* that would be sold to their enemies, they allowed the white men to proceed to the Arikara village. The Arikaras were at war with several surrounding tribes and had been unable to hunt, so they had little to offer Truteau in exchange for what few trade goods he had left. Disheartened and virtually empty-handed, Truteau returned to St. Louis.

The Spanish government, dissatisfied with Truteau's performance, revoked his trading license and issued another one to Diego (James) MacKay, a Scot who had served the North West Company in Canada for several years before becoming a Spanish citizen. After having his goods plundered by the Poncas, MacKay arrived at the Otoes' village in late October and was escorted from there to Blackbird's village by the chief's son and several prominent Omaha and Oto leaders.

MacKay described Blackbird as a man "full of experience, intelligence, and capacity."²⁷ In MacKay's opinion, the Omaha leader was more despotic than a European monarch but much more intelligent. MacKay assured Blackbird that the Spaniards wanted to furnish goods to the Omahas, but would not trade with them if they continued to harass trading parties. When MacKay presented peace medals to Blackbird and the other Omaha chiefs, he was informed that British traders provided flags as well as medals. Since the Spaniards provided no flags, Blackbird claimed that they did not respect him as much as the British did. He then demanded a larger medal and flag than any of the other chiefs received, befitting his greater importance. Blackbird also expressed regret that MacKay had not given him as many presents as British traders had provided, and concluded sadly that MacKay's parsimoniousness would cause ill feeling between the Omahas and the Spaniards.²⁸

MacKay agreed to provide Blackbird with gifts, only to have the chief demand gifts for the chiefs of the other tribes as well.

26. *Ibid.*, 1: 293.

27. "MacKay's Journal, October 14, 1795-January 18, 1796," in *ibid.*, 1: 358.

28. *Ibid.*, 1: 358-59.

Blackbird claimed that those leaders would respect his council to be friendly toward the Spaniards only if he accompanied his words with presents. Blackbird assured MacKay that the British always gave such gifts, and their influence could be counteracted only by a greater volume of presents from the Spaniards. MacKay agreed to give Blackbird gifts for the chiefs as well as for himself and his followers. In return, Blackbird agreed to summon the chiefs of the Poncas, Otoes, Yanktons, Brule Sioux, and Arapahoes to speak with the Spanish trader. He also promised to give MacKay a safe conduct to the Arikara villages.²⁹

MacKay abruptly abandoned his plans for trading on the upper Missouri when a Ponca war party arrived at Blackbird's village with several Arikara scalps. Blackbird condemned the Poncas for their actions and, at MacKay's request, demanded the return of the goods they had stolen from the Spaniard's party. After lengthy talks, the Poncas agreed to surrender a handful of pelts as payment, and Blackbird demanded gifts from MacKay as his commission for negotiating the exchange.³⁰

Since warfare between the Poncas and the Arikaras precluded any attempt to continue upriver, MacKay finally abandoned Blackbird's village and returned empty-handed to St. Louis. He had extracted a pledge of loyalty from the Omahas, but he could not convince their neighbors to keep the peace. Spanish officials continued to complain of Ponca attacks on traders, and the Omahas and their allies frequently attended British conferences at Prairie du Chien.³¹

The Omahas and Poncas remained loyal friends of the British. By 1800 a British post had been established on the Des Moines, and British traders came to dominate the region completely. The British chief trader, Jean Baptiste Faribault, traded with several tribes and encouraged the Iowas and Omahas to visit his posts and to bring chiefs of other tribes.

Blackbird used his influence with the British to acquire guns that greatly expanded the Omahas' power. In 1799 the Omahas attacked the Pawnee Loups near the Platte, killing sixty warriors and stealing most of their enemies' horses. Although the Loups

29. *Ibid.*, 1: 360-61.

30. *Ibid.*, 1: 362, 363.

31. Trudeau to Gayoso de Lemos, St. Louis, 18 December 1795, in *ibid.*, 1: 372.

made peace, the Republican River Pawnees retaliated against the Omahas by stealing goods from Little Grizzly Bear, one of Blackbird's trading captains. Outraged, Blackbird and his warriors attacked the Pawnees' town on the Republican, killing more than one hundred men, women, and children and destroying most of the village.³² Collecting horses, corn, and prisoners, the Omahas accepted the Pawnees' submission and returned home. Blackbird's victory eliminated the Pawnees as serious commercial rivals on the Platte and in the central Great Plains.

The Omahas did not enjoy their favorable economic position for long, however. In 1801 and 1802 a smallpox epidemic swept through their villages, killing two-thirds of the Omahas and a large number of Poncas.³³ Blackbird was among those who died in the epidemic. Leadership of the Omahas passed to Big Rabbit, who was, in turn, challenged by White Cow and Big Elk, two traditional chiefs. In 1804 the Brule Sioux attacked the Poncas and captured sixty women and children. Although the Omahas managed to ransom the captives with horses, the two tribes' self-confidence was badly shaken. Big Rabbit attempted to recover his tribes' losses by attacking the Otoes. Although the numerically superior Omahas seized large numbers of the Otoes' horses, they were repulsed by Oto marksmen and failed to loot their village.³⁴ British traders entered the Omahas' territory in 1804 and provided them with more guns and powder to repel future Sioux attacks. Nevertheless, the Big Knives counseled Big Rabbit to keep the peace since the Sioux were the Englishmen's friends.

The era of colonial trade, when French, Spanish, and British traders had all jostled for position as providers to the Indians, had left the Omahas, Poncas, and other tribes in a strong position, free to offer furs to the highest bidder. The decline in fur-bearing animals in the early nineteenth century, the influx of

32. James, *Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains*, in Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels*, 15: 88; Nasatir, "Anglo-Spanish Frontier on the Upper Mississippi," 231.

33. Clamorgan to Salcedo, St. Louis, 18 April 1801, in *ibid.*, 2: 632-34; Tabeau, *Narrative*, 100; Van der Zee, "Fur Trade Operations," 483.

34. James, *Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains*, in Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels*, 15: 88-89; "Personal Narrative of Capt. Thomas G. Anderson," in Draper and Thwaites, eds., *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 9: 151.

refugee tribes from Wisconsin and Illinois, and the rising domination of the Missouri River trade by American interests threatened to end this economic independence.

THE OMAHAS and their allies had begun trading with Americans in the 1790s through Indian middlemen. Still, in 1803, when the United States assumed control of the Louisiana Territory, the American threat to their economic independence seemed far away. With the occupation of St. Louis in 1804, however, the United States began extending its control up the Missouri. Nicholas Boilvin, the assistant Indian commissioner for the western department, established his headquarters on the Des Moines River and, employing Iowa middlemen, began to offer trade goods as well. The Iowas continued to trade with the British when they could, but Boilvin's presence encouraged trade with the Americans, who also built well-stocked forts near the Iowa villages on the Des Moines and proposed one for the Otoes' country on the Platte.³⁵

The pro-British Sac and Fox tribes who had immigrated into the Des Moines River valley tried to influence their western allies—including the Iowas, Otoes, and Omahas—to avoid the Americans. By 1804 the Iowas were almost completely under the commercial domination of the Sac and Fox. Zebulon Pike described the Iowas as virtual servants of the Sac and Fox, who supplied a few goods to the Yanktonai Sioux. The Iowas were at war with the Omahas and Poncas, who, in turn, were allied to the Pawnees.³⁶

This political situation continued until 1808, when the Shawnee Prophet convinced the Foxes to attack the Yanktonais. Fear of Yanktonai revenge raids and dissatisfaction with the commercial domination of the eastern immigrants convinced Hard Heart, the Iowas' chief, that an alliance with the Americans would be more profitable than opposition. Seeking to avoid conflict, Hard Heart made peace with the Missouri River tribes and moved his village to the Grand River to be near the Otoes.

35. Governor Wilkinson to the Secretary of War, 8 October 1805, in Clarence Carter, ed., *Territorial Papers of the United States* (Washington, D.C., 1948), 13: 234-37.

36. Donald Jackson, ed., *The Journals of Zebulon Montgomery Pike*, 2 vols. (Norman, Okla., 1966), 2: 130, 276-77.

The American factory at Fort Madison in eastern Iowa encouraged Hard Heart's Iowas to remain loyal since it was a major source of goods for them. The Otoes, close to both St. Louis and Fort Madison, also drifted toward the Americans.

The Omahas and their allies had begun trading with the Americans in the 1790s through Potawatomi and Sac and Fox villages on the Des Moines. The Omahas and Poncas also supplied corn and pemmican to occasional American expeditions up the Missouri. Then in 1805 Robert McClellan established a temporary trading post on the Missouri two leagues above the Omahas' town. Within a year, however, British trader Joseph LeCroix had delivered so many cheap goods to the Omahas that McClellan was bankrupted.

The death of Big Rabbit in 1805 left White Cow and Big Elk as the prominent Omaha chiefs. Fearing that commercial rivalry would split their people, Big Elk and White Cow both greeted the American expedition led by James Aird and Ramsay Crooks that arrived at the Omahas' village in 1807. Big Elk assured the Americans that the Omahas were poor and desperately needed the Long Knives' (Americans') goods. Gifts were essential, since the Omahas had no robes. Aird gave Big Elk gifts of tobacco and powder, but assured the Omaha chief that he and Crooks were also poor and needed robes to pay off their debts. Otherwise, he explained, there would be no more gifts for the Omahas. After Big Elk had assured Aird that his people would hunt, Aird and Crooks built a trading post to gather the Omahas' supplies of robes.³⁷ Although the post was never supplied with enough goods to satisfy the Omahas and Poncas, the two tribes nevertheless managed to maintain their role as middlemen. Brule and Pawnee traders kept looking to the Omahas for goods, while Omaha traders traveled to St. Peter to offer goods to the Dakotas.

Like the Iowas, the Omahas continued to trade with the British when they could, but British friendship with the Sioux was a barrier to the Omahas' continued good relations with Great Britain. The American promise of trade and protection

37. Lavender, *Fist in the Wilderness*, 66-75; Draper and Thwaites, eds., *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 4: 95-102; for a thorough discussion of Aird's adventures, see R. G. Thwaites, ed., *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1804-1806*, 8 vols. (New York, 1959), 5: 373-90.

made by Aird and Crooks induced the Omahas—and their allies, the Poncas—to support the Long Knives. Their friendship with the Americans did not enable the Poncas and Omahas to escape hostilities with other tribes. War with the Sacs and Foxes to the east erupted in 1809, and two nomadic tribes, the Arapahoes and Cheyennes, began disputing the Omahas' and Otoes' control of the Platte at the same time. This warfare disrupted the Omaha-Ponca trade network with the friendly Comanche Indians, cutting off the tribes' supplies of horses and pelts. As the aggressive plains tribes drove the Omahas and Poncas away from the middle Platte, the Sioux began pressing into Ponca territory from the north. Regular trade with the Americans had provided the prairie tribes with firearms, but their few warriors could not regain their lost lands from their new enemies.³⁸

The loss of the buffalo lands came as a psychological blow to the prairie Sioux. The nature of the Indian world view, in which all things were interrelated, required that the Omahas and their neighbors hunt buffalo for spiritual needs as well as physical benefits. The loss of the prairie tribes' western lands threatened individuals with more than just starvation.

As American officials displayed their inability to protect the Omahas and their allies, the fictive kinship established between the two groups fell apart. Fearing Sac and Fox raids, Aird and McClellan dismantled their small post in January 1809. This abandonment stunned the Indians, who expected that their Long Knife friends would protect them. The Americans' disregard for the Indians' psychological and material dependency struck the Omahas as unnatural. White men, accustomed to seeing trade as a temporary monetary arrangement between strangers, failed to grasp that Indians regarded trade as the exchange of gifts between brothers. White Cow and Big Elk, the Omaha chiefs, visited Meriwether Lewis and asked for traders, only to be told that the "Great Father" loved his Omaha children but had no time for them.³⁹

38. William Clark to the Secretary of War, 8 May 1807, in Carter, ed., *Territorial Papers*, 14: 122; Meriwether Lewis to the Secretary of War, 1 July 1808, in *ibid.*, 198-99.

39. John Bradbury, *Travels in the Interior of America in the Years 1809,*

Encouraged by British traders to buy their goods, the Omahas sent hides to the Big Knives in Canada. Young warriors also fired on American pirogues carrying goods to the Mandans, who were allies of the Cheyennes and Arapahoes. In an effort to calm the Indians, Lewis dispatched veteran French trader Pierre Chouteau to the Omahas' villages in November 1809. Originally sent to accompany the chiefs of the Mandans as they returned from St. Louis, the expedition stayed at the Omahas' villages and listened to the complaints of White Cow and Big Elk about the lack of a trading post. Chouteau agreed to establish a post at their village, and demanded that the Omahas and their allies keep the peace.

The Poncas, fearful of the Sioux who were beginning to push into the White and Niobrara River valleys, were eager for American protection as well. Three years later, however, the Poncas' chief, Smoke Maker, was still demanding protection despite the post at Council Bluffs. By 1811 the Poncas were so hungry for goods they had turned to begging for whiskey, powder, and knives. Even though traders frequently provided such gifts, the Poncas resented whites, who shot the animals and favored their Indian enemies with trade.⁴⁰

The Iowas were reduced to mining lead to earn money to buy trade goods. The Omahas were in a better position, since they and the Otoes still controlled the Pawnee trade. Annual returns from this trade—over two hundred packs of buffalo robes and seventeen packs of beaver and fine pelts—were traded for goods the Omahas and Otoes purchased from Baptiste Roi and his partners at Council Bluffs. Also, by 1809 the Otoes and Omahas had begun trading corn as well as robes. Corn was a valuable commodity to the traders, who needed food for themselves and their stock. At a price of one

1810, and 1811, in Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels*, 5: 95-97; James, *Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains*, in *ibid.*, 14: 227; H. M. Breckenridge, *Journal of a Voyage up the Missouri River, Performed in 1811*, in Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels*, 6: 77-93.

40. Meriwether Lewis to the Secretary of War, 1 July 1808, in *ibid.*, 198-99; Pierre Chouteau to the Secretary of War, 14 December 1809, in *ibid.*, 344; John Luttig, *Journal of a Fur Trading Expedition to the Upper Missouri, 1812-1814*, ed. Stella M. Drum (St. Louis, 1920), 53-56.

bushel for a yard of cloth, the white men made a good profit.⁴¹

In an effort to secure horses, the Iowas and Otoes fought the Osages along the Grand River.⁴² Meanwhile, in 1812 the Shawnee Prophet had incited the Iowas, Sacs, and Foxes to strike at the Americans. The paucity of goods and the disappearance of game animals from the Indians' hunting grounds encouraged disgruntled individuals to attack the Long Knives. Hard Heart avoided the war hysteria, but White Cloud readily accepted the leadership of pro-British Sac and Fox chiefs such as Black Hawk. The pro-American Iowas visited Fort Madison to ask for help, but an attack by hostile Iowas against an American force on the Mississippi ruined hopes for peace.⁴³

The Omahas and Poncas remained pro-American throughout the War of 1812. Aird had reopened trade from 1810 to 1812 before moving to Prairie du Chien. He continued to send goods guarded by friendly Brules overland to the Omahas. This constant flow of trade articles encouraged the Omahas to remain loyal, as did their dislike for the Shawnee Prophet and his Sac and Fox allies who favored the British.

In 1814 Manuel Lisa, another St. Louis trader, bought out Roi's post at Council Bluffs. Lisa married an Omaha woman and, through his wife's relatives, employed the Omahas as hunters. Appointed subagent for the Omahas by William Clark in 1814, Lisa visited the Omahas and encouraged them to attack the Iowas. Small war parties killed some of Hard Heart's hunters, and Big Eyes, the Omaha war chief, joined with minor leaders like Upright Horn and Thief to attack other pro-British Iowas. Brule warriors, allied with the Omahas and Poncas, raided in the Grand and Osage river valleys.⁴⁴ White Cloud's Iowas and their Sac allies were unable to protect their own villages from these attacks and quickly sought peace with Lisa.

41. Robert Stuart, *Discovery of the Oregon Trail*, ed. Philip A. Rollins (New York, 1935), 233; Will and Hyde, *Corn*, 193.

42. John Johnson to Governor Howard, 9 July 1812, in Carter, ed., *Territorial Papers*, 14: 578-79; Nicholas Boilvin to William Eustice, 23 February 1811, in *ibid.*, 14: 439.

43. Nicolas Boilvin to the Secretary of War, 11 February 1811, in Carter, ed., *Territorial Papers*, 14: 439; Draper and Thwaites, eds., *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 9: 139.

44. James, *Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains*, in Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels*, 14: 267-68.

The end of the War of 1812 did not benefit the prairie Sioux. The decline of fur-bearing animals in their own lands continued to plague them. Hard Heart's Iowas had few beaver for trade by 1819. Some Iowas had settled with the Otoes. Thief and Upright Horn, the leading Omaha headmen, could offer only moccasins and jerked meat to Joshua Pilcher in that year. Having allied themselves to the Gens Du Ferrilles band of the Assiniboines, the Omahas and Poncas remained safe for the moment from western Sioux incursions, but the lack of buffalo had reduced the tribes (and their Assiniboine allies) to eating red haws, wild rice, and food stolen from Pawnee caches.⁴⁵ The chiefs complained that the American soldiers' hunting drove off or destroyed all of the available game. The Otoes, who had abandoned their villages after Sac and Fox warriors attacked the post at Council Bluffs in 1818, stayed nearly as hungry.⁴⁶ Fear of American retaliation against hostile Indians misdirected at them proved stronger than the Otoes' desire to harvest their corn.

Indian agent Benjamin O'Fallon visited the prairie Sioux in 1819 to encourage them to hunt. His entreaties fell on the ears of tribal leaders whose people were too weak militarily to regain hunting lands lost to stronger tribes. The voracious Sacs and Foxes, seeking fortunes of their own, bullied the Omahas and Poncas, claiming their lands on the Big Sioux. The Sacs threatened war, but American officials intervened and forced them to remain east of the Big Sioux.⁴⁷ By 1820 the Omahas hunted a few beaver but subsisted almost entirely on their supplies of corn. L'Homme de Valeur, a ranking Omaha chief, was too busy fighting the Yankton and Brules to hunt. The Otoes were no longer trappers or hunters at all. Instead, they raised mules to sell to the army and to wagoners. Hard Heart's Iowas had been reduced to destitution, and all of them now lived with the Otoes. White Cloud's followers mined lead in eastern Iowa and did no hunting at all.⁴⁸

45. *Ibid.*, 14: 277.

46. *Ibid.*, 15: 193.

47. *Ibid.*, 14: 314-17.

48. *Ibid.*, 15: 193; Paul Wilhelm, Duke of Wurttemberg, *Travels in the Interior of North America, 1822-1824*, ed. Savoie Littinville (Norman, Okla., 1973), 247, 338, 386-87.

Beads, Bangles, and Buffalo Robes

AS THE AMERICAN FRONTIER MOVED WESTWARD, the realm of the fur trapper and hunter moved into the Rocky Mountains and beyond. The prairie Sioux found themselves without the power to control the trade as they once did. For a time they were able to obtain buffalo hides for trade, and they continued to supply pemmican and cornmeal to white trappers.

The power of the Omahas, Otoes, Poncas, and Iowas as middlemen lasted as long as beaver were plentiful in their country, as long as Europeans sought to flatter them for this wealth, and as long as the powerful plains tribes remained too distant to threaten them. The loss of the fur trade on which they relied left them unable to purchase the European goods they had come to need. They could not make the transition from primary producers to outfitters; because of this, the fur trade frontier moved on and left them poorer in its wake.

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