

The
PALIMPSEST



THE FUR TRADE
Indians on Horseback Killing Buffalo

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The Meaning of Palimpsest

In early times a palimpsest was a parchment or other material from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete; and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the record of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

Contents

THE FUR TRADE

GEORGE F. ROBESON

Manuel Lisa	65
Fur Trade in Early Iowa	79
Life Among the Fur Traders	93
The Epic of the Fur Trade	J. E. BRIGGS 105

Cover

All pictures, unless otherwise noted, are from Volume IV (Atlas) of Maximilian's *Travels in the Interior of North America*, and are reproductions of original paintings to illustrate the text by Charles Bodmer.

Author

This article is a reprint of the January, 1925, issue of THE PALIMPSEST by George F. Robeson of the Department of Political Science of the University of Iowa. All pictures, except that of Manuel Lisa, have been added to illustrate the text.

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THE PALIMPSEST

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Manuel Lisa

Previous to the memorable expedition of Lewis and Clark the whole country drained by the Missouri River was as a closed book. Even the Indian traders — those vanguards of civilization who proclaimed the advance of the frontier — dared not penetrate that portion of the continent more than a few hundred miles. But after the return of the intrepid explorers in 1806, a number of fur traders were bold enough to risk not only their fortunes but their lives in the newly explored region. One of the foremost of these was Manuel Lisa.

Of Manuel Lisa's life before he became the moving spirit in the fur trade in the country of the Upper Missouri, relatively little information is available. Born of Spanish parents in 1772 (September 8th), his early years in New Orleans are almost completely shrouded in mystery. His father came to America "about the time that the Spanish took possession of Louisiana," serving as an agent of his government until his death.

Manuel — many knew him by no other name — came to St. Louis “probably not later than 1790.” The exact date is not known.

It was during the decade following his advent in St. Louis that Lisa became well established in the fur trade. Indeed, it is a matter of record that he received a patent from the Spanish government which entitled him to a monopoly of trade with the Osage Indians located along the river by the same name. Such a grant of power by a government famous for its lust for money may be considered as a distinct recognition of his standing and ability.

Lisa's experience with the Osage Indians appears not to have been very successful, for soon after the return of Lewis and Clark in 1806 he seemed eager to seek a new outlet for his energies. Only a little over six months elapsed between the return of the “trail makers” and the first expedition of the “trade maker” — “the real forerunner of all subsequent fur trading expeditions within the Upper Missouri area.”

His first expedition, with some sixteen thousand dollars capital, left St. Louis — then the gateway of the Far West — on April 19, 1807. The party, commanded by Manuel Lisa, consisted of forty-two men among whom was George Drouillard who had “crossed the continent with Lewis and Clark.” The plan was to ascend the Missouri for the purpose of trading with the In-

dians and of erecting suitable posts and forts of a permanent character at convenient places. At these outposts men were to be stationed to promote friendly relations with the natives, to hunt and trap on their own account, and to barter with the Indians, storing the produce against the coming of the boats from St. Louis.

The party arrived at the mouth of the Big Horn River on the twenty-first of November and, being too late for the fall hunt, the work of constructing a trading house was immediately undertaken. The structure consisted of "two rooms and a loft." A fort was built during the following spring. Fort Raymond, named by Lisa in honor of his son, thus became the first permanent structure of its kind on the Upper Missouri. It was later referred to as Manuel's Fort or Fort Manuel.

Lisa spent the winter of 1807-1808 in the newly erected trading house. Expeditions were sent out into the surrounding country to hunt and explore. During the long winter, with its enforced inactivity, dissensions arose over petty thievery. The leader enforced discipline by the laying on of hands, followed by "much conversation and some heat." Even a long winter, however, must finally end. The new fort was finished and Lisa, leaving a small garrison, set out during the month of July for St. Louis where he arrived on August 5, 1808.

News of the return of Manuel Lisa's successful

trading expedition from the Far West resulted in the formation of a small company to prosecute the Indian trade with more vigor. That Lisa was a moving spirit in the formation of the Missouri Fur Company may be taken for granted, although there is some justification for the hypothesis that the new company was formed for the purpose of lessening a "ruinous competition" that was bound to result from the opening of the Missouri country. Indeed, the list of partners lends some support to this view for some of them had been competitors in the Osage trade. The association was to continue for a period of three years; its capital was to be such sum as was fixed by a majority of the partners; William Clark, the late associate of Meriwether Lewis, was to be the resident agent at St. Louis; each partner was obliged to accompany the expeditions or furnish a satisfactory substitute; and a majority vote of the partners was always necessary for a decision.

It may appear somewhat strange that a man of decision and independence like Manuel Lisa would hamper his activities by associating himself with others under such regulations. However that may be, Lisa became the recognized leader of the expeditions. A man of his temperament, experience, and ambition could not occupy a subordinate place. It is said that he ruled his men with an iron hand.

The first expedition of the new company set

out from St. Louis sometime in June, 1809. The party consisted of three hundred and fifty men about half of whom were Americans, the rest French Canadians and Creoles. Embarked on thirteen barges and keel-boats loaded with food, munitions, and articles suitable for the Indian trade, the trip up the Missouri River was arduous and of necessity rather slow. The means of propelling the craft varied with conditions and included "rowing, pushing with poles, cordeling or pulling with ropes, warping and sailing." Brave hearts, a willing spirit, and strong arms were indispensable. Passing again along the western border of Iowa, Manuel Lisa, ever watchful of the vagaries of the treacherous river, always on his guard against surprises from hostile Indians, and constantly urging the boatmen to greater effort "as if their lives depended on their getting forward with the greatest possible speed," finally brought his party to the Gros-Ventres village located between the mouth of the Little Missouri and that of the Big Knife rivers in what is now North Dakota.

There in the fall of 1809 while Fort Lisa was being erected, the larger boats were unloaded preparatory for the return to St. Louis with produce. Thus Fort Lisa, located near the Mandan villages, in reality superseded Fort Manuel at the Big Horn as the upper post of the Missouri Fur Company. It appears that Lisa had intended

to proceed to the forks of the Missouri but instead he sent one of the other partners. According to one account this change of plan resulted from some ill-feeling that developed during the voyage because of the hard work and scanty rations. One of the men became so incensed in an altercation with the leader that he shouted: "I have heard some of our boys say that if they ever caught you two hundred yards from camp they would shoot you, and if they don't I will . . . you are going to the forks of the Missouri: mark my words, you will never come back alive."

In any event Lisa returned to St. Louis in October, 1809 — an action that "was in accordance with the provisions of the articles of association." That fear could have caused him to alter his plans seems incredible: men of his training, character, and determination are not turned aside by threats uttered in the heat of passion.

Lisa spent the following winter (1809-1810) in an attempt to reach Montreal for the purpose of purchasing suitable goods for the Indian trade, but he was forced to abandon the undertaking at Detroit. In the spring he appears to have ascended the Missouri again.

These were trying days for the Company. The upper post was abandoned. The Blackfeet were annoying the trappers and had even killed some of the leaders, and the survivors under Major Andrew Henry, hoping to avoid further difficul-

ties with the Indians, crossed the mountains in order to be able to trap without danger. By the spring of 1811, the long continued absence of the trappers had developed such a spirit of apprehension within the Company that a searching party was organized to ascend the river and determine their fate.

This group, consisting of twenty-five men under the leadership of Lisa, left St. Louis in the month of March. Their boat was a barge propelled by a crew of "twenty stout oars-men," but to relieve the drudgery of constant rowing the vessel was fitted "with a good mast, and main and top sail." Due to the recent unfriendly attitude of the Indians and because the expedition was in the nature of a relief party, considerable attention was given to the matter of military equipment. According to the journal kept by a member of the party they were "completely prepared for defence." There was "a swivel on the bow of the boat, which, in case of attack would make a formidable appearance." These men knew the value of a "bold front." Besides, the cabin boasted of "two brass blunderbusses."

In addition to the necessary supplies for the trip — including ammunition, food, clothing, and such things — a small stock of trading materials was "concealed in a false cabin." This "ingeniously contrived" arrangement was intended to present "as little as possible to tempt the savages."

The limited supply of goods "which consisted of strouding, blankets, lead, tobacco, knives, guns, beads, &c" illustrated the straightened circumstances of the Company whose profits were mostly "anticipated." Indeed, a fire the previous winter which wiped out the stores of "buffaloe robes and beaver fur to the amount of fifteen or twenty thousand dollars" had been a blow severe enough to leave the Company almost ruined.

The trip of 1811, lasting from March until October, may be characterized as the "Marathon of the Missouri" — a race between the representatives of two rival trading organizations. Having an advantage of about three weeks' start, a party representing the Astor interests under the leadership of Wilson Price Hunt sought to keep well ahead of the Lisa expedition. The former feared that Lisa would use his influence to incite the Indians against them, while Lisa hoped to combine forces and thereby secure an uninterrupted passage through the hostile Indian country. During two months the anxious voyageurs travelled a distance of twelve hundred miles — a feat unparalleled in the history of keelboat travel on the Missouri. That there could have been any intrigue on the part of the representative of the Missouri Fur Company is improbable, for the Astorians contemplated the Columbia River as their field of operations which made them unlikely competitors. Indeed, Lisa's subsequent conduct

in assisting Hunt's party should have assuaged the doubts of even the most skeptical.

The conjunction of the two expeditions just beyond the Niobrara River on the second of June was of mutual value, for the country was infested by bands of unfriendly Indians "who were only deterred from attack by this exceptional show of force." When Hunt decided to take his party overland, "hoping to find a route better furnished with game than that traversed by Lewis and Clark, and free from the murderous Blackfeet," Lisa "proved helpful and generous." On account of his greater experience Lisa was able to negotiate the purchase of horses "from the treacherous Aricaras" and he "brought animals of his own from the Mandans, taking Hunt's boats and superfluous luggage in exchange."

Overtaking the Astorians proved to be fortunate in another way, for with them Lisa found three of the "lost legion." It appears that these men "had left the main party and started for home" but had been persuaded to join the Hunt expedition. Learning from them that Major Henry and his men were safe, "Lisa went no further up the river than Fort Mandan." Later, on returning to the Aricara villages to the southward, he and Henry combined forces and returned to St. Louis in October, 1811.

That winter, as upon several other occasions, the Missouri Fur Company was reorganized.

Manuel Lisa gradually assumed a more important role in the councils of the concern until finally he became president. His program each year was to spend nine or ten months in the wilderness, trading with the Indians, gaining their confidence, negotiating treaties, and promoting good will.

So effective were his methods and so potent his influence for good that the government made him Sub-agent for the tribes on the Missouri above the Kansas River. His appointment by Governor Clark in the summer of 1814 was designed to counteract British influence among these tribes, to cement them to the American cause, and if possible to organize them into effective war agencies. That he was successful in this work there seems to be no question. Governor Clark's report to Washington was enthusiastic, declaring Lisa to have been "of great service in preventing British influence the last year by sending large parties to war."

His methods of promoting friendly relations with the Indians accounted in no small degree for his success not only as a trader but as a government agent. Lisa's own statement of the matter sheds considerable light upon his tactics. "I put into my operations great activity. I go a great distance while some are considering whether they will start today or tomorrow. I impose upon myself great privations. Ten months of the year I am buried in the depths of the forest, at a vast

distance from my own house. I appear as the benefactor, not as the pillager: of the Indian. I carried among them the seed of the large pumpkin from which I have seen in their possession fruit weighing one hundred and sixty pounds; also the large bean, the potato, the turnip; and these vegetables will make a comfortable part of their subsistence; and this year I promised to carry the plow. Beside, my blacksmiths work incessantly for them, charging nothing. I lend them traps, only demanding a preference in their trade. My establishments are the refuge of the weak, and of the old men no longer able to follow their lodges; and by these means I have acquired the confidence and friendship of the natives and the consequent choice of their trade."

That Manuel Lisa's life as a trader was one of "great activity" there can be no doubt. Beginning in 1807 he made twelve or thirteen annual trips up the Missouri, enduring some twenty-six thousand miles of river travel — almost equivalent to Magellan's circumnavigation of the world. These were years of profit — a season's production of furs sometimes reaching the value of thirty-five thousand dollars — yet withal they were years of unvarying strain, even for one of his untiring energy.

The last trip to the upper country was made in 1819, and Mrs. Lisa, a bride of but a year, accompanied him. They spent the winter at Fort

Lisa — the second by that name — which had been established in 1812 a few miles above the present site of Omaha. This was the year of the famous Yellowstone Expedition sent out by the government under Major Stephen H. Long to explore the region beyond the Missouri. The winter quarters of the party having been located “a half mile above Fort Lisa” no doubt the “presence of the officers and scientists gave the place an atmosphere quite different from that of the ordinary trading post.” Dinner parties were exchanged — in keeping with the amenities of civilization.

The menu of one of these dinners has been preserved. “It consisted of the entire bison hump the rump of a bison roasted, boiled bison meat, two boiled bison tongues, the spinous processes roasted in the manner of spare ribs, sausages made of minced tenderloin and fat, etc.” It is true that they had “no vegetables whatever, but having been so long estranged from them,” their absence was scarcely regretted. Good bread made of “excellent wheat flour” was served, and the “collation was succeeded by coffee as a dessert.”

Matrimonially, Manuel Lisa was a man of experience. Three times he was married — twice among his own people. Little is known of his first wife. Her maiden name was Mary or Polly Charles. Tradition has it that, having been taken

a prisoner by the Indians she was finally ransomed by General William Henry Harrison, and Lisa, pitying her condition, married her. To this union three children were born all of whom died in comparative youth.

In 1814 he took to wife an Omaha woman — the beautiful daughter of one of the tribe's leading families. This union, made with "due ceremony," was entered into "as a matter of policy" in order to promote more friendly relations with the Indians. Indeed, this custom appears to have been not infrequent on the part of the early traders, even though another wife was living in the settlements. The Indians in this case knew that Lisa had a wife in St. Louis, but "to the untutored savage this was no bar to further marriage." Mitain bore him two children — a girl and a boy — destined to be his only descendants. The girl, Rosalie, when but two years old was taken by Lisa to St. Louis, there to have the advantages of an education and proper training. He was prevented from doing likewise with the boy by the interference of the Indian agent.

Later, in the summer of 1818, within six months after the death of his first wife, Lisa was married to Mrs. Mary Hempstead Keeney, an aunt of the second Governor of the State of Iowa. "Though Lisa was a Spaniard and a Catholic, and his wife was English and trained in the strictest Puritanism, the marriage proved to be an ideally happy

one." Indeed, it is asserted that no "unpleasant or wordy jangle" ever marred that household "for the good husband understood no English and the wife no French nor Spanish" — a statement no doubt somewhat overdrawn in every way.

This period of happiness, however, was destined to be of short duration for soon after their return to St. Louis following the winter spent in the north, Lisa became critically ill and died on August 12, 1820. Today he lies buried in the Bellefontaine cemetery in St. Louis. A shaft marks the resting place of this intrepid voyageur, who first made American influence felt along that "surging, sounding majesty of troubled water" — the Missouri River.

GEO. F. ROBESON

Fur Trade in Early Iowa

The dream of the founders of New France in America to establish "a chain of well-garrisoned forts along the St. Lawrence River to the Ohio and thence down to the Gulf of Mexico" was but a part of their scheme "to retain the trade monopoly in the furs and minerals of the West" and thus "check the encroachments of their aggressive neighbors and enemies" the British and the Spanish. This dream was in some degree translated into action, for at an early date their rude "forts" — in reality merely "traders' huts surrounded perhaps with high fences of pickets or split logs" — began to appear on river banks in the Mississippi Valley.

That the Iowa country soon came to be included within the boundaries of this dream realm is not surprising. Teeming with wild animals, the streams and forests of Iowa made an ideal hunting ground for the Indians. But it was not until about 1690 that facilities for bartering the products of the chase were available. Such opportunities were afforded when Nicholas Perrot erected two or three forts or trading posts along the Mississippi River above the mouth of the Wisconsin. Here came the Indians of northern Iowa to ex-

change peltries for trinkets. Later Perrot built a "fort" opposite the lead mines — probably "near the site of Dunleith on the Illinois side" of the river — thus bringing his wares within easy reach of his customers.

Other Frenchmen engaged in considerable trade with the Indians. Posts were established at various places in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Illinois, many of them at no great distance from the present borders of Iowa. The French dream of an American empire came to an end, however, when the English defeated the French in their struggle for North America — the Iowa country passing into the hands of Spain. During the period of Spanish control a bitter contest was waged with the English over the Indian trade. The Spaniards complained that the Sioux and the Ioways were unfaithful, giving to the English the fruits of their hunting, but the liberal presents of the British were not able to win over the Sauk and Fox tribes.

The policy of the Spaniards in attempting to exclude the British from all trade relations with the Indians of the upper Mississippi Valley "became more and more impracticable." The English, through their liberal "presents," were able to secure an unusual hold upon the affections of the natives. It is doubtful if the Spanish would have been materially benefited even if the suggestion of the Governor of Upper Louisiana that "it

would be advisable to establish another fort at the entrance of the Mua [Des Moines] river" had been carried into effect.

In 1794 the Spanish Governor gave Andrew Todd, "a young and robust Irishman," the right to the exclusive trade of the Upper Mississippi. "Don Andreas," as he came to be called, appears to have been successful in the undertaking — sending vast stores of goods up from New Orleans and bringing back furs. Two years later James Mackay in the employ of the Spanish Commercial Company of St. Louis reported that the "traders of the River Monigona [Des Moines] have sent twelve horses laden with goods to trade with the Panis [Pawnees] and the Layos [Loups] on the Chato [Platte] River." He adds furthermore that he "would be glad to be able to deal them a blow on their return." The struggle against British aggression seemed to be still in progress.

That same year, 1796, witnessed the confirmation of Julien Dubuque's claim to the lead mines. Todd, however, retained his monopoly of the Indian trade, insisting that the Spanish government absolutely prohibit Dubuque from trading with the natives; but with the death of Todd in 1796 the monopoly also seems to have ended, for the grant made in 1799 to Louis Tesson near the present town of Montrose in Lee County, and the one in 1800 to Basil Giard at what is now Mc-

Gregor in Clayton County, contained no such restrictions. Tesson's grant specifically entitled him to "have the benefit of whatever he may do to contribute to the increase of the commerce in which he is to participate." These three men, Dubuque, Tesson, and Giard, were in all probability the first fur traders who actually lived in Iowa; although other and earlier transient traders — French, Spanish, English, and Yankee — vying with each other and leading the precarious life of the *coureur de bois*, made frequent excursions into this region.

A period of more active interest in the fur trade began about the year 1800. The first trader of the new commercial era was Jean Baptiste Faribault. An agent of the North West Company operating out of Canada, he established a post called "Redwood" located some two hundred miles above the mouth of the Des Moines River, probably somewhere above the present site of Des Moines. Within a year after his arrival he had collected a sufficient quantity of furs to warrant a trip to the mouth of the river where he "delivered them to Mr. [Louis] Crawford, one of the accredited agents of the company." During the four years Faribault remained in charge of this lonely trading post he saw no white men but his own assistants, except on his annual trip to the mouth of the river.

"High prices" were often charged by the trad-

ers. It has been estimated that the "Ayouwais," a tribe of some eight hundred Indians located about forty leagues up the river "Demoin," annually consumed merchandise valued at thirty-eight hundred dollars for which they gave in return six thousand dollars worth of "deer skins principally, and the skins of the black bear, beaver, otter, grey fox, raccoon, muskrat, and mink." In 1804, following the purchase of the Iowa country by the United States, the government agreed to establish a post to enable the Sauk and Fox Indians to obtain goods "at a more reasonable rate" and incidentally "to put a stop to the abuses and impositions practiced upon them by private traders." As a result of this treaty Zebulon M. Pike set out the following year on his expedition to the source of the Mississippi with instructions "to select suitable sites for military establishments and a trading-post."

It was not until 1808, however, that the United States government undertook to keep its promise to the Sauks and Foxes by actually giving the necessary orders. This fort, with its factory, was located on the Mississippi River about twenty miles above the mouth of the Des Moines River and was called Fort Madison. It was the first government post to be erected in Iowa. Trade with the Sauks, Foxes, and Ioways flourished in spite of the opposition of British traders and the unfriendly attitude of their chief supporter, Black.

Hawk. According to an inventory in 1809 the "Le Moine Factory" appeared to be a healthy institution showing "merchandise, furs, peltries, cash on hand, and debts due" to the value of nearly thirty thousand dollars.

Trade along the Mississippi River and its tributaries — the Des Moines, the Skunk, the Iowa, and the Turkey rivers particularly — was in a flourishing condition. The forts, factories, and private establishments located along these waterways — such as Fort Madison, Dirt Lodge (at the Racoon Forks of the Des Moines River), Redwood, Tesson's place at the head of the Des Moines Rapids, Flint Hills (Burlington), the Dubuque Mines, and Giard's post opposite Prairie du Chien, all on Iowa soil, and Prairie du Chien near the mouth of the Wisconsin River — were the centers of the Indian trade in Iowa and the surrounding territory.

In this connection it may be mentioned that, although the fur trade developed somewhat earlier along the Mississippi River for reasons that are apparent, it was during this period that encouragement was given to the exploitation of the vast region drained by the Missouri. Indeed, no sooner had Lewis and Clark returned from their expedition in 1806, than that picturesque character Manuel Lisa began the operations that made him the "trade maker" of the newly opened country. In 1807, well supplied with merchandise, he

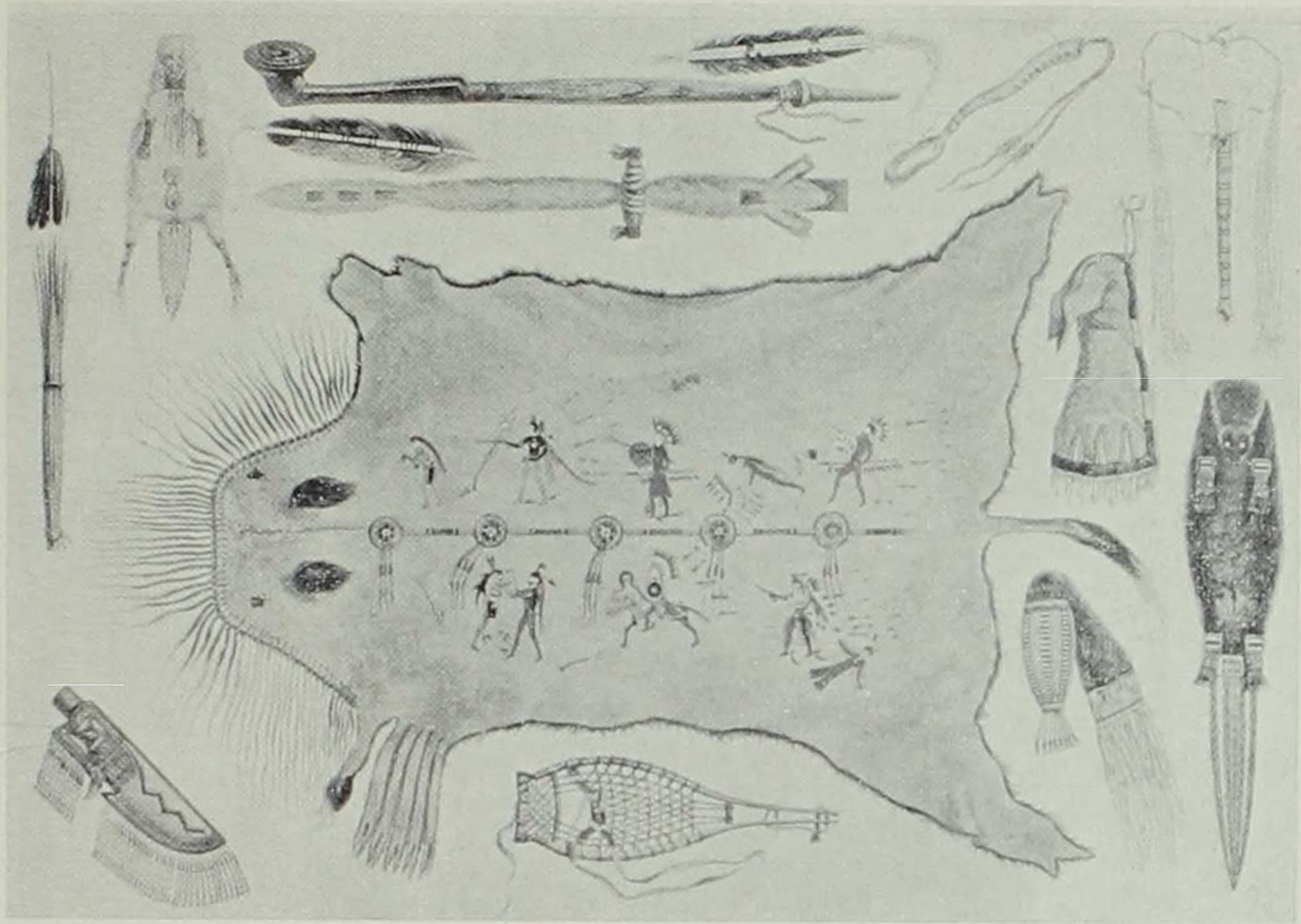
began the first of twelve or thirteen long and dangerous trips up the surging, yellow stream to the clear, cold waters of the Upper Missouri. He erected several forts with their accompanying trading posts, one of which was located about eleven miles above the present site of Omaha. There Lisa spent several profitable winters promoting friendly relations with the Indians — an art in which he had no superiors — and incidentally reaping a considerable harvest in furs from the natives of western Iowa. In all probability no one had an influence over the Indians of the Iowa country during the period from 1807 to 1820 equal to that of Manuel Lisa.

With the construction of Fort Madison and its attendant success the government appears to have become committed to the policy of establishing posts with the intention of driving out private traders. By 1811 there were ten such "forts" in operation in the upper Mississippi Valley, only one of which was in Iowa, however. In that same year Nicholas Boilvin recommended that a new fort be situated at Prairie du Chien, for many years the headquarters of the Indian trade of northern Iowa. The proximity of this location to the lead mines also made it an ideal spot, particularly since the Indians of the region had during the past year "manufactured four hundred thousand pounds" of lead "which they exchanged for goods." It appears that they had abandoned

hunting for the most part "except to furnish themselves with meat." The lead thus "manufactured" had been bought by Faribault, then located at Prairie du Chien as a private trader. Boilvin considered it a good stroke of business if the Indians could be induced to engage in mining as a regular occupation inasmuch as the Canadians, having no use for lead, would probably cease to be competitors. Lead, too, was not perishable and was "easily transported;" whereas peltries were bulky and large quantities spoiled every year before they reached the market.

The insidious influence of the British traders was somewhat nullified by Americans who were encouraged by the government "to be vigilant, indulge the Indians, and make them presents as circumstances might require." During the War of 1812 Manuel Lisa was made Sub-agent for all the tribes of the Upper Missouri and his work was very effective in defeating British plans in the West.

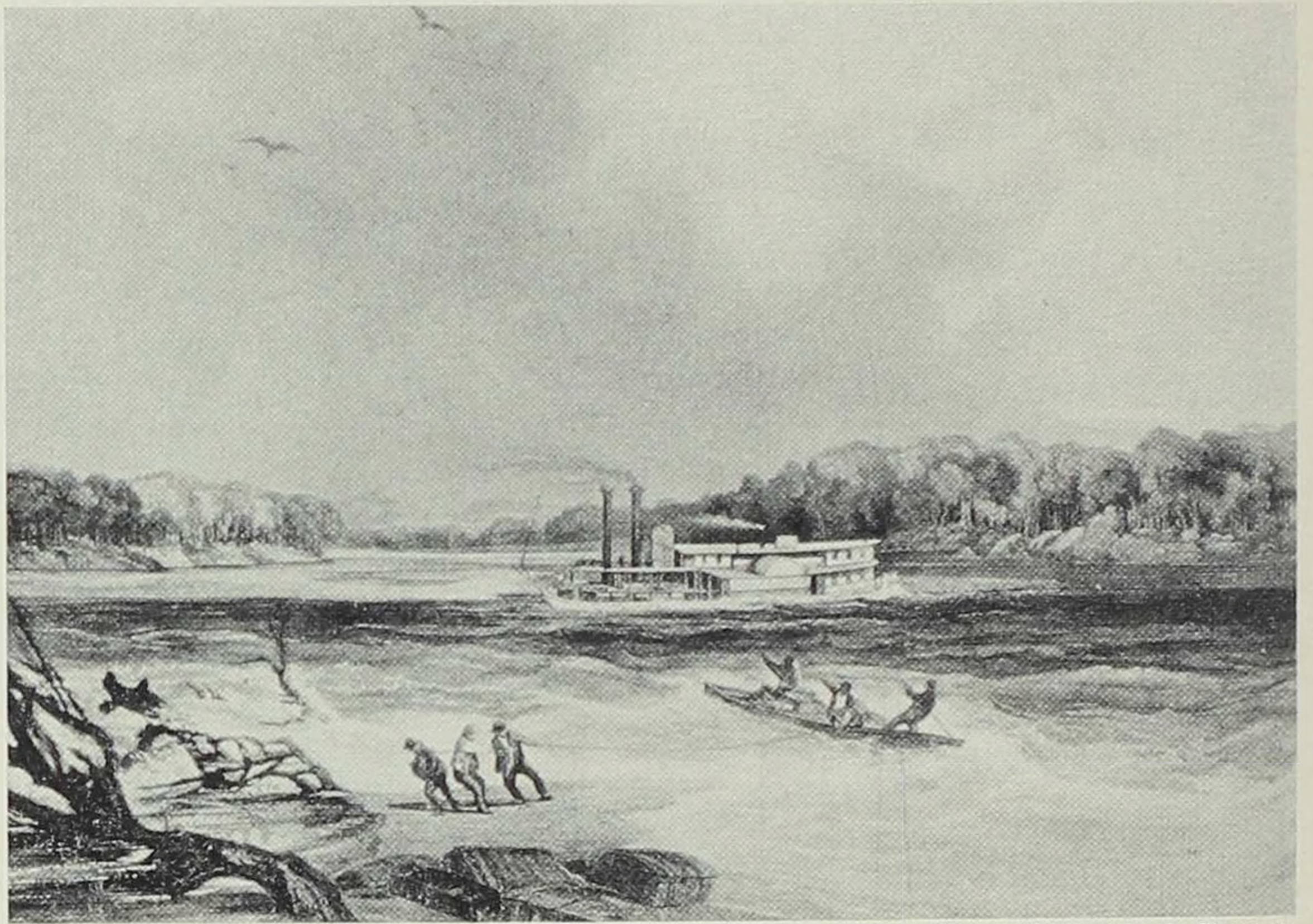
The war, however, brought the government experiment at Fort Madison to a close. Being poorly situated the garrison there was subject to repeated attacks by the Indians. This hostility, said to have been of British origin, resulted in frequent requests by the commandant for relief. Finally, being "reduced to the direst extremity and driven to the verge of starvation" the garrison decided to abandon the post and escape. Dig-



From Maximilian's *Travels*
Buffalo Robe and other Articles of the Mandans.

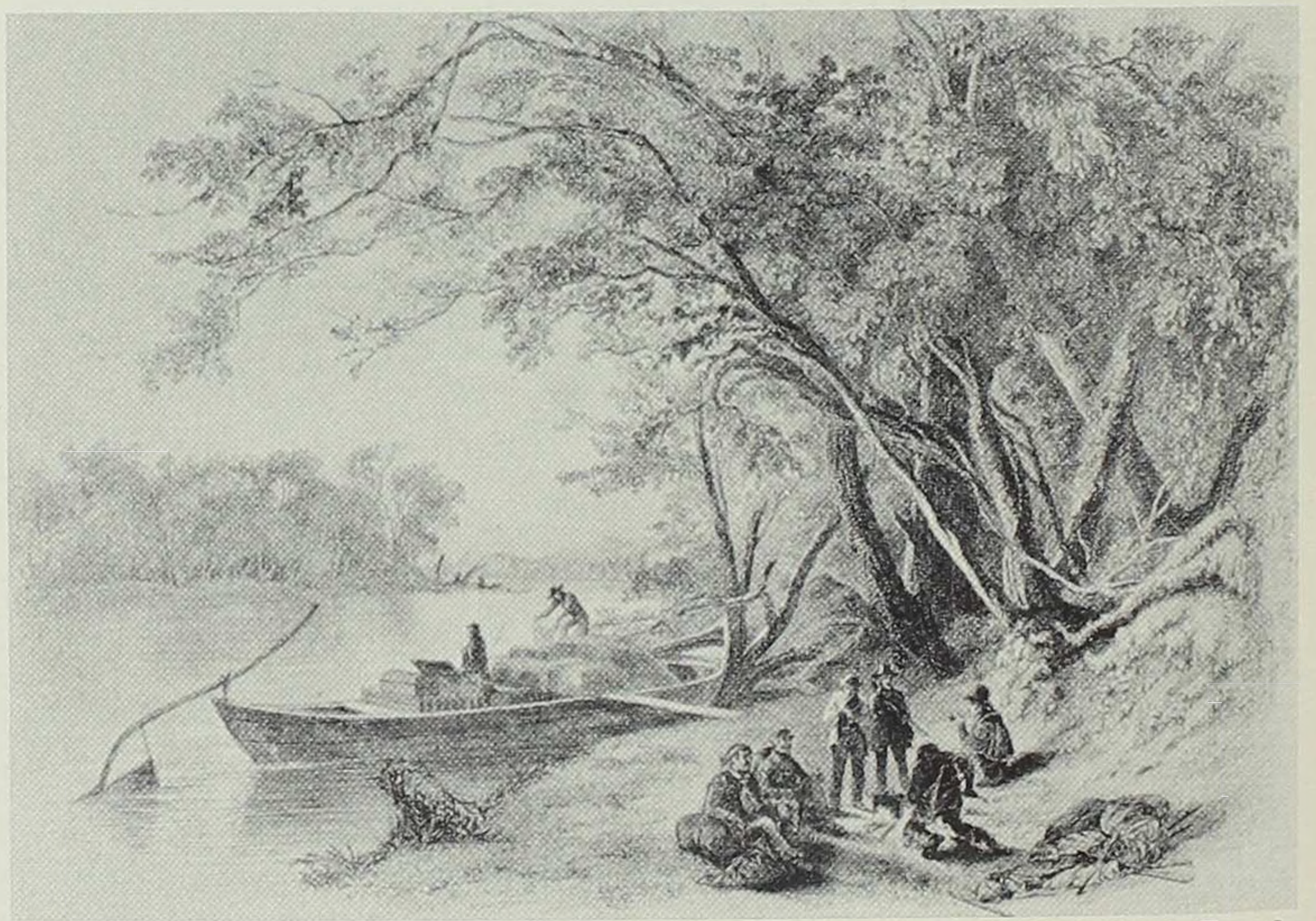


From Maximilian's *Travels*
Inside of a Mandan Hut.



From Maximilian's *Travels*

The Steamboat Yellowstone.



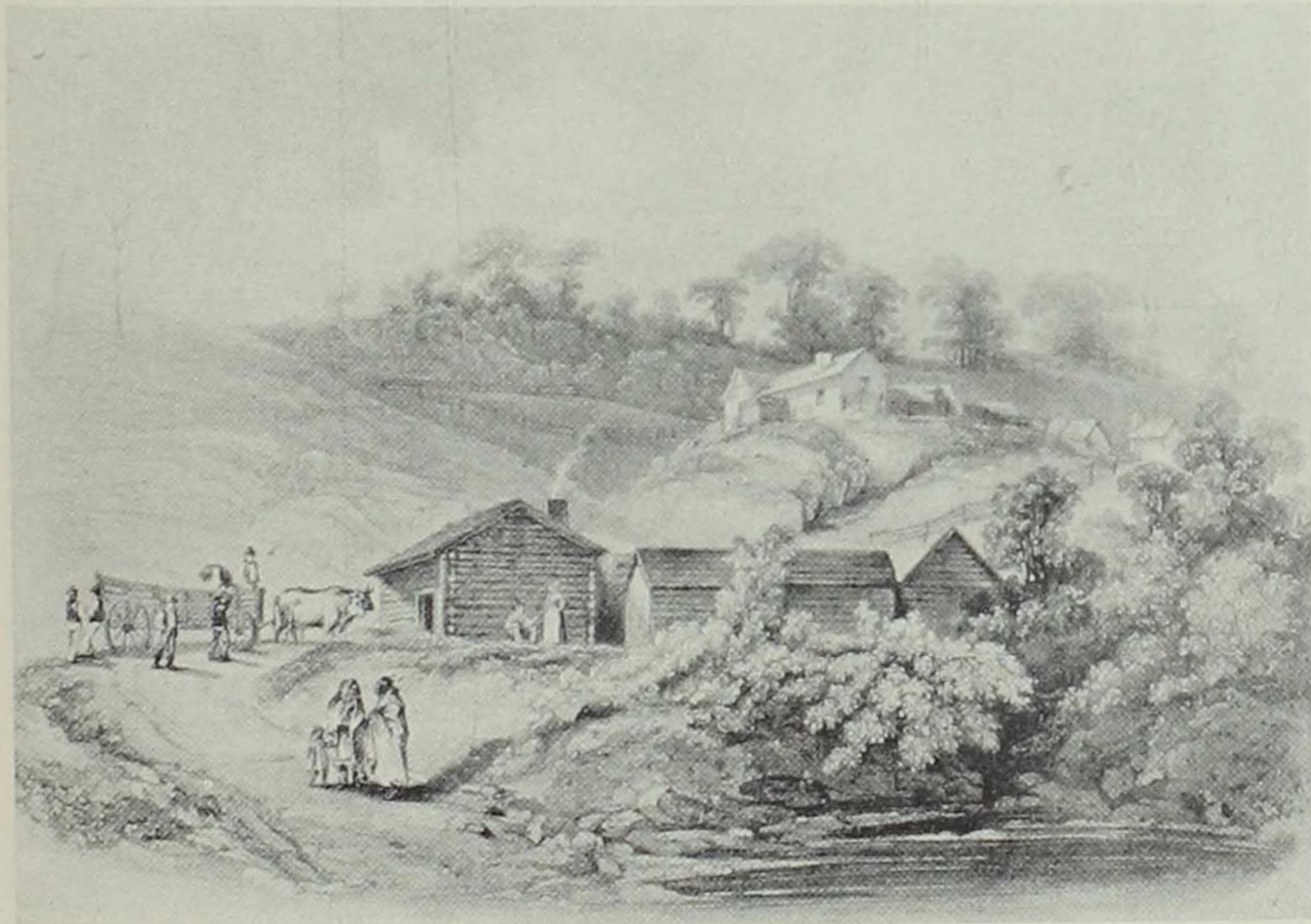
From Maximilian's *Travels*

Bivouac in the Forest.



From Maximilian's *Travels*

View of Fort Union; the Assiniboins breaking up their Camp.



From Maximilian's *Travels*

Bellevue, just below Omaha. Major Dougherty's Post.



From Maximilian's *Travels*

Black Bear on the Missouri.



A Currier and Ives Print

Close Quarters: A Fight to the Finish.

ging a trench to the river the soldiers were able to elude the besiegers, remove their "provisions and property," and gain "their boats by crawling out on hands and knees . . . leaving the fort wrapped in flames to the enemy's utter surprise."

After the War of 1812 the government in Washington once more undertook to promote friendly relations with the Indians and succeeded to a certain extent. In order to reserve the trade for Americans, however, Congress "at the instigation of John Jacob Astor" passed a statute prohibiting "foreign merchants or capital" from "participating in Indian trade within United States territory." Aimed particularly at the British, the law enabled Astor to buy "the interests which the gentlemen of Montreal held in the South West Fur Company" and to reorganize it as the American Fur Company. In addition the government, in accordance with the requests that had for so long been ignored, at last erected a factory at Prairie du Chien.

American domination and control of the fur trade was not easy to secure. Capital and men "to bear the fatigues, and brave the dangers incident" to the wilderness commerce were not always available. Accordingly, the Indian Agents were given "the exclusive right of granting trade licenses to foreigners." Bonds were required to insure compliance with the law, particularly with reference to the liquor traffic.

In actual practice the new policy left something to be desired. A foreigner of undesirable character being unable to secure the necessary license not infrequently resorted to a ruse. By employing an American to take out the license the alien, accompanying the expedition as an "interpreter" or "boatman," would, as soon as the Indian agencies were passed, assume control of his property and carry on his business as usual.

Such was the character of the men frequently employed by Astor — French Canadians who otherwise could not have engaged in the trade. This astute American appears to have had considerable influence with the government. The Secretary of War recommended that every facility be afforded Astor and his agents consistent with the laws and the regulations. Moreover, instructions were given to issue licenses to any person that Ramsay Crooks, the agent of the American Fur Company, might designate. Headquarters were maintained at Mackinac Island and trading posts were in time established at strategic points from there to the Pacific coast. The trade of the Iowa country was handled chiefly through Prairie du Chien. At first the policy of the American Fur Company was not to trade directly with the Indians but to outfit private traders and buy the furs from them.

Thus matters stood when in 1816 troops were landed at Rock Island to build Fort Armstrong.

Accompanying the soldiers was an Englishman by the name of George Davenport, later "destined to exert a tremendous influence upon the Indians of the neighborhood." At first "content to furnish the troops provisions" he decided the following year to enter the Indian trade. He erected "a double log-cabin and store-house" on Rock Island a short distance from the fort, "purchased a small stock of goods," and proceeded to gain the confidence of "the hostile Winnebagoes" located on the Rock River. There he lived, building up a profitable business with the Indians of eastern Iowa until he was murdered by a band of desperadoes in 1845.

The system of government factories was not an unqualified success. Private traders made bitter complaints against it and the natives for whose benefits the scheme was devised were not satisfied with its operation. The British traders continued to take an undue share of the business "by trading rum for furs, by selling better goods on credit, and by reason of their marriage to Indian wives." Then, too, the feeling became general that the Indians were losing confidence in the government since the goods sold at its factories were of such poor quality.

So in 1820 the Secretary of War, John C. Calhoun, sent Rev. Jedidiah Morse on a tour of the West to ascertain the facts. He found that private traders had "secured from the Indians in the

very shadow of the walls of the government trading-house at Fort Edwards 980 packs of all sorts of furs and peltries valued at \$58,800." George Davenport, with headquarters at Rock Island, traded also at Flint Hills and the mouths of the Iowa, Wapsipinicon, and Maquoketa rivers. Dr. Samuel Muir, located on an island opposite the Dubuque mines, and Maurice Blondeau, who maintained a trading house above the mouth of the Des Moines River during almost the entire first quarter of the nineteenth century, each did a flourishing business. The government had in reality been crowded out of the fur trade, so that the Morse report, unfavorable to the continuance of the system was readily accepted.

The act abolishing the government factories, passed on June 3, 1822, was in some respects unfortunate in its results. Private traders without considerable supervision and regulation were in many instances not above resorting to improper methods. According to one authority the "rapacious system of exploitation by means of credit and whisky" now came to be the order of business intercourse.

The heyday of the American Fur Company was in sight. "Having pushed government factories to the wall, Astor now proceeded to grind smaller competitors out of existence." It was also true that traders whose volume of business had reached considerable proportions — Maurice

Blondeau, George Davenport, Russell Farnham, and others operating in the Iowa country — were finally induced to cast their lot with “the first American monopoly.”

Dissatisfaction soon developed, however, due in some measure to the practice of sending out “runners to secure credits and follow the hunters to their places of chase.” This method was particularly corrupting to the Indians for with an ever-present supply of liquor the trader could secure peltries when the natives were in no condition to drive an honest bargain. The practice was therefore made illegal by an act of Congress in 1824. Furthermore, the law made it “the duty of Indian agents to designate, from time to time, certain convenient and suitable places for carrying on trade,” requiring all vendors of goods to do business at specific places and at no others.

These new regulations as a matter of fact pleased neither the traders nor the Indians and many and loud were the complaints. That the objections were based to a marked degree upon the effect on the liquor traffic is apparent. The western movement of population had inevitably brought to the frontier many men who had no scruples against selling whisky to the natives. Indeed, the problem of restraining the Indians residing near the settlements from the use of liquor was a well-nigh impossible task. The “beverage which seemed to fascinate all Red Men”

induced them to visit "the various little distilleries and Grocery establishments" and exchange their money, furs, and peltries for rum. This being the case it was not surprising that frequently the traders who had advanced them goods on credit were left in hard circumstances — the Indians being induced by whisky "to carry the produce of their winter hunts to others."

The next step in the regulation of the fur trade, therefore, was to absolutely prohibit the "introduction of liquor into the Indian country;" if it worked a hardship on the trader he had only himself to blame.

Then came the Black Hawk War in 1832 with the attendant loss of lives and money, the ceding of a strip of land in what is now eastern Iowa, and the payment of annuities to the Indians as the wards of the Nation. And as the westward movement of population advanced, "crowding in closer upon the native inhabitants," the trader's profits steadily decreased. "Only the Indians' removal farther west," whence the fur-bearing animals had already retreated, offered any hope for the "revival of business in furs and peltries." The "scenes of barter and exchange" no longer characterized the eastern border of Iowa but "were being shifted westward as the vanguard of sturdy Anglo-Saxon conquerors with axe and plow" began to reach the banks of the Missouri.

GEO. F. ROBESON

Life Among the Fur Traders

The "easy waterway" leading to the Iowa country — the old Fox-Wisconsin route to the Upper Mississippi — marked the passage of many a frail French craft manned by sturdy voyageurs singing their rollicking boat songs. Then came the Spaniards up the Great River from New Orleans and St. Louis. The British, too, after the conquest of New France, arrived from Montreal and Quebec; and finally the Yankee, ever bent on driving a shrewd bargain, made his appearance to gather what was left of the harvest in peltries.

The trip from the remote settlements to the appointed rendezvous for trading was long, dangerous, and withal an arduous one. The northern route particularly was interspersed with many portages "in consequence of rapids" necessitating the carriage of the "canoe, provisions and baggage" sometimes for miles "on the shoulders of the men." All in all it was indeed a venture for the "young and enterprising."

Their canoes, constructed of "thin, but tough sheets of birch-bark" were both "light and strong, though frail in appearance." These the Indians commonly referred to as "a gift from the Great

Spirit" so swiftly could they be paddled through streams and rapids. Heavier craft, usually called "freight canoes," were employed to carry the equipment. These "were manned by eight or nine men" and could be loaded with as much as "sixty-five packages of trading goods of ninety pounds each, six hundred pounds of biscuit, two hundred pounds of pork, three bushels of peas, two oil cloths to cover the goods, a sail, an axe, a towing line, a kettle, a sponge to bail out water, and gum and bark to repair vessels."

Each trader's company, whether large or small, was not infrequently composed of various nationalities. The trader may have been French, Irish, Scotch, Spanish, British, or American; the boatmen or voyageurs were usually French-Canadians; the interpreters were half-breeds of uncertain mixture; while the clerks, runners, and hunters were for the most part unnamed and unknown.

The voyageurs with so large a "share of the romantic in their composition" retained much of the "gayety and lightness of heart" so pronounced in their French ancestors. Their "patience and courage on long, rough expeditions" was only surpassed by their "love of the camp fire and the full pot;" their dexterity with paddles was only "exceeded by that of the song and dance." Dressed in "a coat made of a blanket," with leather leggings that reached "to the knees of their cloth trousers," and wearing "moccasins of deer skin"

they seemed to fit readily into their wild surroundings.

Such voyageurs usually enlisted for a three year period of service during which they were not infrequently required to pass through a period of "severe probation." Having served their apprenticeship, however, they assumed a very much higher rank together with its appropriate privileges. Discipline in some cases had to be enforced among these men with a "strong hand" but for the most part they were interested in their work and were cheerful, unmurmuring, and faithful to their trust.

The trader came well stocked with goods for the season's sojourn in the wilderness. In addition to the equipment necessary to such an undertaking — food, clothing, and the like — a sizable quantity of merchandise was carried to be exchanged for peltries. These goods were of two sorts; those of an inexpensive character — "blankets, cloths, calicoes, tobacco and cheap jewelry" — such as were suitable for gifts to the natives who soon became famous for their begging propensities; and the more costly articles intended primarily for the trade, such as guns, powder, whisky, traps, bridles, brass kettles, silver wrist bands, and even plows.

Upon his arrival at the rendezvous destined to be the trading post — usually near a fort or at the juncture of two rivers adjacent to some tribal

haunt — the trader would build a log cabin, a portion of which was reserved as living quarters, and at once begin making a favorable impression upon the Indians of the locality. In this a marked degree of native curiosity helped much and an insatiable desire for gifts “of any and all descriptions” rendered the trader’s task comparatively easy. Then, too, traders for the most part repaired year after year to the same post — a practice tending toward mutual advantage.

The Indians were in some respects rather child-like in their dealings with the traders, particularly at first. It was not uncommon for a canoe to be exchanged for a knife. But as they became more accustomed to the novelty of manufactured goods the natives became more insistent and “looked for presents from the white men, with a degree of eager expectancy which amounted to a demand.” Gifts were not always forthcoming, however, which sometimes induced them to steal and plunder.

The trader was required, therefore, to be ever ready in defending his property against any hostile intentions. Strained relations leading to such drastic action were on the whole rather rare — a circumstance which would seem to show that the traders were “men of unusual tact” in dealing with their “red brothers.” Moreover, the Indians were generally “respectful and friendly” and in but few instances was it ever necessary to inflict the “great-

est punishment" upon a band of natives — that of refusing them ammunition and clothing on credit.

Thus, a relationship of mutual dependence developed between the traders and the Indians. The former needed the friendship and cooperation of the natives in order that plenty of furs and peltries would be forthcoming, and the latter came to look upon guns, ammunition, and clothing from the East as prime necessities. The natives slowly lost that independence of spirit which earlier they had possessed in so marked a degree.

And so the fur traders came to occupy a very prominent place among the tribes of the Upper Mississippi Valley. The French practice of intermarriage was followed rather extensively. That the fur traders were already married to wives of their own race back in the settlements appears not to have been considered a "bar to the bans." The traders, clerks, and voyageurs "did not consider their dignity lessened by forming marital alliances" and the Indian wives "were of so much service to their husbands" that such marriages, "generally first formed by the traders for present convenience, became cemented by the strongest ties of mutual affection."

The nature of the fur business was such that few traders ventured alone into the wilderness. Even the smallest companies usually consisted of the trader, an interpreter, and a clerk. The more pretentious parties representing the larger trading

companies were composed of a personnel both numerous and varied in character — traders, trappers, interpreters, clerks, boatmen, runners, hunters, and sometimes soldiers.

That it was possible for the Iowa country and its adjacent areas to support numerous fur-trading outfits is not surprising. The whole region prior to 1840 abounded in game of all kinds. Beaver, otter, deer, elk, bear, buffalo, fox, and other fur-bearing animals were to be found in great numbers. The tribes varied somewhat in their ability and eagerness to hunt, but for the most part they undertook their regular pilgrimages with considerable zest.

A party of Indians on their way to the hunting grounds must have been a unique spectacle. One such — a Dakota village of about seventy lodges — wended its way down the Mississippi in 1840 to hunt in what was known as the Neutral Ground in northern Iowa. Each family was the possessor of one or more ponies which were used to carry the baggage. To each side of the saddle was attached one end of a pole "like the shafts of an ordinary vehicle" except that the other end "trailed upon the ground." A sort of a "basket made of interlaced leather thongs" was attached to these poles upon which was placed the skin lodge and the heavier articles of baggage. Here also rode the children who were unable to walk. First in the procession came the old men, and the other members of the family "assumed their appropriate

places," the women leading the horses. One family followed another in single file "so that the line was extended to a great length." When crossing a stream "the women were expected to carry over the baggage on their shoulders." At night a camp was made, "the ponies were unloaded and turned out to graze, poles cut, and the lodges raised in an incredibly short time by the women." The men were "quietly smoking their pipes" during this period of feverish activity — indeed, an Indian woman would have felt "ashamed to see her husband performing any of the labor or drudgery about the camp."

The hunting season extended throughout the fall and winter months, for then the fur was best. Just prior to these annual sojourns the trader did a flourishing business furnishing the Indians with the necessary supplies for the winter season. In these transactions credit was usually preferred to cash, the natives being urged to pay in peltries gathered during the winter — an arrangement making for the trader a double profit.

The trader, however, did not sit idly by and await the return of the Indians. Throughout the hunting season and particularly during its later stages it became the rule for the furs and peltries to be collected by the trader's men in the game country. The "runners," as they were called, carried merchandise "of fifty or a hundred pounds weight, frequently for days together" and returned

"laden with buffalo robes and the skins of other animals." These, having been brought to the post, were sorted, cured, and packed for market; and "in April" they were "transported to headquarters" — St. Louis, Montreal, Quebec, New York.

The life of a trader and his men was anything but an easy one. "The road of the portage" was "truly that of heaven," for it was "straight, full of obstacles, slippery places, thorns and bogs." The usual portage package "weighed anywhere from sixty to ninety pounds" but nevertheless those sturdy men "made twenty or more miles a day over the rugged country."

From dawn till dark the hardy adventurers worked their way along through sunshine, rain, heat, or cold. Their subsistence was for the most part rather meager, the fare "being composed principally of salt pork, hard bread and biscuit," while the laboring portion of the party "had to content themselves with hulled corn, seasoned with a small amount of tallow." Workmen, despite the hardships which they had to endure, were to be had at a very low figure. The wages of a good clerk were "\$200 per annum; an interpreter \$150, and common laborers or voyageurs \$100, and the rations allowed them were of the simplest description." Hard work, a moderate compensation, and a restricted diet were boon companions.

But even such meager fare was not always available. Many a trader's company was com-

pelled to subsist for days and weeks on the shortest of rations. Hardships of this character were due to a variety of causes: the overturning of a canoe in a rapid current; thievery by roving Indians or by the anti-social members of the party; or a journey of unforeseen duration. But of whatever cause, these periods of fasting were such as tried men's souls.

One party of which the records have been preserved subsisted for a period of eighteen days on half a meal each twenty-four hours. Nor was that all. This company of eighteen men during the next nine days ate "only one beaver, a dog, a few wild cherries, and old moccasin soals [soles]." Meanwhile they had travelled during these twenty-seven days, "at least five hundred and fifty miles." One man became entirely bereft of his senses, and five men at the journey's end were "unable to travel."

Between the time of the fall sales and the spring collection of peltries, the trader and his men were variously employed. If located at a permanent post, this was the time for making improvements and repairs; if in the path of hostile war parties, some attention had to be given to defense; if the winter were an open one — and there were few such in the early days — some attention would be given to hunting and exploring the region; otherwise "the traders and their men ensconced themselves in their warm log cabins" biding the time

for invading the various Indian camps to secure the furs and peltries collected during the hunting season. In times of plenty it was not unusual for the traders to have a supply of "venison, bear, and turkey meat" which could be kept frozen and ready for use — a welcome substitute for "salt pork and hominy." Some traders it is true spent the entire winter actively engaged in business.

All in all the life of a trader was "laborious and dangerous, full of exposure and privations" often "leading to premature exhaustion and disability." So strenuously did they live that few of them reached "an advanced stage of life," and still fewer preserved "an unbroken constitution." The labor was "excessive, subsistence scanty and precarious," and the Indians were "ever liable to sudden paroxysms of passion" in which they spared neither friend nor foe.

Such an existence must of necessity have had its compensations and no doubt one of these was the hope of profit which has always been considered the life of trade. The trader's profits of course varied — depending in no small degree upon the reputation and practice of the tribes for paying their debts. The Ioways for instance "seldom paid more than fifty cents on the dollar." But such a situation could be remedied by "fixing prices accordingly." For by selling at a profit of "400 per cent" the trader would be amply remunerated if he received but one-fourth of his price.

Both Davenport and Farnham in their dealings with the Sauk and Fox Indians charged "as high as fifty percent or even more." These men also did a considerable credit business — in seven years amounting to \$136,768.62 of which they had collected all but \$53,269.88. This balance the Indians had promised to pay in "cash or skins."

In the giving of credit the traders exercised some business acumen. The cheaper articles of trade — gunpowder, flints, lead, knives, tomahawks, hoes, domestic cottons, and the like — were sold regardless of an Indian's financial rating; but with costly articles such as wampum, rifles, and fine bridles the transactions were for cash.

There was also a marked difference in the ability of various traders and their willingness to give attention to details — work essential to any enterprise if it is to be successful. In this regard George Davenport followed a definite procedure for many years. In the winter he "traversed the Iowa prairies," visiting the hunting camps and getting his pick of the furs. And during the early spring he "would have all his furs and skins nicely packed and prepared — feathers all sacked, bees-wax and deers' tallow all barreled — then he would load his boat," go to St. Louis, and sell his cargo for the highest market price, "owing to the good condition in which everything was put up."

Although the profits of the fur trade were high they were no doubt deserved. The traders, being

primarily interested in "good business," used their influence to prevent useless hostilities. Although many a trader lost his life at the hands of the Indians, it is equally true that for the most part the natives and the traders got on well together. Both in the main recognized their mutual obligations. Indeed, the extent to which these "men from the East" had a voice in tribal councils no one will ever know, but historians are generally agreed that the traders "exerted a powerful influence."

That this influence was always for good may hardly be expected. It was true to some extent that their gains came "from the ignorance and vicious and savage habits of the Indians." No doubt many of these merchants believed that civilizing the Indians spoiled them as hunters. It is even possible that the American Fur Company through its agents had a hand in promoting the Black Hawk War "in the hope that if they could bring Sauk and Fox grievances to a head and cause the government to force the Indians into submission" the company would be in a better position to collect its debts as well as obtain future gains from new Sauk and Fox annuities. But all in all it was decidedly in the interests of more profitable business for the traders to deprecate warlike activities, to oppose excessive intemperance, and to avoid undue extortion. In fact, "anything to promote business" was exploited.

GEO. F. ROBESON

The Epic of the Fur Trade

In the whole history of heroic exploits of strong men there is nothing comparable to the story of the American fur trade. For sheer courage, for indomitable determination, for elemental manhood, the hardy gatherers of peltries would put to utter shame the armored knights of old. Deep-chested, hairy, buckskin-clad fellows they were — those old trappers and voyageurs. They were the kind of men who could go far, eat little, and stay to the finish. In their eyes was that steady, alert gaze that comes of looking to the horizon. Fed upon wild, red meat and inured to exhausting toil, their bodies were sinewy and lean. And their souls were as lean as their bodies.

If heroic struggle against insuperable odds and the interplay of human passions is the stuff of which epics are woven, then the history of the far Northwest of the fur traders is epical. Certainly there was no dearth of fighting men, and the elements left no lack of superhuman impediments. Nature fashioned the setting of the tremendous story on a vast scale, for the characters were to be mighty men — “laughers at time and space.” Among them were noble figures like Father de Smet who carried the gospel into the wilderness;

some were renegades and desperadoes; and most of them were violent at times. "But they were masterful always. They met obstacles and overcame them. They struck their foes in front. They thirsted in deserts, hungered in the wilderness, froze in the blizzards, died with the plagues, and were massacred by the savages. Yet they conquered."

The annals of the American fur trade are full of episodes that make the epic tales of Greece and Rome seem like travesties. Too often sordid and brutal, the exploits of the trail makers are none the less fascinating. As told by John G. Neihardt, poet laureate of Nebraska, they will stir you. Think of old Hugh Glass who was horribly mangled by a grizzly bear and left to die by his companions. But finally he revived, got a drink of water, and crawled a hundred miles to the nearest fort. When he found his faithless comrades he forgave them.

Or recall Alexander Harvey, one of the most capable and desperate characters in the fur trade. Stationed at Fort Union on the Missouri River just above the mouth of the Yellowstone, he was discharged one winter at Christmas time and ordered to report in St. Louis if he wished to be reinstated in the service of the company. "I'll start in the morning," he said. "Give me a dog to carry my blankets, and by God I'll report before the ice goes out!" Afoot and alone, through hostile tribes

and blizzards, he negotiated the long journey of nearly twenty-five hundred miles and arrived early in March, just in time to return on the first steamboat up the river.

Nor is the story of the fur trade devoid of the glamour of kings, for the whole expanse of plains and mountains from the Great Lakes to the Pacific Ocean was the realm of the American Fur Company. At strategic places forts were built — the provincial capitals of the empire. John Jacob Astor in New York “spoke the words that filled the wilderness with deeds.” Far and wide he sent his subjects, the trappers and traders. The broad and eccentric Missouri River — which in some prehistoric age had fortunately changed its headlong course toward Hudson Bay and sought a warmer climate — became a great imperial thoroughfare that would have delighted Caesar. To-day it is “one long grave of men and boats,” and the kingdom of Astor is no more.

JOHN ELY BRIGGS



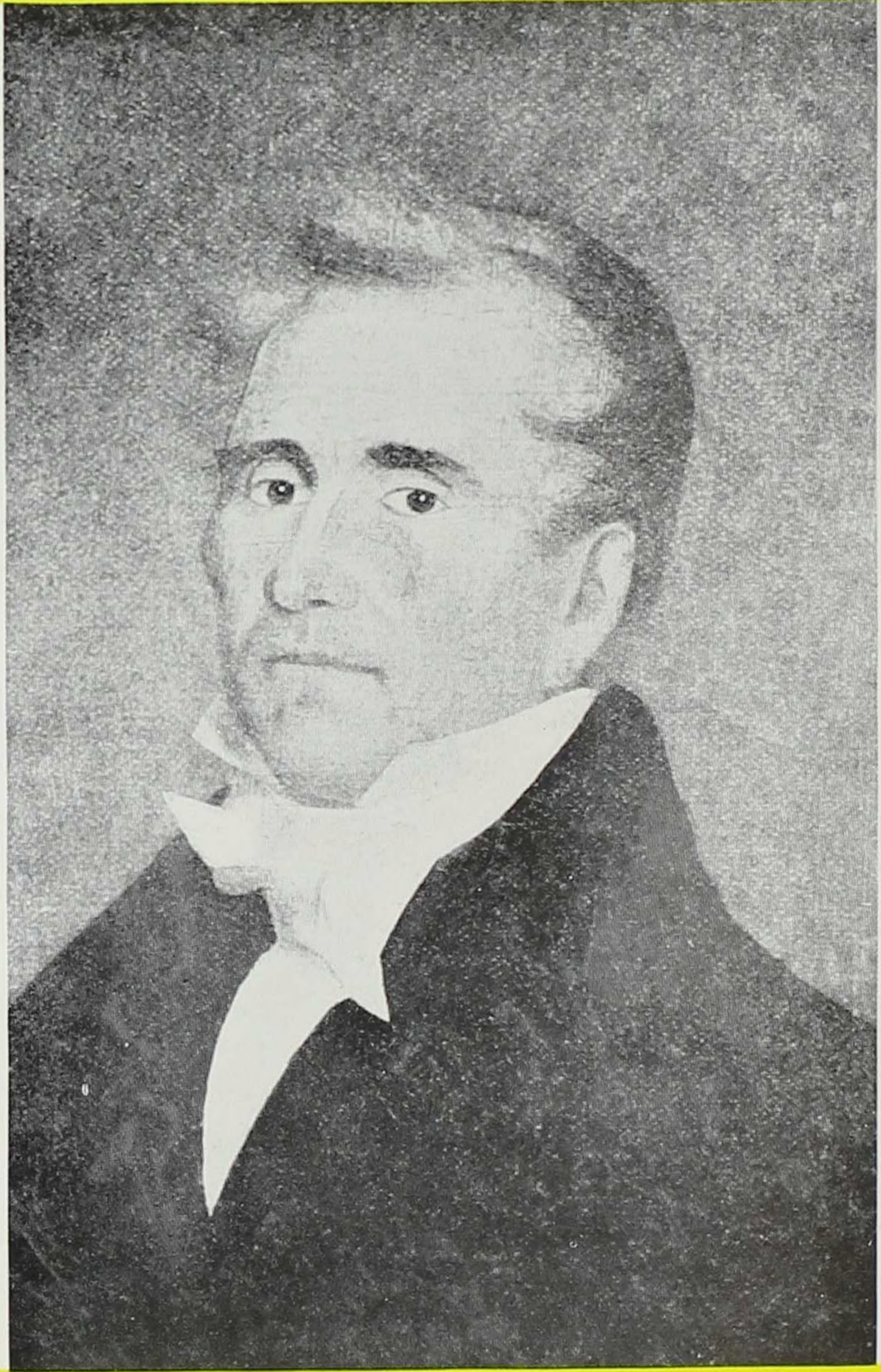
A Currier and Ives Print

War or Peace? White Hunters Meet Indians on Prairie.



A Currier and Ives Print

White Men on Horseback Hunting Buffalo.



From a Painting Owned by the Missouri Historical Society

MANUEL LISA