

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