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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