

Trading with the Indians

"If I understand the Indian character at all," wrote Captain Meriwether Lewis, "I do know that there are but two effectual cords by which the savage arm can be bound, the one is the love of merchandise, and the other the fear of punishment. . . ."

Fort Madison was meant to appeal to the Indian on both these counts, but the commercial appeal was stronger. No longer was the Indian a self-sufficient woodsman living entirely off the land. The warrior who brought chunks of lead downriver from the mines, or shuffled up to Johnson's counter with a roll of skins across his back, was already spoiled by the fripperies of civilization. For him the flint age was long gone, the iron age was here and assimilated — and now he was entering the pewter age, the japanned tin age, the calico age. Never again would he feel comfortable without a lodgeful of the gadgets that Johnson or the private traders had for sale.

By 1775 the second Continental Congress had recognized the vital nature of Indian trade and had begun work on a plan for licensing traders. When the project lagged, George Washington revived it in 1793. Soon afterwards, in 1795 the

first factories had been set up at Tellico in what is now eastern Tennessee, and on the St. Mary's River in Georgia.

When the Fort Madison factory was built in 1808, those two original posts had been abandoned; but there were eleven others ranging from the Red River in Orleans Territory to the island of Michilimackinac in the far north. Others would follow, but steady opposition from the big fur companies and other interested factions forced the system out of existence by 1822.

Supervising all these frontier department stores was the job of the Army, with the actual administration handled by the Office of Indian Trade in Georgetown, D. C. Through this headquarters the goods were purchased from suppliers on the East Coast and in Europe, then shipped west. Usually the shipments were sent up the Potomac to Cumberland, Maryland, then overland to Brownsville on the Monongahela or to Wheeling on the Ohio. From there the great Ohio-Mississippi network provided access to the western factories.

There was no secret about the reason for these trading houses. John Johnson's original instructions from Georgetown began like this:

The principal object of the Government in these establishments being to secure the Friendship of the Indians in our country in a way the most beneficial to them and the most effectual & economical to the United States, you will

avail yourself of every proper means & opportunity of impressing these people favourably toward the Government.
. . .

In song and legend the Indian has always been a great customer for baubles and beads; but the Indian of real life was more interested in blankets and hardware. Johnson sold thick, shaggy blankets in great quantities and charged from 67 to 82 cents a pound. He sold flintlock muskets and steel traps, and both these items were frequently of shoddy construction — providing plenty of work for the blacksmith.

Drygoods were important, and the commonest item was stroud, a coarse fabric usually dyed red or blue. Johnson also sold white and green baize for summer blanketing, calico, lace, Hessian (a sacking of hemp or jute), flannel, twill coating, colored and striped gartering, assorted ribbons, buttons, and thread.

Hardware included swords, spurs, fishhooks, brass and steel pipe tomahawks, butcher knives, axes, hoes, froes, rasps, files, and awls.

Household goods consisted of cooking pots and frying pans, scissors, knives, and table utensils. Some drugs and condiments were sold, such as allspice, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, Prussian blue and vermillion (for cosmetic use), and Turlington's balsam (a patent medicine).

After his basic needs were cared for, the Indian could turn to the joys of costuming himself. He

wanted beads, rings, earbells, cowbells, sleighbells, headbands, armbands, wristbands, brooches, earwheels, gorgets, and strings of wampum.

Considering risks and transportation costs, the prices Johnson asked for these goods were fair. He set his retail price at 120 per cent of cost. He extended credit and found that Indians, like white men, had wide-ranging views on the necessity of paying their bills. One private trader in the region said he always charged the Ioways more than the other tribes because they seldom paid back more than fifty cents on the dollar.

The common medium of exchange was fur or lead. According to his records in 1809, Johnson sent the following kinds and amounts of furs to St. Louis, to be forwarded to the seaboard markets.

- 274 packs deerskins — 38,131 pounds
- 7 packs beaver furs — 100 pounds
- 17 packs bearskins — 347 skins
- 30 packs raccoon — 3,610 skins
- 2 packs muskrat — 1,330 skins
- 2 packs otter — 176 skins
- 60 deerskins covering raccoon packs
- 44 bearskins covering various packs
- 9 kegs tallow
- 1 keg beeswax
- 43 dressed deerskins
- 3 bags feathers

A piece of fur was a troublesome thing, tasty to moths, likely to rot in transit, and occupying far

too much storage space. Easier to handle were the pigs or plaques of lead that Johnson bought from the Indians. They were so stable — mere flat blobs of partly refined metal weighing about seventy pounds — that they were almost a kind of currency in the region.

The lead mines of the Sauks and Foxes were located on both sides of the Mississippi and along the Wisconsin, beginning a hundred miles or so below Prairie du Chien. The women worked the mines and the men floated the lead down to Fort Madison in canoes. At five cents a pound this lead was among the most profitable of all the goods Johnson handled. He collected nearly 48,000 pounds between the time of his arrival and the end of 1809. In 1810 he collected 80,000 pounds.

So important were the mines that Nicholas Boilvin would report in 1812 that the Sauks and Foxes had nearly given up the hunt as a means of livelihood. White men were producing ore, too, in mines below St. Louis, and the value of the lead now being exported from the Territory by whites and Indians was reported to be greater than the annual export of furs.

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