

The Star of Empire

Adventure, gold, the Christian faith, and new dominions lured the white men into Ioway. Pagan souls they found innumerable, and perils never ceased. But the gold they sought was in the form of fur, and their imperialistic claims were hotly challenged. Fur trade invited conquest, and the victor held his prize with forts and military roads. — The Editor.

THE LURE OF PELTS

The skins (peltries) which the trader sought were beaver, otter, marten, mink, muskrat, raccoon, and cat; and he sought also skins of the bear and the deer. His choice, however, was beaver, for beaver was currency; it was cash.

By 1671 beaver, hitherto abundant throughout New France, began sensibly to decline, owing to the ravaging by hunters of the St. Lawrence and the Ottawa rivers. It was with the beaver as it soon was to be with the bison. Recession had set in : from the Sagueney to the St. Maurice; from the St. Maurice to the Ottawa; from the Ottawa to Lake Huron; from Lake Huron to Lake Michigan; and from Lake Michigan to the land, remote and almost fabled, of the Sioux.

The good start of the French in collecting furs was interrupted by the wars with the Foxes; so, quitting the Mississippi and the St. Peter's, they tried the Missouri and the Big Sioux. In short, having been excluded from Ioway at the front door, the French pressed for admission at the back. As early as 1696 or 1697 the Trading Company Rouen-La Rochelle was dealing with the Prairie Sioux along the lower Missouri, and by 1704-1705 Frenchmen were on the Missouri higher up. Posts were established in the present Missouri and Nebraska, and by 1757 packages of skins of deer, bear, and beaver were being brought in.

Under Montcalm the French in America suffered overthrow, and in 1762 Ioway passed by cession under the aegis of Spain. St. Louis was founded in 1764 and Ioway lay open to Spain's outstretched hand. But the British were already in Ioway. They had entered the land by the mouth of the St. Peter's and by the Des Moines. "Nothing will stop them", wrote Governor Carondelet in 1794, but forts on both rivers.

All at once and for the first time Ioway had become a place of moment. By the Mississippi and the Missouri (the Des Moines interlinking) it could exert a strangle hold upon the fur trade.

Lured by British trade came British adventurers: Jonathan Carver in 1766; Peter Pond in 1773. Carver sought the wealth of China; Pond sought gains more immediate. "I descended", says Pond, "into the

Masseiphey and Cros that River [into Ioway] and Incampt."

British traders on the Des Moines between 1777 and 1814 included two men of mark — Jean Baptiste Faribault and Thomas G. Anderson. Faribault in 1799 established a post (Redwood) "two hundred miles" up stream; and prior to 1796 he, or others, established three or four posts down stream — "forts" Crawford, Gillespie, and Lewis. More and more into Ioway came the British. They inundated it — not by their numbers, but by their wares.

But the Don (the Spaniard) in Ioway, what meantime of him? Not so ill. His two proposed establishments, one on the St. Peter's and the other on the Des Moines, he is never to get; but his hand over Ioway is not altogether impotent. He spreads aloft on the Des Moines the emblem of Charles V — flag of the Cross of Burgundy. Never for an instant prior to 1803 was Iowaland anything by heritage but Spanish — Spanish or French. It was the Spanish connection, indeed, that gave to Iowa a part not negligible in the first war of the United States — that of the American Revolution.

BY FORCE OF ARMS

With the winning of America from France by Great Britain (trans-Allegheny America to the Mississippi) there had come word that the British were to segregate

the region and make of it a huge park or game preserve for the sake of the furs. America was roused. What Americans coveted was not primarily furs, but land — land for homes, land for exploitation. When, therefore, there dawned for America the day of '76, the day of revolution, the situation in the West was this. At Niagara, at Detroit, at Kaskaskia there were British soldiery to guard the game preserve; while on the Ohio and even the Mississippi there were American seekers after land.

What the men of the "Western Waters" (1777-1779) required against the British was powder and ball. New Orleans, Spain's American financial center, furnished the powder. The Ioway lead mines, controlled by the Foxes, set flowing a stream of lead. With gaze upon Detroit, George Rogers Clark (man of the Western Waters *par excellence*) seized Kaskaskia and Vincennes. At Vincennes his success was dazzling. He captured there the British commander of the entire Northwest — Henry Hamilton. The British sought to avert triumph on the part of the Americans by enlisting the aid of the Sioux and by an attack on St. Louis in 1780. The attack proved a failure, and the counterstroke was Clark's.

Iowaland, acquired from France and Spain by the United States in 1803-1804, was first made the scene of an act of possession by America in 1808-1809. There, in the years named, the government was build-

ing a fort (and factory) on the Mississippi. Fort Madison was a five-sided stockade, the pickets being of white oak, from twelve to eighteen inches in diameter and fourteen feet in length. Within, on the side farthest from the river, were the factory buildings and a block house. There were two other block houses, one at each corner on the side of the fort nearest the river. The garrison comprised some fifty or sixty men under Lieutenant Alpha Kingsley and on April 19, 1809, the Lieutenant wrote to the Secretary of War that he was "making the best preparations for the safety and defense of this establishment".

The attack foreseen by the Lieutenant was not long in developing. While the Fort was in course of erection, keen eyes (eyes black, beady, and darting) had marked each step. They were the eyes of Black Hawk the Sauk. In 1812 on September 5th, some two hundred Winnebagoes and a party of Sauks under Black Hawk laid siege to Fort Madison, but they withdrew on the 8th.

Further Indian attacks on the Fort were brought off in 1813. One of these, on July 16th (not by Black Hawk for he was now absent with the British), forced the abandonment of the post. The garrison of a hundred men crept on their hands and knees along a trench and entered boats. An order was given to apply the torch. Soon the Fort was in flames and the boats far out on the Great River. So perished Fort Madison.

The Rock River-Mississippi junction was a center for Indians who were pro-British — Sauks, now, and Foxes, no less than Ioways. This center (nest of a thousand stings) General Howard at St. Louis resolved to break up. In August, 1814, he despatched up the Mississippi three hundred and thirty-four men in eight boats under command of Major Zachary Taylor, and on September 4th, toward evening, the flotilla, long of line and white of sail, came opposite the mouth of Rock River.

But they had been forestalled. From Prairie du Chien the British had sent down the Mississippi a light battery under Lieutenant Duncan Graham; and this battery, catching Taylor's flotilla at McManus Island where it had been halted by a shift of wind, so harassed and riddled the boats that to escape destruction or capture they fled. Taylor's loss was eleven men badly wounded — three mortally. The flotilla dropped to the site of Fort Madison; and there, on September 6th, Major Taylor wrote to General Howard an official report of the fiasco.

Amid the struggle for Iowaland there dawned the year of the Treaty of Ghent. The British had more than held their own in the West. Mackinac they had won, and Prairie du Chien. It was, they said, the time to realize in the West the old plan — the plan for a game park, a neutral belt, an Indian buffer realm into and beyond which the American land shark might not

pass. Yet in 1815 at Ghent the Americans were left to reoccupy the Northwest — Mackinac, Prairie du Chien, and the upper Mississippi.

POSSESSION FORTIFIED

In the territory wrested from the British, including Iowaland, the Americans now sought to promote trade in furs. The initial step was the erection of forts on or near the Mississippi. In 1816 forts Howard and Crawford were established — the one not far from the mouth of the Fox River (Wisconsin) and the other at Prairie du Chien. In 1817 Fort Armstrong was completed on the island of Rock Island, and in 1822 Fort Snelling at the mouth of the St. Peter's River. These establishments carried into effect ideas of long standing — ideas of the French, the British, and the Spanish for control of the northern route to the Western Sea, once followed for gold but now for beaver.

On the Missouri, too, the American set forts. Between the various forts there was projected a system of military roads. A road was to connect Fort Snelling with a post at the head of the St. Peter's, and this with the Mandan towns. Thus would British traders be headed off. Then a road was to connect posts on the Arkansas with those on the Missouri River; and this road would give pause to the Spanish. Iowaland was to be an area not only picketed but contained.

But just how by the picketing forts and the contain-

ing roads was the fur trade to be developed? The answer is that each fort was to have a factory or trading house where the Indian, shielded from the private trader (British, Spanish, American), might receive supplies at cost from the United States government, and in exchange turn over to that government his peltries. The weakness of the factory system, which by 1822 had spent itself, lay with its beneficiary, the Indian. Three things the Indian could in no wise forego — credits, gratuities, whiskey; and these the factory system could in no wise allow him. In brief, it was not a governmental system that was to give to America trade in furs : it was the individual trader, or rather the private trading company.

Of private companies there arose between the years 1808 and 1823 three : the American Fur Company, the Missouri Fur Company, and the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. At the head of the American Company was John Jacob Astor; and at the head of the Missouri Company was Manuel Lisa.

Between these two intrepid captains, the rivalry was keen. Astor was of German blood while Lisa was a Spaniard, though both were none the less Americans. Astor sent his agents out, while Lisa went himself.

Early in 1811, Wilson Price Hunt, representative of John Jacob Astor, set forth in keel boats up the Missouri for the Pacific. The same spring, Manuel Lisa set forth by the same stream to bring down for

his company the season's pack. On the river, Hunt had the start of Lisa by some nineteen days or two hundred and forty miles; yet Lisa — now at the helm, now trimming the sail, now chiding the crew, now plying them with grog, now striking up a boat song, now rending the solitude with shouts — Lisa, a tornado of will, overtook Hunt, won the race, vindicated himself, and did the Missouri honor.

“ ‘Manuel gets so much rich fur!’ ” “ ‘Manuel must cheat the government, and Manuel must cheat the Indians’ Bon! I will explain. . . . I put into my operations great activity. . . . I impose upon myself great privations”. Thus in 1817 spoke Manuel Lisa by letter to Governor William Clark.