

THE FUR TRADE IN MINNESOTA DURING THE BRITISH RÉGIME ¹

There was nothing, broadly speaking, peculiar to or characteristic of the fur trade of the region now included in the boundaries of the state of Minnesota which was not also characteristic of the region of the Great Lakes and the upper Mississippi River. The title of the present paper, therefore, while perhaps appropriate on the occasion of a meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society, may suggest an idea or a conception which it is best to avoid from the outset: namely, the notion that a modern state, Minnesota or any other, is a logical or natural geographical unit on which to base a study of the early fur trade. The region must be pictured as it was during the British régime without reference either to modern political boundaries or to present-day lines of communication. In short, the territory lying west of the Great Lakes was a part of a geographic and economic entity, and in dealing with it one must consider not the state of Minnesota alone, but rather a more extensive region of which the area now included in the state was an important part.

It should be explained that the British régime is regarded as the period from 1763 to 1815, during which the influence of British traders was paramount in the Northwest. The British régime had been preceded by the French period, which lasted from the earliest explorations until the conquest of Canada in 1763. It was followed by the American period which began after the close of the War of 1812 and ended gradually with the movement of the fur-trader's frontier westward.

The most interesting and significant aspects of the Northwest fur trade during the British régime can be understood

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only by a careful examination of the map. The region of the Great Lakes and the upper Mississippi might be entered from two directions: first, from the east by way of the St. Lawrence River system; second, from the south by way of the Mississippi. Of these two routes, the northern proved more convenient and was certainly much more important in the history of the fur trade. The location and distribution of fur-bearing animals made Canada and the city of Montreal more important in the early development of the fur trade than southern Louisiana and New Orleans. It was said in the days when Rome flourished that all roads led to the Imperial City. It may be said with equal truth that in the days of the early fur trade, all trails in the empire of the Northwest led to Montreal. The post of Michilimackinac was a sort of half-way station on the route from Montreal to the upper Mississippi, and might be reached either by following the Great Lakes or the Ottawa River and Lake Nipissing. The region of the upper Mississippi might be reached from Michilimackinac by one of two routes: first, by way of Lake Superior and the St. Croix River; second, by way of Lake Michigan and the Fox and Wisconsin rivers. It was possible to penetrate the wilderness west of the Mississippi by the Minnesota River, or the St. Peter's, as it then was called. Traders resorting to the Canadian Northwest took the Grand Portage route. The communications from Montreal to the Northwest were controlled at two or three strategic points, chief of which were Detroit, Michilimackinac, and Grand Portage. Perhaps Prairie du Chien might also be included.

During the French period, the upper Mississippi was on the outer confines of the territory regularly visited by white men. The fur trade of this region was a part of the great prize contended for by the English and French during the intercolonial wars, though none of the fighting actually took place there. It was not in the wilderness, but rather in the heart of Canada that the French cause was lost and with it the peltry trade. The capture of Quebec in 1759 and the sur-

render of Montreal in 1760 delivered the economic as well as the political control of the Great Lakes and the upper Mississippi into the hands of the British. True, the territory west of the Mississippi was ceded to Spain in 1763, but, owing to its geographical location, its trade was easily controlled by the British in spite of all efforts of the Spaniards to prevent this.

When the British had secured military and political control of the Northwest, their first act was to abolish the French system of monopolies and to open the trade to all comers. This meant the overthrow of the entire business organization which had been built up by French merchants in the days of the old régime. Henceforth the goods used in the Indian trade were to be imported from England and the furs for which they were exchanged were to find their way to London rather than to Paris. The commerce of the French merchants was automatically ruined and its control passed to their British competitors, who were swarming into the upper country even before the signing of the treaty of Paris. There were left in the Indian country, including the upper Mississippi, however, a great many *engagés* and small French traders who must either accommodate themselves to the new order of things or seek new fields of endeavor. The easy-going disposition of the French Canadian led him to choose the former alternative and the result was that when the British merchant entered the Northwest he found ready and waiting a large number of persons skilled in certain processes of the fur trade who entered his employ and constituted an invaluable asset to his business organization. The system of trading posts which had been erected in the interior by the French was also at the disposal of the British when they arrived.

The zeal of the British merchants who flocked into the Northwest was temporarily checked in 1763 by the Indian rising known as the conspiracy of Pontiac. Traders at Michilimackinac and smaller posts scattered throughout the interior were plundered and murdered. The outbreak was suppressed

in the following year, however, and there was a second rush of traders into the region formerly occupied by the French. These men were of English, Scotch, Irish, and Yankee descent. Most of them were actuated by motives of gain and by love of adventure, but some had been obliged to leave their homes for other and more urgent reasons. From the conquest of Canada until the time of the American Revolution the private trader held sway. Some of these men were of extremely shady character and Lieutenant Governor Hamilton, commandant of Detroit, tells us that the very name of "trader" had become a synonym for "artfull cheat." Of all the traders who visited the region west of the Great Lakes during this period, none is more interesting than Peter Pond, a Connecticut Yankee who visited the region of the upper Minnesota in the winter of 1773 and 1774. He journeyed from Albany to the upper country by way of Montreal and Michilimackinac. From the latter post he proceeded to the Mississippi by way of the Fox and Wisconsin rivers. After a brief stop at Prairie du Chien he ascended the Mississippi as far as the Minnesota. Pushing up the Minnesota he wintered among the Indians and, as he says, "We Did our bisnes to advantage." Pond has left an account of his travels which is one of the most fascinating narratives dealing with the early fur trade. He spelled phonetically, but he was a most keen judge of human nature and he was not without a subtle sense of humor.²

The outbreak of the Revolution had little direct effect upon the fur trade of the Great Lakes and the upper Mississippi. It has already been shown that control of this region depended upon the possession of a few strategic posts. The British succeeded in holding these posts during the war and with them the control of the Indians and the fur trade. British supremacy in the Northwest tottered momentarily when an expedition under General Montgomery captured Montreal in 1775.

² The "Journal of Peter Pond" is published as one of a series of sources on the "British Regime in Wisconsin" in *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 18: 314-354 (Madison, 1908). It was first printed in the *Connecticut Magazine*, 10: 239-259 (April, May, June, 1906).

But the Americans were obliged to withdraw and the Canadian fur-traders breathed freely once more. The invasion of the Illinois country by George Rogers Clark next threatened the security of the British traders. Certain of them were driven in from the outposts, but British garrisons still retained the principal strongholds of Michilimackinac and Detroit. The capture of either of these posts would almost certainly have obliged the British traders to withdraw from the upper Mississippi, but such a project was too much for the military resources of the Americans. There was one respect, however, in which the British traders were somewhat seriously hampered. The military authorities feared lest supplies and ammunition intended for the fur trade might fall into the hands of Clark's men and their Indian allies and be used against the British garrisons. The situation was complicated by the fact that the loyalty of some of the petty traders, particularly the French Canadians, was not above question. The result was that the transport of supplies into the Northwest was put under stringent regulation and in some instances prohibited altogether. Certain traders at Detroit and Michilimackinac were refused permission to go into the interior at all. But this temporary inconvenience was more than offset by the fact that rival Yankee traders were completely excluded from the Northwest and the Canadian merchants had full sway. During the Revolution they laid the foundations of a monopoly in the Great Lakes region which they retained until the close of the War of 1812.

The English and Scotch merchants who entered the Northwest during the British régime have seldom been surpassed in shrewdness, energy, and business ability. Their vigor and initiative are attested by the remarkable growth of the fur industry between 1763 and 1796. From their headquarters at Montreal, Detroit, and Michilimackinac, they pushed down into the Illinois country and wintered in the wilderness west of the Mississippi, while some of them penetrated far into the country beyond Lake Superior. Hundreds of thousands

of pelts of many varieties were carried annually out of this vast range of territory. They included beaver, marten, otter, mink, muskrat, raccoon, bear, and cat. Their annual value probably fell not far short of two hundred thousand pounds sterling, perhaps more than a million dollars according to present-day standards.

Many interesting questions arise when one comes to consider the nature of the fur industry. What kinds of goods were used by the traders? What was done with the furs received from the Indians? How was the business organized?

There were three commodities which were an indispensable part of the outfit of every trader who penetrated the Minnesota wilderness — rum, firearms, and ammunition. Of the three, rum was probably in greatest demand. It acted as a lubricant in the conduct of the trader's business. It commanded a high price in furs, besides helping the Indian to see the force of the trader's arguments. The only concern of the trader was to avoid personal injury in the carousal which usually followed the dispensing of the coveted fire water. Arms and ammunition were needed by the Indians for the hunt — in other words they constituted the tools of their trade. It was apparent that the sale of liquor, arms, and ammunition might be abused, and so it was the policy of the British authorities for a period of several years to require an accurate statement of the quantities of these goods carried into the upper country. Merchants were obliged to take out licenses and to give security for their good conduct before their cargoes were permitted to leave the posts. In addition to the articles which have been mentioned, most traders carried with them an assortment of "dry goods," obviously so designated to distinguish them from rum or "wet goods." These included scores of articles, some useful and others not, ranging from needles and kettles to earrings and cocked hats. The Indian had a fondness for variety in the matter of wearing apparel. Everyone is familiar with the conventional portrait of the Indian — a figure of much dignity, robed in skins or blankets, and

adorned with vermilion, wampum, and eagle's feathers. The writer often has wished that some historically-minded artist might depict him as he must have appeared after a visit from a white trader. Some of the articles mentioned in the trader's invoices are striped calico shirts (strange to say, there is never any mention of trousers), cocked hats, shoulder epaulettes, and military coats. It is only reasonable to suppose that the Indians purchased these articles to wear. The portrait of the dignified warrior should, therefore, be revised and he may be pictured upon state occasions dressed in a cocked hat, a calico shirt, and perhaps a pair of brass epaulettes, but minus trousers. Some of the wealthier Indians probably varied this costume by the addition of a long-tailed, lace-trimmed coat. Their sense of the fitness of things seems to have equaled that of one of their descendants in the Oklahoma oil fields, who, having decided to purchase an automobile, selected a huge motor hearse and drove off in proud state with his family.

It is interesting to study the disposition of the furs secured from the Indians in return for the goods just described. Most of the pelts found their way sooner or later by one of the routes mentioned to Michilimackinac or Detroit. There they were sorted and packed in bales and shipped down to Montreal, either in canoes by way of the Ottawa River, the quicker method, or in sailing vessels by way of the Great Lakes. At Montreal, after being checked and sorted a second time, they were loaded on ships which sailed alone or in convoys to London. The center of the world's fur trade during the British régime was the city of London, where were held annually great fur auctions which were attended by buyers from continental Europe, especially from Germany and Russia. Many of the furs offered for sale at these auctions found Russian buyers and were carried to St. Petersburg. Some of them were sold in China, being carried overland across Siberia from St. Petersburg in caravans. The scope of the fur trade was truly world-wide.

Since the principal markets for furs were found in foreign countries, it is not surprising that the trade should have been affected by wars and other international complications. The price of furs in the Minnesota wilderness was directly affected by Napoleon's continental blockade and the British orders in council. What a boon the telegraph or radio would have been to the trader in the Indian country! As it was, his friends and business associates in Montreal and London did their best to keep him informed with regard to the fluctuations of the market. The correspondence of the period is filled with advice not to buy this or that variety of furs except at a very low price, in view of the state of the market.

The conventional portrait of the fur-trader is that of a man in buckskin shirt and raccoon cap, dispensing fire water and trinkets at first hand to gullible savages in return for ten times their value in furs. But there were hundreds of persons connected with the fur trade who never entered the wilderness at all. There were big London firms which forwarded goods to Canada and managed the auctions which have been described. There were large concerns at Montreal which handled the goods imported from London and forwarded the furs received from the upper country. There were smaller firms or private traders at Michilimackinac and Detroit who imported goods from Montreal and made up outfits which, in turn, were supplied to the traders who bartered with the Indians among the tributaries of the Great Lakes and upper Mississippi.

Almost the entire fur industry was based upon credit. The London firms sent goods to the commission merchants of Montreal on credit. These merchants forwarded them to Detroit and Michilimackinac upon the same terms. Outfits were made up and carried into the wilderness of the upper Mississippi, still on credit. Credit was in many cases the basis of the trader's dealings with the Indians. The goods which have been described as a part of the trader's outfit were not given directly to the Indians in exchange for furs. Instead, the trader

went to the camp of his particular Indian clients in the fall and advanced to them a certain quantity of arms and ammunition with perhaps some steel traps and small tools and implements, keeping a careful record of the transaction. The Indians then departed for their winter hunting grounds and the trader perhaps saw no more of them until spring. In the spring, if all went well, they returned to their rendezvous, bringing with them the results of the season's hunt. The trader was on hand to meet them and to receive the furs which they carried in from the wintering ground. If they equalled in amount the credit which he had extended in the autumn, all well and good. If they did not, it was his loss which he could only hope to make good at some future time. Occasionally a rival trader waylaid the Indians coming in from the wintering grounds, plied them with fire water, and cajoled them into giving up the returns of the season's hunt. In that case, the first trader got nothing. Again, the Indians might decide of their own accord not to return to the trader who had given them credit, but to carry their furs to another post. This pleasant custom was known as "stealing credits," and was apt to be a constant source of worry to the trader. But taking into account the fact that there was little or no legal authority in the Indian country, there was surprisingly little loss from such causes. The Indians as a rule fulfilled their obligations.

When the ice had cleared from the rivers in the spring and the trader had collected his peltries from the Indians, he carried them to one of the larger posts. He turned over his furs to the merchant who had advanced his outfit in the fall and received credit on the books of the latter. At times he might decide to forward the furs on his own account to Montreal, in which case the merchant to whom he was indebted perhaps acted as an agent, receiving a commission for his services. When the furs were received in Montreal, the firms in that city forwarded them to London to balance their accounts with the merchants located there. Two years, as a rule, and often an even longer period elapsed between the time when

the goods were forwarded from London and the time when the furs for which they were exchanged could be received and the accounts settled.

The canny English and Scotch traders who operated in the Northwest during the years following the Revolution soon came to realize the advantages of combination and organization, not only as a means of reducing competition, but as a means of facilitating the conduct of the business. The result was that trading companies began to appear in the field. Some of them were only small concerns and disappeared after a short time. Others were large and powerful and were backed by the strongest financial interests of Canada and the Northwest. The three most important companies which operated in the upper Mississippi country during the period of British influence were the Northwest, Michilimackinac, and Southwest companies. The American Fur Company arose after the War of 1812, when John Jacob Astor became prominent in the field. It is interesting to note that in 1811 the Michilimackinac and Northwest companies decided by mutual consent to limit the field of their respective operations in the upper Mississippi Valley. Accordingly, they drew up articles of agreement establishing a line passing through northern Wisconsin and Minnesota, south of which the Michilimackinac Company should enjoy a virtual monopoly and north of which the Northwest Company should hold sway. Probably these companies were Minnesota's earliest monopolies. They ruled their respective spheres of influence with an iron hand and did not hesitate to drive out private traders by violent means if persuasion failed.

The surrender of the Northwest posts in 1796 weakened but did not destroy the hold of the British traders upon the region of the upper Mississippi and the Great Lakes. Their influence continued to be paramount until the close of the War of 1812. It must not be supposed that they met with no opposition in the enjoyment of their monopoly. After the Revolution, but before the surrender of the posts, American

traders had tried desperately to push their way in, but without success. The economic and political advantages of their rivals were too great. The Spanish authorities also endeavored at various times to exclude the British from the territory beyond the upper Mississippi. Decrees were issued warning British traders to keep off the Spanish preserves. Carondelet, governor of Louisiana, recommended in 1794 that a fort be built at the mouth of the Minnesota to keep them out. Such decrees and threats did not disturb the equanimity of the British in the least and the Spanish officials fumed in vain. To have kept the British trader's rum out of Spanish territory would have taxed the ingenuity and resourcefulness of a modern federal prohibition officer. It was the energy and initiative of the British trader which in a large measure determined the character of the history of the Northwest from 1763 to 1815 and made the history of the region really the history of the fur trade.

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