

RAMSAY CROOKS AND THE FUR TRADE OF THE NORTHWEST¹

In the exploration and opening up of the great West the fur-trader was the primary influence. With the governmental expedition of Lewis and Clark remains the honor of having made the first overland trip to the Pacific, and the expeditions of Pike were of enduring consequence, particularly in the history of the Northwest. But for many years after these explorations the sole information obtainable about the interior of the United States came as a result of the fur-trader's penetration into that area in search of his furs, skins, and buffalo robes. Men such as Pilcher, Ashley, and Lisa made possible a rude understanding of the geography of the West and brought to St. Louis its first wave of prosperity as the center of the fur trade of all the vast territory drained by the Missouri River. But in New York there was developing an organization which was to prove larger and more powerful than any of the St. Louis houses. Under John Jacob Astor was being framed the preliminary company which was to take final form in that great monopolistic enterprise, the American Fur Company. Under its management the second overland trip to the Pacific was conducted, the magnificent dream of Astoria on the Oregon coast became a realization and a disappointment, and great quantities of furs were gathered throughout the West to be sold through the four principal world markets, New York, London, Leipsic, and Canton, China.

The credit for the operation of this first forerunner of American big business is usually attributed to John Jacob Astor. It is not generally realized that Astor himself lacked the practical knowledge of the western country and the Indian trade necessary to make the venture a success, or that the

¹ A paper read at the seventy-seventh annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society on January 11, 1926. *Ed.*

American Fur Company continued successfully for almost a decade after Astor left its management. In the beginning Astor provided the capital; the experience and the actual handling of the company in the West were provided by partners in the enterprise. It is with the foremost of these associates of Astor, Ramsay Crooks, that the present paper deals.

Like the majority of the early merchant princes of America, Ramsay Crooks was of foreign birth; like so many of the leaders in the fur trade, he was a Scotchman. He was born at Greenock, a little town northwest of Glasgow, in 1787. His mother, a widow with four children, emigrated to Ontario when Ramsay was sixteen. He soon found employment in a mercantile firm in Montreal. In 1805, however, he entered the service of a merchant named Gillespie, and went to the United States to the frontier village of St. Louis. Here he remained for two years in the employ of Gillespie, studying the opportunities for trade with the Indians which the valley of the Missouri afforded.²

In 1807 he met and formed a partnership with Robert McClellan, characterized by Chittenden as "a man of many perilous exploits and hairbreadth escapes, a sure shot, a daring hunter," and "one of the most romantic characters in the annals of the Western fur trade." An expedition of eighty men was gathered by the partners and an outfit advanced them on shares by two of the elder members of the famous Chouteau family, all of whom were connected intimately with the fur trade. In the fall of 1807 Crooks and McClellan set out for the upper Missouri. Reports of a warlike attitude among the Sioux Indians caused them to abandon this plan, and they established themselves near the present site of Council Bluffs, where they remained until the spring of 1809.

² "Facts Concerning Ramsay Crooks," a manuscript in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society, by his granddaughter, Mrs. W. F. Just; Alfred T. Andreas, *History of Chicago, from the Earliest Period, to the Present Time*, 1: 93 (Chicago, 1884).

In the summer of that year, encouraged by the ascent of the river by more powerful rivals, they determined to follow, although they had only forty men. While passing through the Sioux country they were stopped by a force of some six hundred Indians, who forbade them to proceed but agreed to trade with them on the spot. Opposition being out of the question, they pretended to set about the erection of a trading post while the Indians went to their villages some twenty miles away to secure articles for trade, leaving behind only a small guard. Crooks and McClellan immediately sent a small party secretly up the river, and after breaking up their establishment returned to their old post, leaving behind only "a message for the Indians not calculated to mollify their feelings." The two partners always maintained that the halting of their party was due to a plot of Manuel Lisa and the Missouri Fur Company of St. Louis, and McClellan declared that if he ever caught Lisa in the Indian country he would shoot him on the spot.⁸

In January, 1810, the Pacific Fur Company was organized by Astor and five associates. The purpose of this company was to establish a line of trading posts along the Missouri and Platte rivers to the Rockies and thence to the Pacific. Two expeditions were planned, one to go by sea to the Oregon coast and establish the principal fort and post at the mouth of the Columbia River, and the other to progress overland to this point, examining the territory en route for likely posts in the interior.

In the meantime Crooks left the Missouri country, entered the employ of the Northwest Company, and was stationed at Mackinac. To this place came Willson P. Hunt, the commander of the overland expedition. He was impressed with the experience of Crooks, and admitted him as a partner in the enterprise. The members of the expedition left Mackinac for St. Louis by way of Green Bay, the Fox and Wisconsin rivers,

⁸ Hiram M. Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, 1: 159-161 (New York, 1902).

and the Mississippi, and reached their destination in the fall of 1810. Here the services of McClellan were also secured.⁴

On October 21, 1810, the expedition, composed of about sixty men, left for Astoria, as the new post on the Pacific had been named in honor of John Jacob Astor. They intended to take a more southerly and direct route than that of Lewis and Clark. Incidentally, with but few variations, their course became a few years later the Oregon trail. After wintering along the Missouri, they set up the river again in the spring. They were soon overtaken by Lisa and a party of traders, and McClellan was with difficulty restrained from carrying out his threat against the Spanish trader. In midsummer they left the Missouri. Shortly after Crooks became seriously ill and had to be carried on a litter. On recovering his health he narrowly escaped drowning in the Big Horn River when his canoe split on a rock and upset in a rapids. Soon after he again almost met death, this time by starvation. Crooks and a little party were separated from the main group for twenty-seven days. For the first eighteen days they had only half a meal every twenty-four hours, and during the last nine days subsisted on "only one beaver, a dog, a few wild cherries, and some old mockason soles." Even after they rejoined the main party, food was scarce and several died of starvation. After penetrating the Rockies, but yet at a considerable distance from the Columbia, Crooks and five others who were unable to travel were left behind with some friendly Indians.⁵

Crooks and one companion survived the winter and, after being despoiled of their scanty possessions by predatory Indians, were finally rescued by a party from Astoria. Crooks, however, was not satisfied with prospects in Oregon, and in the fall of 1812 he set out again upon the overland trip with only six companions. This small band followed nearly the

⁴ Alexander Ross, *Adventures of the First Settlers on the Oregon or Columbia River*, 188, 192 (Milo M. Quaife, ed.—Chicago, 1923).

⁵ John Bradbury, *Travels in the Interior of America, in the Years 1809, 1810, and 1811, 230-242* (London, 1819).

same route that had been taken on the outward journey, reached St. Louis in 1813, and there first learned of the war between the United States and Great Britain.⁶ This war proved fatal to the hopes entertained for the Astoria project. A British naval expedition was sent to capture the post, but before its arrival the property had been sold to agents of the Northwest Company. Astor was disappointed at what he termed the failure of the United States government to protect American property, and the Pacific Fur Company was dissolved in 1814.

Crooks remained in close association with the Astor interests, and when the American Fur Company, headed by Astor, bought out the American interests of the Northwest Company in 1816 Crooks became one of the partners in the new company. The following year, when the reorganization went into effect, Crooks was appointed general manager. He made his headquarters at Mackinac, the company's chief post, but with his customary energy refused to direct the business from a distance. For the next five years his life was almost a continuous journey. In the winter he made his headquarters in New York and in the summer at Mackinac, but Montreal, Washington, Buffalo, Detroit, Green Bay, Prairie du Chien, and St. Louis all received frequent visits.⁷ In 1817 the Southwest Company sold out to a group of associates of whom Crooks was a member. The management of this company also fell to Crooks.⁸

When he was not traveling Crooks busied himself with his correspondence. Just how voluminous this was, may be realized by anyone who has visited Mackinac and seen the two capacious letter books of the American Fur Company preserved

⁶ Ross, *Adventures*, 202-206.

⁷ Chittenden, *American Fur Trade*, 1: 311.

⁸ Crooks to Grant and Kirby, April 12, 1817; Crooks to Samuel Abbott, March 17, 1817, Mackinac Register. The originals of these letter books of the agent of the American Fur Company at Mackinac are in the Astor House, Mackinac; photostatic copies are in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

there, containing copies of company correspondence written almost entirely by Crooks, and covering chiefly a five-year period, 1817 to 1823. These volumes accompanied Crooks on all his travels. The letters are crowded tightly into their pages, one following another with scarcely more than ruled line between. They are remarkable for their vigor and incisiveness and are full of interesting material, much of it constituting the best source of information for the history of the trade with which it deals.

During his years as general manager of the American Fur Company Crooks extended the operations of the company farther and farther into the West, tapping the Minnesota trade. Among the new posts established was one at St. Peter's, now Mendota, at the junction of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers. This post became the company headquarters for Minnesota. Here Henry H. Sibley, who was later the first governor of the state of Minnesota, was in charge of the company's interests; and Crooks made the post of this associate his base while in the region.

The company as yet maintained no branch at St. Louis. Crooks continually urged upon Astor the necessity of opening a house there in order that the company might share in the lucrative trade of the upper Missouri. Finally he followed Astor to Europe in the winter of 1820-21 and successfully won him over and at the same time entered into a business contract with him for the next four years. An alliance was concluded in 1822 with the St. Louis firm of Pratte, Chouteau and Company, and the American Fur Company was divided into the western and northern departments, with the St. Louis house as the western unit in the business.⁹

The company now extended its operations up the Missouri Valley and into the Dakotas. Its chief post was at Fort Union, one of the largest and most famous posts developed by the fur trade and the headquarters for the upper Missouri trade from its establishment in 1829 until the fur trade dwindled away

⁹ Chittenden, *American Fur Trade*, I: 311, 316-320.

some forty years later. It was located on the north bank of the Missouri, three miles above the mouth of the Yellowstone. Here was built a palisaded fort with stone bastions thirty feet high, pierced with cannon. A tunnel connected the fort with the near-by river, and the fort itself was capable of withstanding a severe siege and was practically impregnable against Indian attack. The establishment of such imposing posts as Fort Union was an innovation in the American fur trade introduced by the many Canadian traders who were entering into American concerns.

Fort Union was also the head of navigation on the Missouri, on the upper waters of which the steamboat was introduced by Pierre Chouteau, Jr., in 1831. For a considerable period the American Fur Company maintained a monopoly on steamboat transportation on the river, a fact which contributed to place them far in advance of their competitors, who still relied upon the keel boat and Mackinaw.¹⁰ Treacherous as was the Mississippi, the Missouri was even more dangerous for navigation, and its many snags, bars, and sudden changes of level made it the graveyard of many a fine stern-wheeler.

One of the most interesting incidents of the fur trade occurred at Fort Union, where its factor, Kenneth McKenzie, "king of the upper Missouri," in order to evade the government ban on alcohol in the Indian trade, established his own distillery, deeming liquor absolutely essential to his business. He was extremely proud of the quality of liquor he manufactured, and trade flowed in as the liquor flowed out. All went extremely well until an independent party of American traders headed by Captain Nathaniel J. Wyeth stopped at the fort. McKenzie treated these guests with his usual lavish hospitality and they professed great admiration for his liquor. But when he refused to sell any of it and charged them exorbitantly for supplies, they reported him to the government authorities. McKenzie was forced to discontinue his still, and in the following year he left on a European tour. The Ameri-

¹⁰ Chittenden, *American Fur Trade*, I: 338-341.

can Fur Company excused itself on the plea that the still was "only intended to promote the cause of botany." Thus ended one of the first American attempts at bootlegging. Crooks, a stern prohibitionist, condemned the proceedings severely from his office in New York.¹¹

In 1822 Crooks, who must have wedged a courtship into his flying business trips to St. Louis, married a daughter of Bernard Pratte, one of the new partners in the western department. Of this marriage nine children were born, five boys and four girls. Only one of these sons, William Crooks, a pioneer railroad builder in the Northwest, followed in his father's path.¹²

In 1830 Crooks dissolved his partnership with Astor, but he continued his position with the American Fur Company as a salaried employee, virtually as head of the company. In the same year he became an American citizen. In 1834 Astor retired from the affairs of the company. The stock of the northern department was bought by a group of seven associates, of whom Crooks was the leading stockholder. The new organization retained the old name and elected Crooks president. The western department was taken over by Pratte, Chouteau and Company, and business arrangements were concluded between the two companies.¹³ The reorganized company began business during an off year, but fortunately encountered little opposition. Its greatest difficulty arose through the illicit liquor trade in which its opponents engaged.

¹¹ Chittenden, *American Fur Trade*, 358-362.

¹² See Mrs. Just's "Facts Concerning Ramsay Crooks," and her manuscript account of "A Minnesota Pioneer—William Crooks," also in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

¹³ Crooks to Edmund A. Brush, May 19, 1834; Crooks to Abbott, June 4, 1834; Crooks to Pratte, Chouteau and Company, September 6, 1834, American Fur Company Papers. These papers are in the possession of the New York Historical Society in New York City. A calendar of the collection and photostats of some of the papers are owned by the Minnesota Historical Society and have been used in the preparation of the present paper. Crooks's certificate of naturalization is in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

The company's agent at Milwaukee, Solomon Juneau, solved the difficulty by purchasing part of his competitor's stock of whisky, but this method was neither advised nor sanctioned by officials of the company.¹⁴

Crooks proceeded to change the inland headquarters of the company from Mackinac to La Pointe, a settlement on one of the Apostle Islands in Lake Superior. The company then endeavored to get rid of its entire property at Mackinac. At one time it was proposed that the buildings there be made over into a hotel, but it was too early for such a development, and a purchaser could not be found. The other posts on the lakes were retained.

By the end of the year the management passed entirely from the hands of Astor to the new stockholders. The summer and fall of 1835 Crooks spent at Mackinac and Sault Ste. Marie, where a schooner was being built for the company's trade on Lake Superior. Since the launching of this vessel, christened the "John Jacob Astor," commercial traffic on the upper lake has been continuous. Crooks also desired the construction of other vessels for use on the lower lakes, as hired vessels proved unsatisfactory and unreliable. As a result another vessel was soon constructed, the "Ramsay Crooks," the nucleus of a small fleet.¹⁵ In 1837 a group of investors proposed the construction of a ship canal around the falls of the St. Mary's River. The project received little encouragement from Crooks, who believed it too highly speculative. He also believed that such an undertaking would provide for the too rapid development and settlement of the upper lake, which would be ruinous to the company's plans of exploitation. The construction of such a canal was afterwards begun in 1853 by the state of Michigan.

¹⁴ Lyman M. Warren to Crooks, October 16, 1834; Solomon Juneau to Crooks, December 13, 1834, American Fur Company Papers.

¹⁵ Crooks to Benjamin Clapp, August 11, 1835; Clapp to Crooks, September 3, 1835; Crooks to Brewster, December 18, 1835, American Fur Company Papers.

Settlers who had already pushed the trapper out of the Ohio Valley now began to pour into Wisconsin, so that the company agent at Milwaukee believed that trade with the whites would be as profitable as that with the Indians. Many land speculators were reported.¹⁶ This white settlement was in violation of treaties between the government and the Indians, but under Jackson's administration they were a small deterrent. The white influx was consistently opposed by Crooks, who championed the Indians' cause. He found, moreover, that the Indians were discouraged by the presence of white farmers and made little effort to hunt, so that returns from the Wisconsin region ceased to show a profit. The Indians began to do only enough hunting to purchase liquor, and many of them went over into the territory of the Hudson's Bay Company. Crooks was opposed to allowing his agents to enter into trade with the whites, except incidentally, and always for cash.¹⁷

In 1836 the company declared a dividend of fifteen per cent, making a total dividend of twenty-five per cent since its reorganization. The next year, however, the panic of 1837 affected the business of the entire country and the finances of the company were from that time on exceedingly perilous. In March, 1837, Halsey and Company, the second largest stockholders in the American Fur Company, failed.¹⁸ General financial conditions were becoming so alarming that Crooks found it impossible to leave New York upon his usual western trip.

The company, however, survived the disasters of the panic, although greatly weakened by them. But when Crooks went west in 1838 for his inspection tour he found that his absence of the year before had resulted in a general slackness and demoralization throughout the western posts. Some of the

¹⁶ Juneau to Crooks, March 27, December 16, 1835, American Fur Company Papers.

¹⁷ Crooks to Juneau, March 31, 1835; Crooks to Wildes and Company, November 23, 1836, American Fur Company Papers.

¹⁸ John B. Whetten to William Brewster, February 20, 1837; Pratte, Chouteau and Company to Crooks, April 6, 1837, American Fur Company Papers.

posts had granted credit indiscriminately. Others had suffered from lazy or incompetent managers; and some agents had neglected company affairs to give attention to their own personal interests. Crooks spent the summer and fall of 1838 and the beginning of 1839 in the West, first in Mackinac, the Sault, and La Pointe, and then at St. Peter's and Prairie du Chien, reorganizing his staff. In October he wrote to the New York office: "Our business in this region has been villainously managed, but the purification in progress will teach all evil-doers what they have to expect, and give a new impulse to the affairs of the Outfit, the superintendence of which is now placed in honest, and able hands."¹⁹ Nevertheless, the company lost all profits for that year.

The American Fur Company never really recovered from the business depression that followed the panic. It had become almost entirely dependent upon its foreign sales for funds. The election of Harrison in 1840 was relied upon by company officials to restore confidence in business, but it did not have the desired effect. In that year the report was circulated that Crooks had gone into bankruptcy, which, although false, was dangerously near the truth.²⁰ In 1840 and 1841 the company inaugurated a stringent conservation movement. Negotiations were begun for the sale of all the company business on the Mississippi to Pratte, Chouteau and Company, leaving the company only its posts on the Great Lakes and its interest in the dwindling fur supply of the Ohio Valley.²¹ The year 1841 was disastrous in other respects. The annual fair at Leipsic was reported the worst in years and business was dull at home.²² The company was even disposed to sell its interests

¹⁹ Crooks to Stephen A. Halsey, September 8, October 15, 1838, American Fur Company Papers.

²⁰ Crooks to Curtis M. Lampson, September 5, October 1, 1840; Brewster to Crooks, December 18, 1840, American Fur Company Papers.

²¹ Crooks to Henry H. Sibley, April 23, 1841, American Fur Company Papers.

²² Lampson to Crooks, May 23, 1841, American Fur Company Papers.

on Lake Superior but could not find a prospective purchaser in whose ability to handle the arrangement it had confidence.²³

Prospects for the sale of furs became even duller in 1842. From both London and Leipsic came reports of the smallest sales in years and the market in China was closed by war between that country and Great Britain.²⁴ The amount of money owed the company was large, but the collections were extremely small and many of the company's debtors went into bankruptcy. The sale of the upper Mississippi posts to Pratte, Chouteau and Company was finally concluded, but it did little to relieve the situation. Crooks believed that it would be impossible for him to leave New York for his annual trip; in response to urgent demands, however, he set off on September 13.²⁵ Three days before, the American Fur Company had suspended payments, with an indebtedness of some three hundred thousand dollars. It still had sufficient means when collected to pay all liabilities, but these collections would require considerable time. Meanwhile the company passed into the hands of a receiver.²⁶ Crooks became ill soon after reaching the West and for a time his life was despaired of. His health finally improved, and so great was his importance to the company that with his recovery it was believed that every liability could be paid. Business was continued, but on a reduced scale; operations on Lake Superior remained as before, but at all other points they were substantially diminished.²⁷

The factors that led to the downfall of the American Fur Company were in the main external. The panic of 1837 and

²³ Crooks to Francis Duornig, December 4, 1841, American Fur Company Papers.

²⁴ Lampson to Crooks, February 5, 1842; M. F. Klauke to Crooks, March 25, 1842, American Fur Company Papers.

²⁵ Crooks to Parsons and Company, April 18, 1842; Crooks to Charles W. Borup, July 18, 1842, American Fur Company Papers.

²⁶ George Ehninger to James Henry, September 20, 1842, American Fur Company Papers.

²⁷ Ehninger to Lampson, September 29, 1842; Crooks to John Lawe, April 3, 1843, American Fur Company Papers.

the ensuing business depression were the greatest cause of the failure. Moreover, emigration of settlers to the fur country was responsible for a great falling off in the annual collection of furs; and the decline of the foreign markets together with the competition there of South American nutria caused a considerable shrinkage in the company's receipts. The one great mistake on the part of the company was its unwise policy of monopoly. In order to maintain this monopoly it spent enormous sums of money buying out competitors who could not have substantially damaged the company under any circumstances. In its last years the company realized the weakness of this policy, but the damage was already done.

By the end of 1844 the company had paid a fifty per cent dividend to its creditors, and with the gradual payment of its debts it passed slowly out of existence. In 1845 Crooks opened a commission house for the sale of skins and furs in New York. The old name of the American Fur Company was retained and the venture was extremely successful. Crooks remained in it until his death in 1859.²⁸

Ramsay Crooks seems to have been distinguished for kindness and patience in all his relations, both with white men and red. Although vigorous and relentless as an enemy, he always fought in the open and refused to employ underhanded methods to attain his ends. This is the more remarkable when the corrupt conditions that prevailed in connection with the fur trade are considered. One of his contemporaries wrote of him: "Crooks in particular was a master at Indian diplomacy, easy-going, apparently, but sharp as a razor in concluding a bargain, with experience and keen insight into the intricate buying and selling of Indian supplies, and in knowledge of every pelt's commercial worth."²⁹ His success and the quantity of work

²⁸ Albert L. Belden, *The Fur Trade of America and Some of the Men Who Made and Maintain It*, 297 (New York, 1917).

²⁹ Deborah B. Martin, "Doctor William Beaumont: His Life in Mackinac and Wisconsin, 1820-1834," in *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 4: 267 (March, 1921).

he accomplished are all the more surprising because he was in ill health a great deal of the time. The wonder is that a man who was never strong physically could have endured the hardships and privations which he encountered in his frequent travels beyond the frontier.

Altogether, Ramsay Crooks was one of the strongest men connected with the history of the American fur trade, ranking well up with John Jacob Astor and Manuel Lisa. It was his misfortune to hold a leading position in the trade during the days of its decline and failure. Otherwise he must surely have occupied a more conspicuous position in the history of one of the most picturesque and important periods in the development of the Northwest.

J. WARD RUCKMAN

MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).