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Article Summary: Northwest Nebraska, part of the Fort Pierre-Fort Laramie sphere of activity, had its own fur trade which was separate and distinct from the fur trade of eastern Nebraska, which centered on the Missouri River.

### Cataloging Information:

Names: John Finn; Amos Bettelyoun; Old Man Afraid of His Horses; Red Bear; James Bordeaux; Packs His Drum; Sitting Bull; W G Bullock; Ben Mills; Joseph Bissonette; Pierre Chouteau; Meriwether Lewis; William Clark; Manuel Lisa; Jedediah Smith; Francis Parkman; Hubert Rouleau; James Bordeaux; John Richards; Geminien Beauvais; William Sublette; Frederick Laboue; William Bent; Lancaster P Lupton; Rufus B Sage; Captain Bonneville; Henry Chatillion; Louis Chartran; Andrew Drips; Joseph Hamilton; P D Papin; Magloire Mousseau; David Adams; Auguste Lucien; John Richard; Peter Richard; Henry Claymore; Antoine Janis; Edward Bertrand; William Tucker; Colin Campbell; James Bridger; Gouverneur Warren; Alexander Culbertson; A R Bouis; Nicholas Janis; Elbridge Gary; Sefroy Iott; John W Smith; John Richards; B F Walters; J W Dear; J H Pratt; F D Yates; George Jewett; Spotted Tail; Francis C Boucher; James McCloskey; Louis Tremble; Thomas Twiss; Henry Clairmont; Antoine Du Bray

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Photographs / Images: Fur traders at Fort Laramie, 1868; Joseph Bissonette; Pierre Chouteau; Bordeaux's Map, 1857; Map, Fur Trade in Northwestern Nebraska; Fur trade items (2); Pierre Chouteau medal; Distributing rations at Red Cloud Agency, Harper's Weekly, 1875; Interior of store, Rosebud, South Dakota



*Fur traders at Fort Laramie, 1868. Standing, left to right—unidentified, John Finn, Amos Bettelyoun, Old Man Afraid of His Horse, Red Bear, James Bordeaux. Sitting, left to right—Packs His Drum, or Sitting Bull, W. G. Bullock, Ben Mills.*



*Joseph Bissonette*



*Pierre Chouteau*

# THE EARLY FUR TRADE IN NORTHWESTERN NEBRASKA

*By Charles E. Hanson, Jr.  
and  
Veronica Sue Walters*

## INTRODUCTION

We hope that this brief story of the fur trade in western Nebraska will add another dimension to the early history of Nebraska.

Teachers and museum people alike have frequently expressed a desire for factual material about the period between the first white contact and the ultimate agricultural development in this area. The fur trade history of eastern Nebraska has heretofore been much better documented in literature and more completely monumented on the ground.

Financial assistance from the National Endowment for the Humanities has now made it possible to complete the research work initiated some years ago by the Museum of the Fur Trade and to summarize the results for the widest possible utilization by the people of this area.

The research program was concerned with fur trade activities in the entire "Panhandle" of Nebraska. However the final results indicated that the major trading operations, the trading posts themselves and the established routes of travel were, from certain geographical considerations, confined almost entirely to the northwestern corner of the state. The title of this story was therefore selected to be as descriptive as possible. It will be noted

that the White River was the most important stream to the fur traders in this area and that most of the activity was concentrated within a ten-mile radius from the present city of Chadron.

A substantial part of the basic research was accomplished with the facilities of the Museum of the Fur Trade Library and the Chadron State College Library. For major assistance in our search of archival material we wish to thank Frances Stadler, Isabelle Dotzman and Nancy Smith of the Missouri Historical Society in St. Louis; Paul D. Riley, Research Associate, Nebraska State Historical Society; William H. Barton, Research Historian, Wyoming State Archives and Historical Department; Richard H. Maeder, Superintendent, Fort Laramie National Historic Site; Mrs. Engle of the Colorado State Historical Society Library; James Corsaro, Senior Librarian, New York State Library at Albany; and David Crosson, Research Historian, Western History Research Center, University of Wyoming.

We also wish to express our appreciation to Vance Nelson, Curator of the Fort Robinson Museum, Nebraska State Historical Society; Merrill J. Mattes, formerly of the National Park Service staff in Denver, Colorado; and all the others who gave generously of their time and knowledge to make this study as definitive as possible.

This is by no means the final word—we believe that many opportunities exist for expanding this story in the years to come. The research summarized in this work was made possible through the assistance of a research grant to the Museum of the Fur Trade by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The findings and conclusions presented herein do not necessarily represent the views of the Endowment.—Charles E. Hanson, Jr., and Veronica Sue Walters, Chadron, Nebraska, February 1, 1976.

### THE FUR TRADE

This brief study is concerned with the development of the organized fur trade in northwestern Nebraska. That area was part of the Fort Pierre-Fort Laramie sphere of activity, in many ways separate and distinct from the fur trade of eastern Nebraska which centered upon the Missouri River.

In further illustration of this definite separation of activities in the two ends of the state, the operations of the American Fur

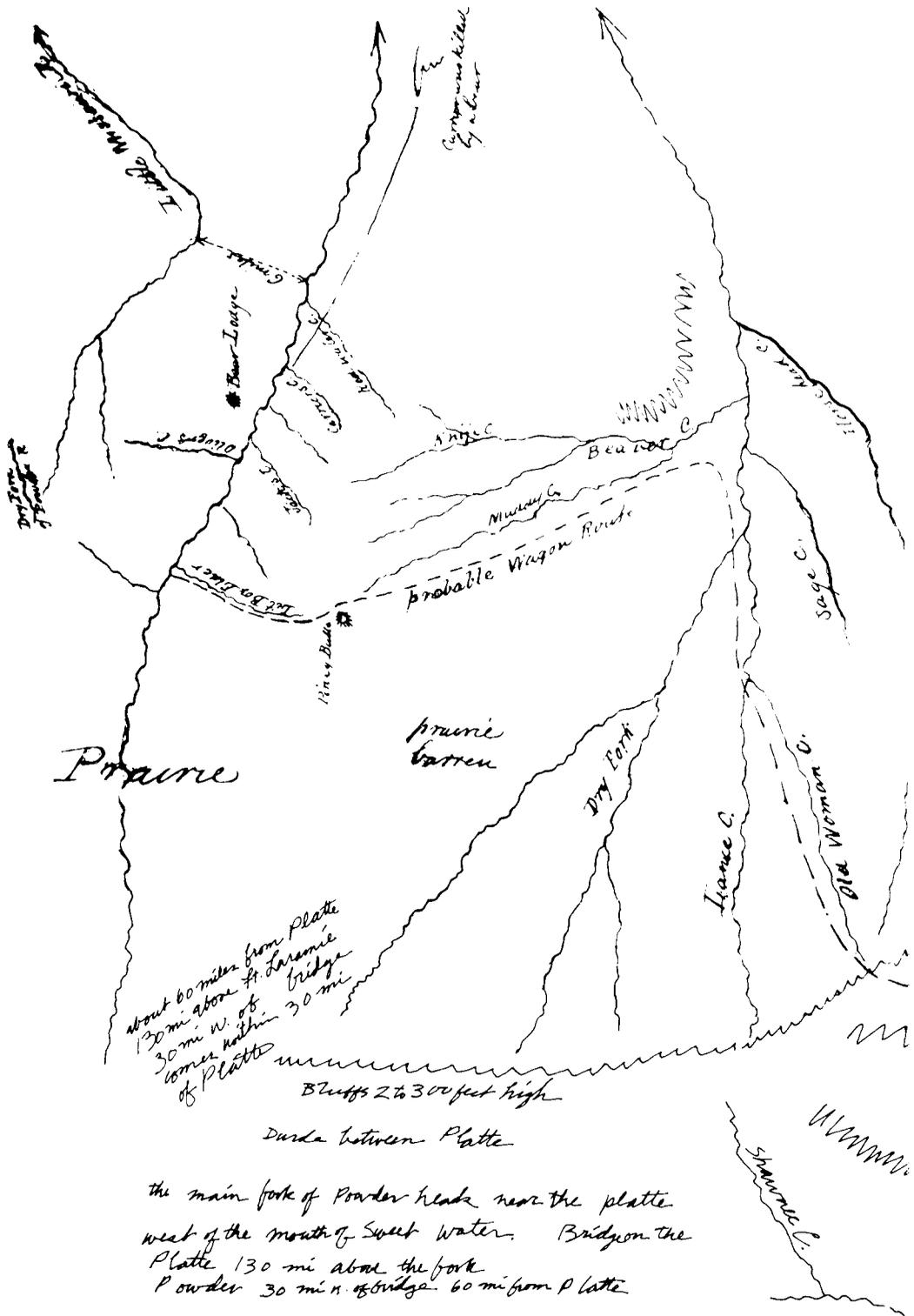
Company and its successor organizations were handled by the Oto and Sioux Outfits in eastern Nebraska, and by the Upper Missouri Outfit in western Nebraska.

Even back in the days of the earliest Spanish influence, the trade goods which found their way to western and southern Nebraska came from Santa Fe, while the Spanish traders to the Oto and the Omaha in eastern Nebraska came up the river from St. Louis.

Any possibility that French traders actually visited the northwestern area is extremely remote. The LaVerendrye party did reach the vicinity of Pierre, South Dakota, in the 1740's and probably saw the Black Hills. French traders around the Great Lakes were supplying guns and various trade goods to the eastern Sioux by 1700. There is some speculation that French traders did at some time travel long distances up the Platte while trading with the Pawnee.

Early Spanish trade in the area is supported by more concrete evidence. Meriwether Lewis and William Clark found Spanish knives, bits, axes, and textiles in the Dakotas and Montana. Many authorities believe that Spanish goods were carried up to the Missouri by inter-tribal barter, but David Lavender has proposed the thesis that New Mexican traders themselves also visited at least as far as South Dakota and it is a reasonable theory. In 1806 Pike estimated that Santa Fe traders came to the Pawnee about every third year. In 1811 a brigade of Manuel Lisa's trappers learned that New Mexicans traded every year with the Arapaho on the South Platte. In any event, the Indians of western Nebraska certainly knew about Spanish bits, bridles, axes, knives, lances, and blankets by 1800. However, such Spanish trade as did exist was not well-organized and provided a very limited amount of merchandise for the Indians.

By 1800 some important changes had taken place in the Indian population of the area between the Missouri and North Platte rivers. The Oglala Sioux had crossed the Missouri and reached the Black Hills by about 1775 in a great migration westward from the Minnesota country. The Brule Sioux came last, moving up the White River to its headwaters by 1810. In these migrations the southern Tetons displaced the Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Crow, who had in turn pushed earlier tribes to the south.<sup>1</sup>



Prairie

prairie barren

Dry Fork

Lance C.

Old Woman C.

Shoshone C.

about 60 miles from Platte  
130 mi above Ft. Larimer bridge  
30 mi W. of  
30 mi within  
of Platte

Bluffs 2 to 300 feet high

Dards between Platte

the main fork of Powder heads near the Platte west of the mouth of Sweet Water. Bridge on the Platte 130 mi above the fork Powder 30 mi n. of bridge. 60 mi from Platte



The Tetons now had horses and were nomads following the buffalo. They disliked trapping and consequently were not a good commercial source of fine furs like beaver and otter. The short heavy bow was always the favorite buffalo hunting weapon, so huge outlays of guns and ammunition were not necessities of life. The Tetons merely traded a few deerskins and buffalo robes for basic needs like knives, kettles, and blankets. Until about 1835 they could not afford such luxuries as laced coats, silverwork, ropes of beads, and imported otter skins.

After Lewis and Clark, the coming of the "Mountain Men" brought Anglo-American energy, organization, and technology to the western trade. The White River and Niobrara River offered some good possibilities for roving beaver trappers and a few early visitors no doubt availed themselves of the opportunity. The Museum of the Fur Trade has a hand-forged beaver trap, ca. 1820, which was found in Chadron Creek south of Chadron, Nebraska. In the fall of 1823 Jedediah Smith led a trappers' brigade along the lower White River and then crossed the Black Hills on their way to the Crow country. One of the last beaver trappers in the area was Hubert Rouleau, who met Francis Parkman in 1846 and went to work at Fort Laramie the next year. In the late 1870's Rouleau lived for a few years on Chadron Creek before moving to the reservation.<sup>2</sup>

Fort Tecumseh, built on the Missouri in 1822, was replaced by the new Fort Pierre for the Chouteaus in 1832 to serve as a depot, not only for the Sioux Indian trade but also for the beaver hunting brigades operating to the westward. Fort Pierre supplied smaller posts like those on the lower White River and the forks of the Cheyenne. Pack trains and cart brigades also operated up the White River from the fort. It eventually became the shipping and receiving point for the trade of the White River and the North Platte.

In 1841 the fur trade in the area east of the Rocky Mountains began to expand significantly. The last mountain rendezvous had been held the year before and the beaver trade had dwindled to nearly nothing. Buffalo robes were where the money was and they were to be found on the high plains. Development of steamboat transportation on the Missouri had begun in 1830 and made it more practical and profitable to ship the heavy buffalo robes out of the plains. Previously traders could not afford to carry them the great distances to the markets. The boats also

made it easier to bring the necessary trade goods into the region.

As the robe trade increased so did the trading posts—four such posts were built in the area where the Laramie River empties into the North Platte.

The paramount reason for any specific interest in the trading complex on the North Platte is that it was the heart that controlled the pulse of the Upper White River—Niobrara—Hat Creek trade. For years the posts there were wintering houses for one or another of the company forts on the Platte. All the men who came there to work and trade had ties down on the Platte River, social, economic, or both. Even after the big companies gave up the business, independents like James Bordeaux, John Richards, and Geminien Beauvais operated in the north from bases down on the Platte River and the Oregon Trail. When the trail was finally closed, scores of old traders gravitated back up to the White River and then followed the Indians to the Dakota reservations.

In short, to avoid a careful study of the North Platte River trade is to lose completely the thread of any factual history of the trade centered on the Upper White River. This is why local legends have made the early history of northwest Nebraska into a dim and shadowy mist of obscure and unknown “trappers” who must have wandered there looking for beaver and furtively selling the Indians beads and whiskey. As a result most of the local history has never progressed from the “who” to the “what.”

The first, and eventually the most famous, fort near the Laramie was popularly known as Fort Laramie for most of its existence. In 1834 William Sublette, while on his way to the rendezvous, left off his clerk, Mr. Patton, and fourteen men to build a log fort at the Laramie.<sup>3</sup> Christened “Fort William,” its name was changed to Fort Lucien when Fontenelle, Fitzpatrick & Company took it over in 1835.<sup>4</sup>

For the first few years this original Fort Laramie was headquarters for trapping brigades, and Fontenelle spent a great deal of time there. As the beaver trade rapidly declined, there was a rush to get into the Indian trade instead. In 1838 Lancaster Lupton was at the Laramie with a wagon, and a Chouteau trader was still using a little house on the Laramie called “Fort Sarpy” while another group occupied Fort William.<sup>5</sup> In December, 1838, Frederick Laboue wrote to Papin from the Platte that William Bent was there with some Cheyenne and several other

traders were, or had been, there. "If I were to tell you of all the riff-raff here there would not be enough paper."<sup>6</sup>

The big log fort had already been purchased by the Chouteau Company, who renamed it "Fort John" and eventually rebuilt it of adobe. A regular trade trail was developed to Fort Pierre, the company's steamboat port on the Missouri three hundred miles away. The road led from the Platte across Rawhide Creek and the Niobrara River to the headwaters of White River, thence down the White to the Badlands where it turned north to the Bad River. It then paralleled the Bad River to Fort Pierre.<sup>7</sup>

The second important post at the Laramie was Fort Platte, a large adobe fort about a mile north of Fort John on the North Platte River. Lancaster P. Lupton, a former lieutenant of Dragoons, was its first owner. It was in operation, at least on a temporary basis, in 1839.<sup>8</sup>

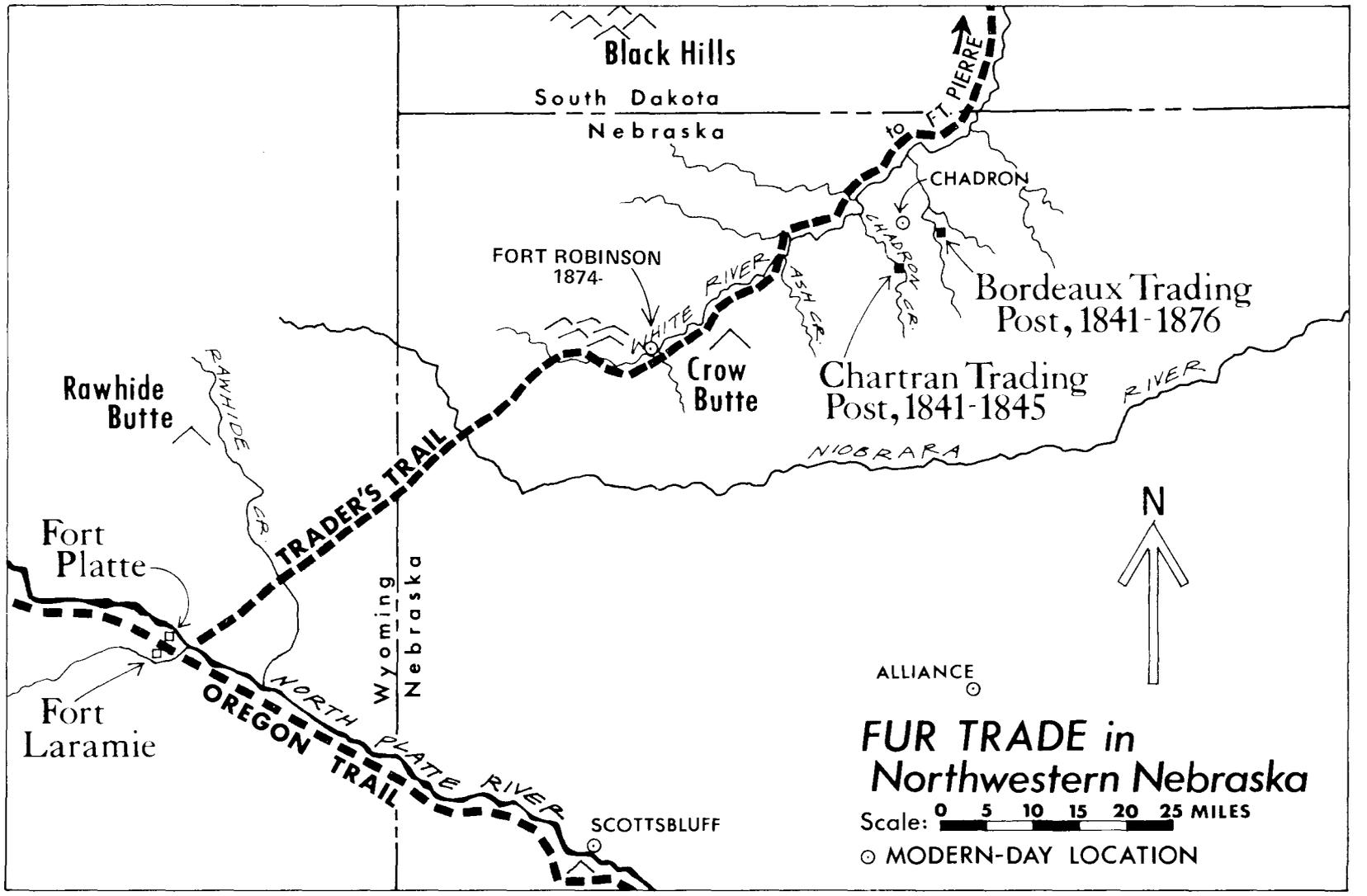
In 1842, Lupton, in financial difficulty, sold his interests on the North Platte to Sibille & Adams of Missouri and thereafter confined operations to his Fort Lancaster on the South Platte River.

When Sibille & Adams first began trading in the region they built a log fort near the others in 1841 and christened it Fort Adams.<sup>9</sup> This fort was apparently scrapped when the company purchased Fort Platte in the early spring of 1842. Evidently some additions or improvements were then made to Fort Platte because Adams reported on October 27, 1842, upon his return from St. Louis, that they "crossed the Larimay fork and entred fort plat all finished and a good prospet for the trad."<sup>10</sup>

In a year or two Sibille and Adams were themselves in financial trouble and the firm of Pratte & Cabanne took over the direction of Fort Platte, finally selling it to the Chouteaus in 1845.

The fourth post was that of Lock & Randolph, built in 1841 about two miles above Fort Adams.<sup>11</sup> Adams mentions in his journals that Mr. Lock was so poor that he had to borrow two axes in order to start cutting logs for his houses. Lock & Randolph were unable to compete on the North Platte so they too moved to the South Platte where they finally went out of business in 1842.<sup>12</sup>

Besides the regular companies, there were several free or independent traders in the vicinity, but their heyday would not come until most of the large companies withdrew from the area.<sup>13</sup>



Black Hills

South Dakota  
Nebraska

CHADRON

Bordeaux Trading Post, 1841-1876

Chartran Trading Post, 1841-1845

Crow Butte

FORT ROBINSON  
1874-

Rawhide Butte

Fort Platte

Fort Laramie

TRADER'S TRAIL

OREGON TRAIL

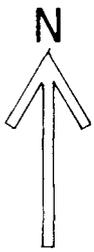
RAWHIDE RIVER

WHITE RIVER

CHADRON RIVER

NIOBARA RIVER

Wyoming  
Nebraska



ALLIANCE

### FUR TRADE in Northwestern Nebraska

Scale: 0 5 10 15 20 25 MILES

○ MODERN-DAY LOCATION

Much organization and deliberation went into the development of these larger companies. Competition was keen between them, especially in the liquor trade where government intervention could mean the loss of one's license.

Within the trade there were different occupations. The hunters kept the post and the outlying houses supplied with meat. The voyageurs carried goods and messages to the trading camps and houses, and they returned the buffalo robes to the main post. The clerks kept the accounts. Traders were sent out to specific areas and tribes—wherever the most robes and the best bargains were apt to be, or, at times, simply to provide opposition for another company.

Concentrated efforts to trade on the Upper White River began in 1841. Rufus B. Sage reported traveling to this area with a party employed by Lupton for the Brule trade. In late November they started to build houses on Chadron Creek, a few miles from the river. By the first of the year they had a substantial log trading house with a stone chimney and a log storehouse.

The trader, called "Yellow Hair" by the Indians, conducted a brisk trade for the period of time that they were there. In the last part of January the buffalo left the area and of necessity the Indians followed. As supplies were nearly gone the party was forced to return to Fort Platte.<sup>14</sup>

After Lupton's men had departed to build that post in November, 1841, Adams left Fort Adams for the Cheyenne River. On his journey there, near the Rawhide, they met two men, who had been with Lupton's company, returning from the White River—Mr. Ward and an Indian.<sup>15</sup> They arrived at Mr. Richard's house on the Cheyenne to find that the opposition representative, Chartran of the American Fur Company, was trading in the area at an Oglala village. Adams sent out a man named "Sigler" to oppose Chartran in that village.

The American Fur Company had several traders, Chartran included, in the White River region, since it was on their trade route between Fort Pierre and Fort Laramie. James Bordeaux operated houses for them on Bordeaux Creek to trade with the Brule.

It is interesting to note that with all the rivalries that existed there were certain cohesive factors, too. Many of the men who had worked together previously continued to do so. For example Adams, Hanson, and Hodgkiss of the Sibille & Adams Company had worked years before for Captain Bonneville. By 1842, Joseph

Bissonette, Henry Chatillion, and Louis Chartran, all former American Fur Company men, were also working for Sibille & Adams.

The fur trade moved out more and more to the Indians as the competition increased. Trading meant going to the Indian villages with the trade goods to bargain, and ceremonies were a big part of the bargaining. The traders "dressed" (gave fancy clothes to) influential Indians who had been selected to be "soldiers" or advisors and protectors for the traders. In return the Indians would often give a dance or a feast for the traders.<sup>16</sup>

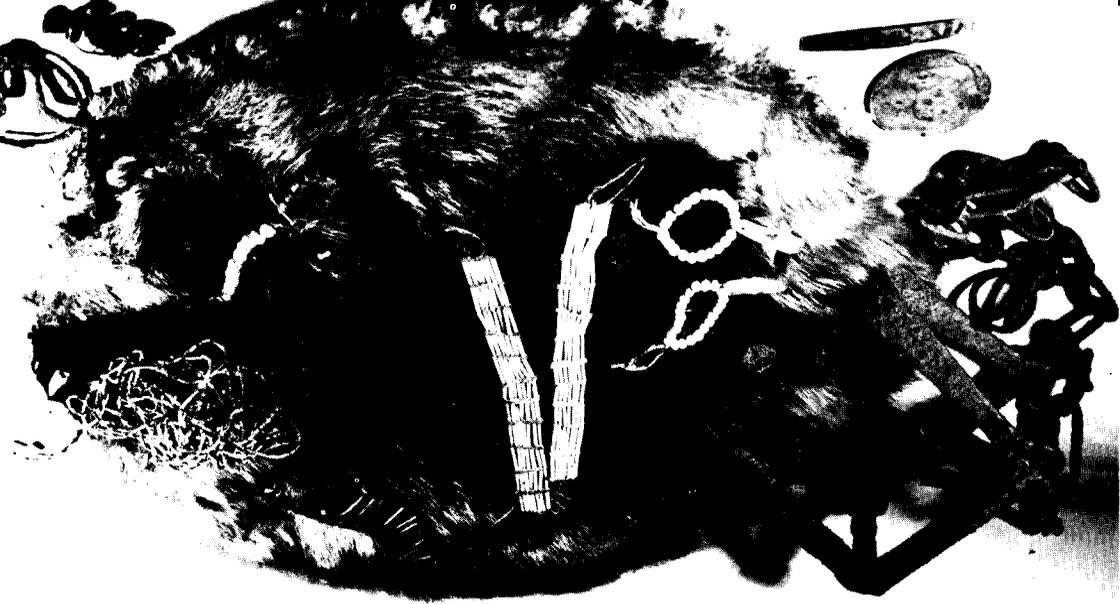
One of the most controversial trade items was "milk." Milk was whisky, usually well-diluted and in great demand by the Indians but strictly illegal. Government agents like Andrew Drips and Joseph Hamilton traveled about the country trying to stamp out the illicit trade, but they were frequently accused of looking the other way for the right people. Even at best it was difficult to get evidence sufficient for convictions.

The whiskey flowed more freely for a time because of the intense competition between the two companies. However it only represented a small portion of the merchandise imported to meet the Indians' demands. In the Adams papers there are lists of merchandise charged to Sibille, Adams, & Company on account. They include: blankets, cloth, knives, hats, American flags, medals, gun powder, musket flints, beads, ribbons, guns, needles, awls, bullets, jew's harps, etc. From Taos in the province of New Mexico the company also brought abalone shells, hand-made Spanish blankets, flour, and beans.

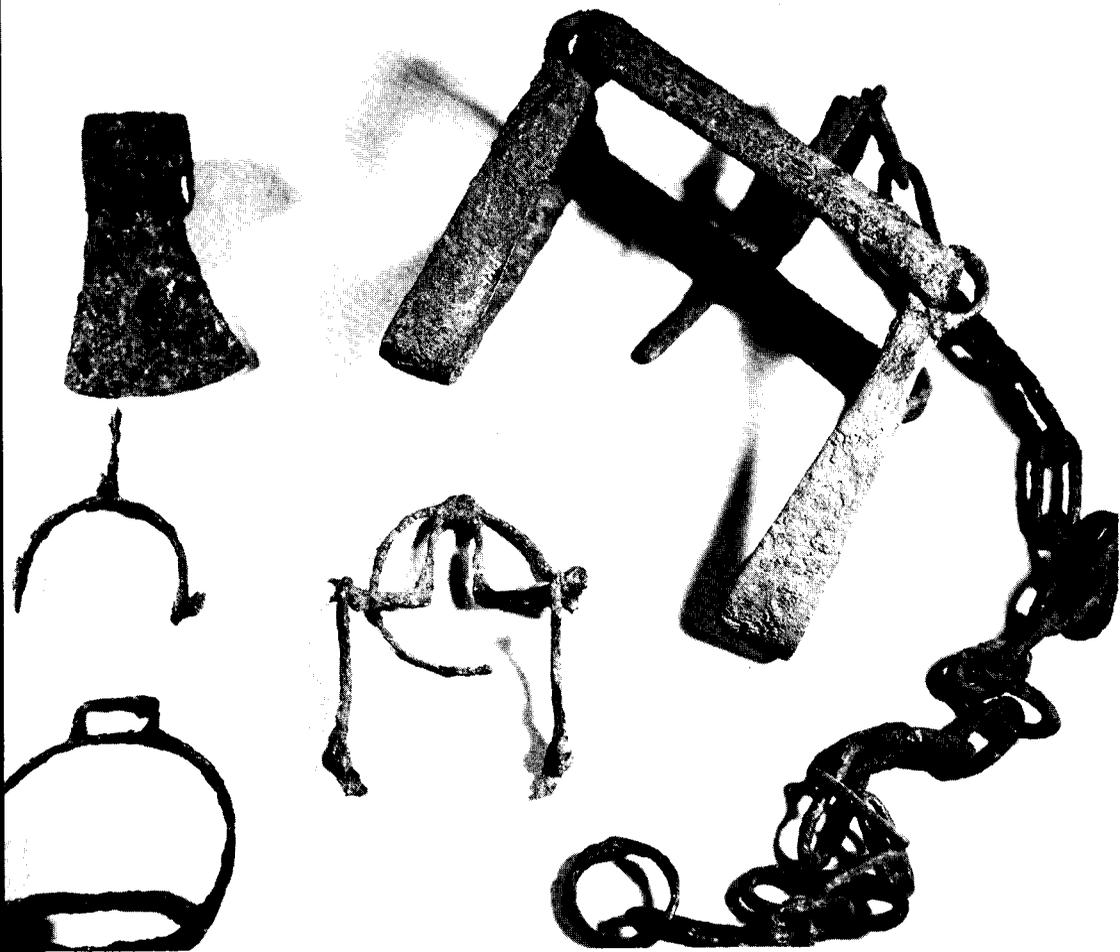
Spring was the time for shipping robes to St. Louis. In March, 1842, Adams and one other man accompanied P. D. Papin of the American Fur Company on such a trip. These journeys were long and strenuous, especially for the animals. It was during this trip that Adams' partners arranged to purchase Lupton's Fort Platte.

The robes were not always packed and carried overland to St. Louis. Rufus Sage described the building of a boat to carry the robes down river at the end of the season.

The timber used in its construction was procured from the neighboring pine hills, and prepared by a laborious process of hand, with the aid of a pit-saw. The ribs and other timber were obtained from an ash grove, a few miles above the Fort, and three men were busily engaged in putting all things in readiness for the expected spring rise—an event which seldom occurs before the 15th of May.<sup>17</sup>



*Above: Fur trade items with beaver pelt provided to Nebraska State Historical Society by Hudson's Bay Company, Canada. Below: Trap and stirrup from Clarks site (25PK1); axe handle and spur from Hill site (25WT1). These are Pawnee sites in Nebraska.*



Later Sage described the boat: "She measured fifty feet keel by thirteen beam, and, without her lading, drew but an inch and a half of water. Her intended burthen was between two and three tons."<sup>18</sup>

Sometimes the boats were made of skins instead of planks. Magloire Mousseau, an employee of the American Fur Company, recounted in later life the building of green hide boats for this purpose:

The manner of constructing these which were called "bull skin canoes" was to make frames and cover them with green buffalo hides with the hair on the inside, and to sew the several parts together, and then cover the seams with buffalo tallow. These "bull skin canoes" would hold 40 or 50 packs. These little cargoes were brought down the tributary rivers like the White, the Cheyenne, and the Cannonball to Fort Pierre where they were unloaded and stored.<sup>19</sup>

When David Adams returned from St. Louis in the fall of 1842 to the new fort, the men were coming in from the summer camps of the Indians—Auguste Lucien from the Brule on the Cheyenne and Sigler from the Oglala on Horse Creek. Sibille and Adams immediately worked out the schedule for sending their traders to the most strategic locations for the winter's trade: Sibille was to go to the Cheyenne River; John Richards to Bear Butte; Bissonette to Horse Creek and Chartran to White River. Adams and twelve men stayed at Fort Platte. Four "free men" or independent traders also headquartered at the fort. These men got goods from the company and worked on their own.

The company traders did not go to their posts alone. Bissonette had eight more men and two Indian women. Twelve employees, two Indian men, and three Indian women went with Richards. Seven men and an Indian woman went with Sibille.<sup>20</sup>

The two companies competed vigorously in the winter of 1843-1844. Pratte and Cabanne were now financing operations at Fort Platte, and their company had twenty traders out with forty voyageurs and about seventy horses and mules.<sup>21</sup> Personnel on their rosters included John Richard, Peter Richard, Henry Claymore, Antoine Janis, Edward Bertrand, and William Tucker.<sup>22</sup>

At Fort John (Laramie) James Bordeaux was trader and second in command under P. D. Papin. They also had a large and competent staff.

In addition to his obvious importance at Fort Laramie, Bordeaux rapidly became the pre-eminent trader on the Upper White River and spent his winters there at least as early as 1841.

The creek that was his favorite trading location for thirty years still bears his name.

One small mystery still unsolved is the part that was apparently played by Frederick Laboue in the White River trade. Maps made by James Bordeaux and Colin Campbell in 1857<sup>23</sup> and by James Bridger in the 1860's<sup>24</sup> give the name "Frederick's Fork" to the present Bordeaux Creek. Lt. Gouverneur Warren of the Topographical Engineers mapped the area in 1855-1857 and named the stream "F. Laboue River" on his map.<sup>25</sup>

Frederick Laboue had been with the American Fur Company a long time and he became a partner in the Upper Missouri Outfit in 1848.<sup>26</sup> In 1830 he was trading with the Sioux and Ponca on the head of the Niobrara.<sup>27</sup> In 1837 and 1838 he worked on the North Platte.<sup>28</sup> At least one letter still exists addressed to him at Fort John (Laramie) in 1845, and Francis Parkman met him in 1846 going down the Platte with eleven boat loads of robes from Fort Laramie.<sup>29</sup> It is therefore logical to assume that he may have participated in or supervised some of the operations on Bordeaux Creek. The post itself might also have been his idea in the first place or he may have built it before 1841.

The trade went on busily in the winter of 1844, but Pratte & Cabanne gave up the financially unequal contest with Pierre Chouteau Jr. & Company and closed Fort Platte in the spring of 1845. Some of the goods on hand were sold to Fort Laramie, the rest were taken over by Joseph Bissonette at his little post a few miles below the fort.<sup>30</sup>

Until 1849 Pierre Chouteau Jr. & Company were secure in their monopoly except for some small competition from Richards' Fort Bernard eight miles below Laramie. Richards and the other independents were using a large percentage of merchandise from New Mexico—hand-woven blue, white, and brown blankets, abalone shells, Taos whiskey, corn, flour, and dried pumpkins. The Sioux particularly liked some of this exotic merchandise and the freight was much cheaper than on St. Louis goods.

After Fort Platte closed, James Bordeaux evidently planned for a heavy trade at the post on Bordeaux Creek. Alexander Culbertson, company partner at Fort Pierre, wrote on June 25, 1845, to Joseph Picotte at Fort Laramie: "You send word that M. Bordeaux has chosen his employment for the winter on White

River; you should remit the list of equipment which he needs for his wintering."<sup>31</sup> Apparently, Fort Pierre could not supply enough goods, for A. R. Bouis wrote from there to Picotte at Fort Laramie on August 30, 1845: "I am really sorry that it did not lay in my power to make Mr. Bordeaux's outfit at this place, Mr. Montalant will explain."<sup>32</sup>

Trade on the White River was apparently just as heavy in the winter of 1846-1847. Nicholas Janis said in later years that he arrived at Fort Laramie from St. Charles, Missouri, on October 15, 1846. He was immediately sent to the White River with a party under Bordeaux's command and spent the winter "near the spot on which Fort Robinson now stands." He probably helped trade in some Oglala camp located there.<sup>33</sup>

The American Fur Company monopoly must have been rather complete on the White River until 1849, and James Bordeaux was so much identified with the trade of that area that it was referred to by company people as "Bordeaux's District." A letter from Fort Pierre to trader Rollette on the lower White River, January 8, 1848, advised him:

The wagon arrived from your post last evening and I learn from the men who came with it that the greater part of your Indians have left for the Sand Hills and Bordeaux's district. Now if this information is correct, there is no use for us to oppose our own people, and it is useless to follow them and I presume that you will call in your traders, and move everything into your houses, in which case you will inform me immediately and I shall be prepared to move you, robes, goods and all at one trip.<sup>34</sup>

Fort Laramie was finally sold to the Government for \$4,000.00 on June 26, 1849, and Bordeaux's employment by the American Fur Company soon ended, but he did not give up his "District." Financed sometimes by the company, and sometimes by other merchants, he kept up his wintering post for twenty-three years more.

Various other traders, like John Richards, frequently traded from camps on the White River, but James Bordeaux maintained a continuity of trading operations until the establishment of the first Indian agency on the White River in 1872.

His first wintering on his own account was a near-disaster. On October 15, 1849, a large war party of Crow under Chief White Bear looted his post, tried to burn it, and ran off eighty-two horses and mules. The Brule, camped on nearby Beaver Creek, organized a rescue party which followed the Crow all day and engaged them near what is now called Crow Butte. Part of the

war party took refuge on the butte but later escaped at night. At least one Crow was killed but only a very few of the horses were recovered.<sup>35</sup>

This attack discouraged some of the proposals by company officials that a big trading post for the Sioux be built on the White River to take the place of Fort Laramie. A letter to the St. Louis office from Fort Pierre summed it up this way:

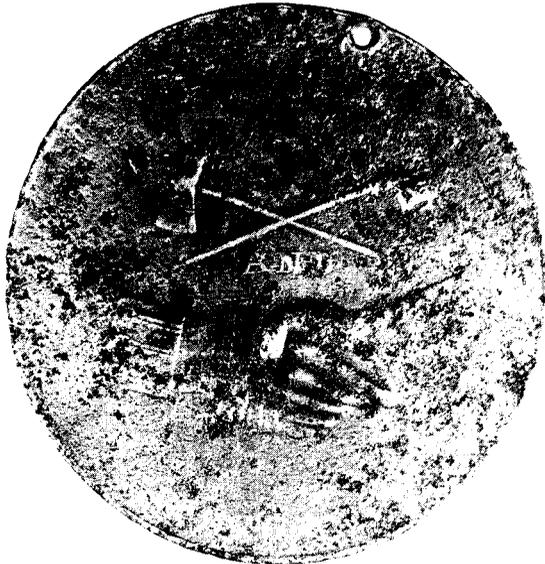
With regard to the future location of the Post, I find it will never do to put it on White River as proposed by Mr. C.—the frequent visits of Crow War Parties there has entirely withdrawn the Indians, and no inducements could be made them—the post must therefore remain where it is (near Scottsbluff), or at some more suitable point on the Platte River.<sup>36</sup>

This situation did not last long. The Sioux were wealthy in robes and horses, they bought more guns and ammunition and carried the war to the Powder River country with increasing energy.

Bordeaux had some sort of working arrangement with his old competitor Joseph Bissonette for a few years. In later life Bissonette said it started in 1849. They did establish themselves close together along the Oregon Trail a few miles below Fort Laramie. Henry Chatillion wrote Francis Parkman that Bissonette and Bordeaux had obtained \$6,000.00 in goods at St. Louis in 1851 and had asked him to go in with them to make up a company.<sup>37</sup>

Bissonette established himself at La Bonte Creek in 1854 and later moved up to Deer Creek (site of present Glenrock, Wyoming) in 1857. Bordeaux stayed at his new headquarters about eight miles below Fort Laramie and developed it into a large and busy establishment for freighting and the emigrant trade.<sup>38</sup>

The picture of the fur trade presented by the media of today is often distorted, and the emphasis is usually placed entirely upon the beaver and the Mountain Man. It might therefore be useful to digress here enough to quote part of a letter from Alexander Culbertson of the American Fur Company to Bridger & Vasquez at Fort Bridger, January 28, 1849: "We have been advised . . . that Beaver has become almost worthless, bringing only 75 cts. per lb. and that Wolf Skins are only worth 50 cts. for the largest, while the smaller ones can hardly be sold at all."<sup>39</sup> This will emphasize the fact that the fur trade of the White River in the 1840's and 1850's was a trade primarily in tanned buffalo robes and that it did not depend in any way upon the number of beaver



*Pierre Chouteau medal, one of many cheap pewter medals produced for the fur traders. This particular design has on the obverse the bust of President Martin Van Buren and the lettering "Pierre Chouteau & Co., Upper Missouri Outfit." The reverse depicts clasped hands and the motto, "Peace and Friendship."*

that might be present on the various streams. Beaver skins were not even worth the freight to market.

In January, 1852, Bordeaux and a temporary partner bought \$6,000.00 worth of goods from the Fort Laramie sutler and beat his competitors from Fort Pierre to the lion's share of the White River trade. In February Picotte at Fort Pierre wrote to Drips on the Platte:

From the reports Paul made of the Indians on Wht. River on his former trip I immediately dispatched Mr. Beauvais<sup>40</sup> with a large outfit, but when he had gone a little more than half way to them he met some Indians who stated that they had gone in the "Sand Hills" with Bordeau and Gerrieu, and he therefore returned—Paul now reports 3 small camps in the vicinity of "Bute Cache"<sup>41</sup> one of these camps I know are Indians from him and I have sent a trader to them, but the others I think are Platte Indians who would not follow Bordeau & G.<sup>42</sup>

The independent traders who had taken over in the White River country after Fort Laramie was sold still had to compete with parties from the company's Fort Pierre. However, that competition ended with the sale of Fort Pierre for Army use in 1855. The whole area was now a land of free enterprise.

The Grattan Massacre at Fort Laramie in 1854 and Harney's attack on the Indians at Ash Hollow in 1855 also affected the Niobrara—White River area by driving some Indians up there to get further away from the soldiers and emigrants along the Platte.

In November, 1857, Elbridge Gerry and James Bordeaux agreed to purchase a certain lot of goods from Ward & Guerrier at Fort Laramie "for the sole Indian trade on the South Fork of the Platte River and Arkansas River with the Arapahoe and Cheyenne Indians and White River and Sand Hill with a band of Sioux known as the Brule and Osage (Oglala) Indians."<sup>43</sup>

One interesting feature of the Sioux Indian trade in the 1850's and 1860's was the quantity of goods brought up from the Santa Fe country. Cloud Shield's Winter Count for his band of the Oglala Sioux gives this entry for the winter of 1858-59: "They bought Mexican blankets of John Richard, who bought many wagon loads of the Mexicans."<sup>44</sup>

Geminien Beauvais, who had a road ranch on the Platte, sent two wagon loads of goods to trade with the Brule in 1865, but they were captured by the Cheyenne and a teamster was killed. In his claim against the Indians for the loss, Beauvais included these exotic items:

7 extra fine red Navajoe blankets  
23 extra fine blue Navajoe blankets  
30 rolls Mexican pumpkins (dried)  
30 fancy Mexican bridle bits  
850 lbs. sweet Mexican corn meal<sup>45</sup>

The growing hostility between the whites and the non-treaty Indians made the Indian trade a very dangerous business, but the profits tempted a few to keep at it. With their family connections, James Bordeaux felt fairly safe trading with the White River Brule and John Richards and his son, John Richards, Jr., regularly traveled to Oglala camps. After the Civil War a few traders did a lively business in Spencer and Winchester repeating carbines, percussion revolvers, heavy muzzle-loading rifles, ammunition, surplus Army saddles and blankets, and other equipment useful to a people who were living on the plains on a war footing or at least on a "ready-alert." A slight deterrent to this traffic was provided by an order in 1866 to military commanders and Indian agents to stop the sale of breech-loading arms and ammunition to Indians in the affected areas.

More and more of the trade during the 1860's was done by making a quick trip with a wagon to a friendly village, hoping that one did not meet a hostile warrior first.

When the Indian agency at Fort Laramie was officially closed in 1868, the long trek back to South Dakota began. The Oglala, or Red Cloud Agency was moved twenty-four miles down the Platte. The Brule went all the way to Whetstone Agency on the Missouri River above Fort Randall. In May, 1868, the Indian Peace Commission appointed Sefroy Iott and Joseph Bissonette as interpreters for the moving operation and James Bordeaux was placed in charge of all rations and subsistence. It was a big job for so many people to go so far, but the old fur traders carried it off without problems.<sup>46</sup>

In 1872 Whetstone Agency was moved down to the Upper White River valley and Red Cloud Agency was also moved to a point further up the river where Fort Robinson was later built. Whetstone was moved first and there the old fur traders had their last chance to follow their lifetime professions. The first licensed traders there were James Bordeaux, John W. Smith, Joseph Bissonette, and John Richards, Jr.<sup>47</sup>

Most of the agency traders from this time on were licensed by



*Above: Distributing rations at Red Cloud Agency. From Harper's Weekly, November 13, 1875. . . . Below: Interior of the Colonel C. P. Jordan store, Rosebud, South Dakota.*



the agents and they were usually eastern merchants who had the right connections—political or otherwise. One of them immediately lodged a complaint about trading going on with the Indians by half-breeds and some of the old traders with Indian families. On December 28, 1872, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs advised Agent Risley at Whetstone that half-breeds or men living with the Indians at the time of the 1868 treaty were considered as Indians and needed no licenses.<sup>48</sup>

It was a hollow victory. For all practical purposes the fur trade with the Indians was dead. Rations were issued regularly at the agencies and there were periodic issues of annuity goods including blankets, knives, leather, tepee canvas, needles, axes, tools, even a few muzzle-loading guns and ammunition. Beads, ribbons, and similar luxuries were readily available at the agency traders' stores along with new and tempting goods like candy, crackers, raisins, and syrup.

The Indians soon had no robes to sell either. The last traders had to be content with antelope and deer skins, wolf skins, cattle hides, ponies or even ordinary silver dollars.

By 1874, the licensed agency traders were all merchants of the new breed—B. F. Walters and J. W. Dear at Red Cloud Agency; J. H. Pratt, F. D. Yates, and George Jewett at Spotted Tail.

James Bordeaux and his oldest son Louis gave up the Bordeaux Creek trading post in the fall of 1872.<sup>49</sup> The year before, Joseph Bissonette had built a spacious three-room cabin and trade store along the creek a half-mile below him. Bissonette was hired as sub-agent for Spotted Tail's Indians and he carried on a small trade in the village "on the side." Francis C. Boucher, a younger French Creole from Missouri, moved into Bordeaux's old post and for four years carried on the fast and dangerous game of selling guns and ammunition to the hostile bands of Sioux when they came down each winter to draw rations and harry the agencies.

Though he really came out of it rather well, Boucher was finally put out of business in August, 1876, when the commanding officer at Fort Robinson was ordered to confiscate Winchester ammunition he had just brought in illegally from Cheyenne.<sup>50</sup> He moved over to Chadron Creek for a brief time and then moved to the South Dakota reservation. When he left the Bordeaux Post, just a hundred years after the Declaration of Independence, the last old-time fur trader's post in western

Nebraska closed forever. It marked the beginning of a very difficult time for the Indians and the fur traders alike.

The fur traders, who had committed their fortunes with those of the Indians, had married Indian women and fathered their families, found they suddenly had no fortunes, no professions, and often, no social or political standing in the new white communities.

Some left the area and went back east with their families to frontier settlements. Not all were content to leave the old life behind and so returned to find other work in the west. One man who did go east was James McClosky. He and a large following of traders including Changreau, Larebee, and Louis Tremble, and their families, settled for a time near Big Springs, Kansas, in November, 1855.<sup>51</sup>

A few of the old traders' families settled temporarily around Rulo, Nebraska. Susan Bordeaux said one of her cousins lived there, and the Indian wife of former Indian agent Thomas Twiss moved back to the reservation from Rulo in the 1870's.

Some of the traders worked for a few years at the two agencies, where they could utilize their knowledge of the country and of the Indians' customs and language. In the 1870's the Richards and Janis families worked around Red Cloud Agency. At Whetstone (later Spotted Tail) Agency the employment rolls included four old Sibille and Adams men: Henry Clairmont, Sefroy Iott, Joseph Bissonette, and Antoine Du Bray. James Bordeaux drew rations there and his son Louis was an interpreter.

The Indians, on the other hand, no longer had the opportunity to deal with white associates on the basis of common interests and racial equality in every sense of the word, taking advantage of the white man's technology where it was practical to do so and not being unduly concerned with his political, economic, religious, and educational institutions.

Even so, the acculturation brought about by long association with traders and their merchandise was deep and lasting. It brought about a long process of changes in the Indians' living habits, social life, and inter-tribal relations, which was unfortunately interrupted by sudden new and alien influences.

Another result was the assimilation of the traders themselves into the reservation communities. Most of all, it demonstrated the facility with which Indians could adopt new things and new

ideas to strengthen and brighten their way of life, and the possibilities for close relationships between two supposedly alien peoples. Any meaningful consideration of Indian-white relations today could better begin at that point of interruption a hundred years ago than to try the impossible task of going back four hundred years when there actually were two alien races.

## NOTES

1. See James Austin Hanson, *Metal Weapons, Tools and Ornaments of the Teton Dakota Indians* (Lincoln, 1975), 3-7.

2. Charles E. Hanson, Jr., "Hubert Rouleau," *The Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West*, IX. (Glendale, California, 1972), 347-349.

3. Morgan and Harris, editors, *The Rocky Mountain Journals of William Marshall Anderson* (San Marino, California, 1967), 34-35.

4. Leroy R. Hafen, editor, *The Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West* (Glendale, California, 1965), I, 152.

5. Letter from Louis Howard, Fort Sarpy, to Picotte at Fort Pierre, September 27, 1838, Chouteau-Papin Collection, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.

6. Letter from Frederick LaBoue, Platte River, to P. D. Papin, December 15, 1838, Chouteau-Papin Collection, M.H.S.

7. Charles E. Hanson, Jr., "The Fort Pierre-Fort Laramie Trail," *Museum of the Fur Trade Quarterly* (Chadron, Nebraska), I, No. 2, 3-7.

8. David Adams wrote his wife on April 9, 1839, from "Fort Plat at the mouth of Larima Rocky Mountains" in which he said, "I was appointed in charrg of Fort Plat." David Adams Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.

9. David Adams Journals, November, 1841, David Adams Papers, M.H.S.

10. *Ibid.*, October 27, 1842.

11. *Ibid.*, November, 1841.

12. LeRoy R. Hafen and Francis Marion Young, *Fort Laramie and the Pageant of the West, 1834-1890* (Glendale, California, 1938), 68.

13. David Adams mentions meeting Mr. Montgomery, a former Sioux trader, who "now has to rove the prairie life a lost wolf." David Adams Journals, March 18, 1842.

14. See Rufus B. Sage, *Rocky Mountain Life* (New York, 1887), 104-144.

15. David Adams Journals, December 1, 1841. Adams wrote that "Mr. Ward is a trador belonging to Mr. Luptons fort." It is assumed that this was Seth Ward of later Fort Laramie fame.

16. In dressing an Indian the main article of clothing given was usually a red or blue military-style coat heavily ornamented with metal lace. Gloves or plumed hats might also be given.

17. Rugus B. Sage, 144.

18. *Ibid.*, 180.

19. Ricker Tablets, 28, p. 8. Nebraska State Historical Society Library, Lincoln. A pack was ordinarily a bale containing ten buffalo robes.

20. David Adams Journals, November, 1842.

21. Letter from Hamilton to Drips, October 17, 1843. Drips Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.

22. Letter from Pratte and Cabanne to Drips, November 5, 1843. Drips Papers, M.H.S.

23. Now in Gouverneur K. Warren Papers, New York State Library, Albany.
24. In the Western History Research Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie.
25. Record Group 77, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
26. Anne Heloise Abel. *Chardon's Journal at Fort Clark, 1834-1839* (Pierre, South Dakota, 1932), 263.
27. *South Dakota Historical Collections Vol. IX* (Pierre, South Dakota, 1918), 100-101. Laboue was a bold and determined man. While trading on the Cherry River in South Dakota in 1832 he killed an employee, was sent to St. Louis for trial, and was acquitted.
28. Chouteau-Papin Collection, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.
29. Francis Parkman, *The Oregon Trail* (Boston, 1899), 86-87.
30. Letter from Fort Pierre to H. Picotte. St. Louis, August 31, 1845. Fort Pierre Letter Books, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.
31. Fort Pierre Letter Books, M.H.S.
32. *Ibid.*
33. Interview in *Chadron Democrat*, October 1, 1885, 1.
34. Fort Pierre Letter Books, M.H.S.
35. See *Museum of the Fur Trade Quarterly*, V, No. 3, 2-4.
36. Fort Pierre Letter Books, M.H.S., July 20, 1850.
37. Chatillion Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.
38. John Dishon McDermott, "Joseph Bissonette," *The Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West*, IV, 56-57.
39. Fort Pierre Letter Books, M.H.S.
40. Geminien Beauvais was a former trader for Sibille and Adams.
41. Butte Cache was a favorite camping and trading spot some twenty miles below the mouth of Bordeaux Creek.
42. Chouteau-Papin Collection, M.H.S.
43. From the Hunton Collection. Information supplied through the courtesy of Wyoming State Archives and Historical Department, Cheyenne.
44. This winter count was collected by an Army surgeon at Camp Sheridan. *Fourth Annual Report, Bureau of American Ethnology* (Washington, D.C., 1886), 143.
45. Records of U.S. Court of Claims, Claim 7104, G. P. Beauvais. National Archives, Washington, D.C.
46. Letters received by the Commissioner of Indian Affairs. Upper Platte Agency, 1868. National Archives, Washington, D.C.
47. Letters received by the Commissioner of Indian Affairs. Whetstone Agency, 1871-1872, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
48. Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Miscellaneous Records, No. 109 Finance & Misc., National Archives, Washington, D.C.
49. Charles E. Hanson, Jr., "Reconstruction of the Bordeaux Trading Post," *Nebraska History* (Summer, 1972), 139.
50. Charles E. Hanson, Jr., "The Post-War Indian Gun Trade," *Museum of the Fur Trade Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Fall, 1968), 1-11.
51. Letter from B. William Henry, Jr., Supervisory Historian, National Park Service, Fort Laramie, Wyoming, to Hobart Bissonette, March 26, 1974.