



*Nebraska History* posts materials online for your personal use. Please remember that the contents of *Nebraska History* are copyrighted by the Nebraska State Historical Society (except for materials credited to other institutions). The NSHS retains its copyrights even to materials it posts on the web.

For permission to re-use materials or for photo ordering information, please see:

<http://www.nebraskahistory.org/magazine/permission.htm>

Nebraska State Historical Society members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* and four issues of *Nebraska History News* annually. For membership information, see:

<http://nebraskahistory.org/admin/members/index.htm>

## Article Title: Reconstruction of the Bordeaux Trading Post

Full Citation: Charles E Hanson Jr, "Reconstruction of the Bordeaux Trading Post," *Nebraska History* 53 (1972): 137-165

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1972Bordeaux.pdf>

Date: 4/13/2015

Article Summary: James Bordeaux had established a small post on Bordeaux Creek to control the White River trade in buffalo robes. After the excavation and documentation of the site in the 1950s, his storehouse and trading house were reconstructed.

### Cataloging Information:

Names: James Bordeaux; Francis Boucher (Bushey); Joseph, Herbert and John Bissonette; Swift Bear; Spotted Tail, E P Wilson

Louisiana Purchase Place Names: Fort Laramie, Fort Pierre, White River, Bordeaux Creek, Chadron

Keywords: James Bordeaux, Joseph Bissonette, Brule Sioux, Crow, Museum of the Fur Trade

Photographs / Images: reconstructed Bordeaux Trading Post as it appeared in 1969; map showing the Bordeaux Post, the old store, and the Bissonette cabin site; Fig 1: Bordeaux Trading Post site topography; log remains in the south wall line revealed in the 1955-56 excavation of the trading house; Fig 2: Bordeaux Trading Post sections; Fig 3: plan of excavated trading house; various flints and brass objects found at the site; homemade hooks for hanging merchandise and cut nails; Fig 4: plan of excavated storehouse; Fig 5: Bordeaux trading house reconstruction; reconstructed Bordeaux storehouse



*The Bordenax Trading Post was established in the winter of 1845-1846. This photograph shows the reconstructed post as it appeared in 1969.*

# RECONSTRUCTION OF THE BORDEAUX TRADING POST

By CHARLES E. HANSON, JR.

## HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The long-time service of James Bordeaux at Fort Laramie (called Fort John by Pierre Chouteau Jr. & Co.) has been amply documented by others.<sup>1</sup> In the 1840's it was one of the important posts for the trade in buffalo robes which had supplanted beaver skins as the desirable commodities in the western trade. While the actual trade over the counter at Laramie was significant, the volume of business depended upon an energetic policy of bringing in robes from the outlying areas tributary to both Fort Laramie and Fort Pierre.

The most important of these tributary areas was the upper valley of the White River in what is now northwestern Nebraska. Rufus Sage wrote in some detail of a branch post established there by Lupton's company in 1842 and he mentions American Fur Company traders thirty miles below them.<sup>2</sup> Much of this tributary trade was being accomplished by very small operations in countless Indian camps.

Fort Laramie was supplied from Fort Pierre and the two forts were connected by an important traders' trail which operated until 1850.<sup>3</sup> Since this trail ran through the upper White River valley it was constantly used to supply branch posts and to pick up robes traded at various points along the way. As time went on, the trade in this area continued to increase in volume and importance.

James Bordeaux was an experienced and knowledgeable Sioux trader. Various *bourgeois* came and went at Laramie but most visitors, including John C. Fremont and Francis Parkman, found James Bordeaux in charge. He recognized the need for a better control of the White River trade, particularly in the winter time, to increase volume, save manpower, and reduce competition. It is therefore not surprising to find in the Fort Pierre Letterbooks a letter from Alexander Culbertson to Joseph Picotte dated June 25, 1845, that said in part: "You sent word that M. Bordeau[x] has chosen his employment for the winter on the White River; you should remit the list of equipment which he needs for his wintering."

The trading expedition that winter established a small post on Bordeaux Creek a few miles above its confluence with the White River.<sup>4</sup>

There is ample evidence that this was no temporary endeavor. In 1848 officials at Fort Pierre were referring to "Bordeau[x]'s district" on the upper White River. A letter from Fort Pierre to Rollette on the lower White River January 8, 1848, advised him:

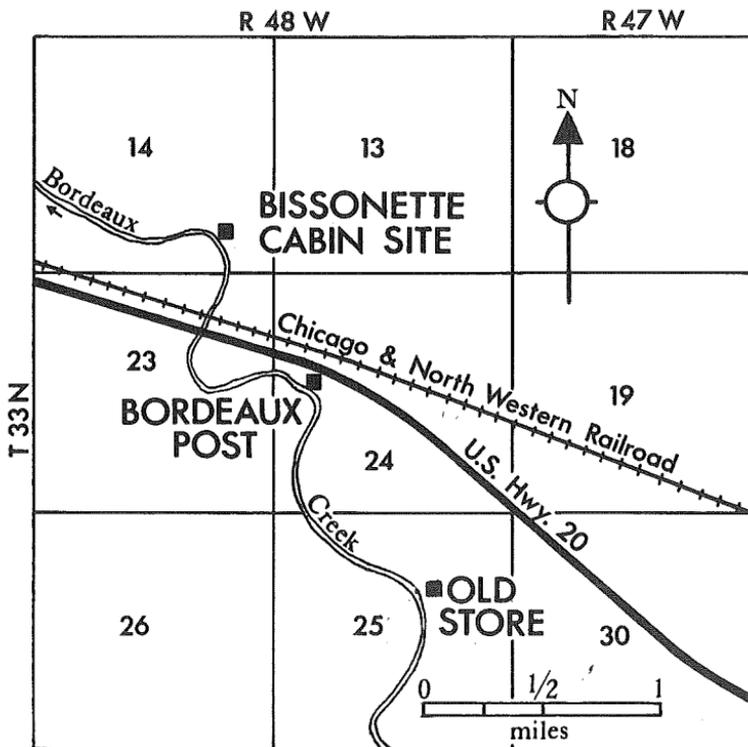
The waggon arrived from your post last evening and I learn from the men who came with it that the greater part of your Indians have left for the Sand Hills and Bordeau[x]'s district. Now if this information is correct, there is no use for us to oppose our own people, and it is useless to follow them 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 & all at one trip.<sup>5</sup>

In 1849 after the sale of Fort Laramie, Bordeaux's post on Bordeaux Creek in the White River valley was looted by the Crow and robbed of eighty-two horses and mules.

This Crow attack was historically important because it helped to convince Pierre Chouteau Jr. & Company that Fort Laramie should not be relocated on the White River. A letter to St. Louis from Fort Pierre July 20, 1850, summarized the situation:

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, or at some more suitable point on the Platte River.<sup>7</sup>

The robe trade in the Black Hills area assumed a new aspect



*The Bordeaux Post is located about three miles east of Chadron, Nebraska.*

after the sale of Fort Laramie in 1849 and of Fort Pierre in 1855. The Fort Pierre – Fort Laramie trail was abandoned in favor of the Oregon Trail route,<sup>8</sup> and the robe trade passed into the hands of independent operators like Bordeaux, John Richard, Joseph Bissonette, and Geminien Beauvais. Of these men, Bordeaux was the most prominent and his posts on the North Platte below Fort Laramie and on Bordeaux Creek near the White River were the centers of his continued activity with the Indians.

His wife was a Brule Sioux and his brother-in-law was Swift Bear, an influential chief and adherent of Spotted Tail. Bordeaux Creek was a favorite camping ground of the Brules, and Spotted Tail requested an agency on Bordeaux Creek in 1874.<sup>9</sup>

The Bordeaux and Bissonette families agree that James Bordeaux finally retired from the Bordeaux Creek post late in 1872.<sup>10</sup> It was immediately occupied by Francis Boucher, who achieved some notoriety as a purveyor of repeating arms and

ammunition to the Sioux. At this time the old Whetstone Agency had been relocated to a point on the White River ten miles north of the Bordeaux Creek post. On December 18, 1873, the commissioner of Indian Affairs wrote Agent E. A. Howard at Whetstone about statements of the northern Sioux warriors that they procured arms and ammunition at the Brule Agency and found sale for mules there at high prices.

The agent denied these charges.<sup>11</sup> However, there was some truth in them because troops from Fort Robinson confiscated a large quantity of Winchester ammunition from Boucher in August, 1876.<sup>12</sup> Shortly afterward Boucher moved west to Chadron Creek,<sup>13</sup> and the history of the Bordeaux post came to a close.

It had been operated longer than any other trading post in the area, spanning the period from the heyday of the buffalo robe trade to the last contraband trade with the hostiles. It had long been a perfect example of the small "wintering house" in the robe trade. Its colorful history was intimately connected with James Bordeaux, Joseph Bissonette, Swift Bear, Spotted Tail, the Crow raiders, and the Brule Sioux generally.

There are various memorials to James Bordeaux in local place names. His name was given to a small community north of Wheatland, Wyoming, and to a former Chicago & North Western station ten miles east of Chadron, Nebraska. The creek where his little trading post was established is still called Bordeaux Creek and his name was also given to one of the principal streets in the city of Chadron.

His close association with Fort Laramie led Emerson Hough to include Bordeaux as one of the characters in his famous novel, *The Covered Wagon*. Hough depicts Bordeaux as the man in charge of Fort Laramie, a personal friend of Kit Carson and Jim Bridger, and the fountainhead of information about the local Indian tribes.<sup>14</sup>

#### IDENTIFICATION OF THE SITE

It is evident from Culbertson's letter to Picotte at Fort Laramie June 25, 1845, that James Bordeaux planned to spend that winter on the White River.<sup>15</sup> Bordeaux's grandson Alex-

ander was positive in later life that James Bordeaux built a trading post on Bordeaux Creek (a tributary of the White River) between Hay Springs and Chadron (Nebraska) in 1846.<sup>16</sup> Louis Bordeaux, son of James Bordeaux, born in 1850, told Judge Eli Ricker in 1907 his father had a trading post on Big Bordeaux Creek four or five miles southeast of Chadron.<sup>17</sup> James Bordeaux's daughter Susan wrote in 1942:

In 1849 the Brule bands of the Sioux were camping at Chadron on Bordeaux Creek. During the fall of that year, my father, James Bordeaux who was a fur trader and had a log trading house there, went down to the main trading post at Laramie.<sup>18</sup>

William Bordeaux, grandson of James Bordeaux, probably did more careful research on his ancestors and their contemporaries than anyone else in the family. Following are pertinent quotations from his letters to Professor E. P. Wilson at Chadron State College:

Nov. 24, 1939 – As to Grand Fathers trading post it was later occupied by Bousheau a French squaw man. . . . The post was known then (1876) as Busheys Ranch located somewhere S. & E. of your present town.

Oct. 1, 1940 – We have made our proposed trip to the Rosebud. . . . We met my Aunt Mrs. I. P. Bettelyoun (Susan Bordeaux) . . . . As to Grandfather's trading post she generally agreed with me that he conducted only one trading post. Of course he did occupy several spots temporarily for trade and barter but as to a permanent one he conducted the post mentioned several times in your letter.<sup>19</sup>

Professor Wilson was familiar with the site of the post from his long-time work with old Indians and early settlers in the area. On September 3, 1951, he wrote to Charles Hanson, Jr.: "As you know, in this vicinity about three miles east of Chadron on highway 20 there is an old Bordeaux trading post."<sup>20</sup>

The site of Joseph Bissonette's last post one-half mile below the Bordeaux site is unquestioned. It was established in the late 1860's or very soon after 1870. Herbert Bissonette, who was born there, and John Bissonette, who lived there, were both alive in 1953. P. B. Nelson, later a Chadron businessman, had repaired the building and lived in it for some two years in the late seventies. Bearing this in mind, the testimony concerning Claim 1296 by Francis Boucher (Bushey) is significant. On December 20, 1873, Joseph Bissonette declared that he was living "near Francis C. Boucher and Indians stole horses from the prairie at night."<sup>21</sup> This certainly ties in with William Bordeaux's identification of the site in question as "Bushey's

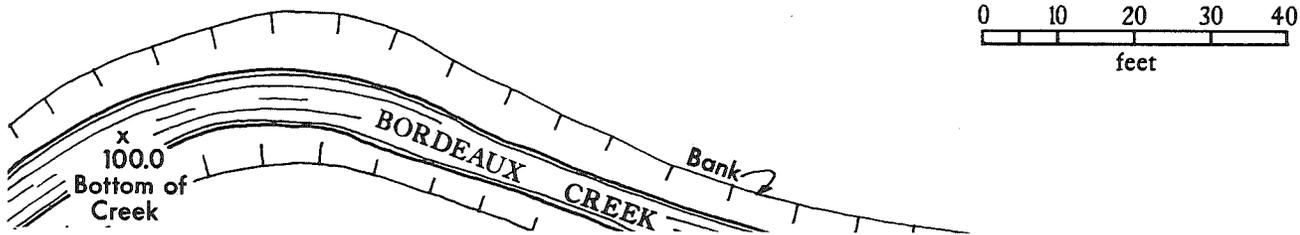
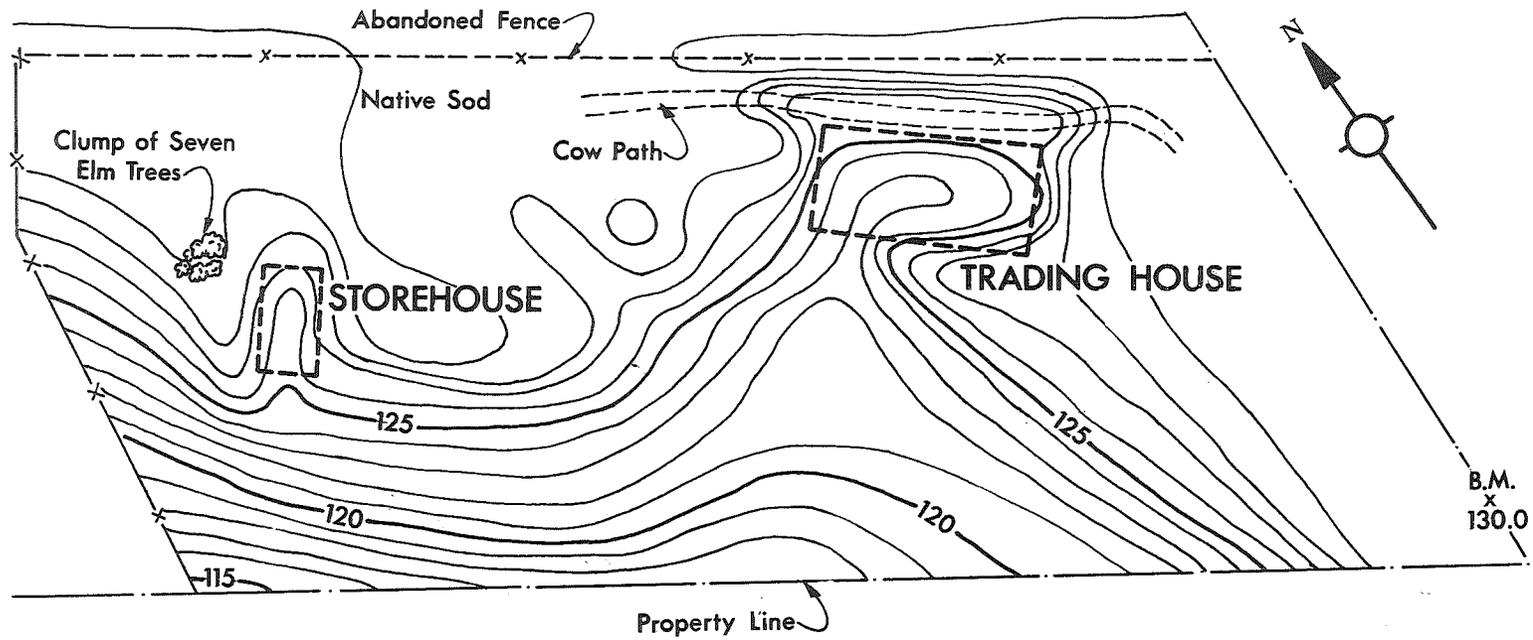


Figure 1: Bordeaux Trading Post site topography

Ranch." On this occasion in 1872 the horse thieves were hostile Sioux.

Bordeaux Creek was so named years before any permanent settlement took place in the upper White River valley. Hobart Bissonette maintains that it was so named by the Indians long before his grandfather came to the area. The earliest map known at this time showing Bordeaux Creek is the sketch accompanying the report of the Black Hills reconnaissance in 1874.

In 1923 one Hudson Mead, county surveyor and son of a trader named I. G. Mead, made what appears to be an accurate map showing all the historic sites identified by his father and by older members of the Sioux nation. On this map the "Louis Bordeaux trading post" is shown on the north side of a bend in Big Bordeaux Creek in the Northwest  $\frac{1}{4}$  of Section 24, Township 33, Range 48.<sup>22</sup> Mr. Mead pointed out the site to the Museum Association Site Committee while sitting in a car on the highway in 1949.

Final identification of the ground was made by Herbert Bissonette in 1952, accompanied by Professor Wilson and Welcome W. Naylor of Chadron.<sup>23</sup> The latter two men were part of a committee interested in helping establish the Museum of the Fur Trade in Chadron.

Herbert Bissonette, son of Joseph Bissonette, was born at his father's trading post one-half mile below the Bordeaux site about 1871.<sup>24</sup> He was his father's closest confidant and he and his family were highly respected in Chadron. He spent much of his adult life around Chadron where he could watch the changes taking place in the local surroundings as the country was settled. Great difficulty has been experienced by some old Indians in identifying sites in areas where development has altered the original surroundings appreciably. For this reason he is believed to have been the most reliable informant on historic sites among the mixed bloods and full bloods who have identified sites in this area for various authorities. Herbert's daughter, Mrs. Bertha Horse, Chadron music teacher, told the writer that her father often took long walks along Bordeaux Creek until he was almost eighty years old.

Two nearby building sites were carefully investigated. One, a rotting log building up the creek one-half mile, was locally

known as the "old store." It was identified by Ernest Nelson, son of early rancher P. B. Nelson, as a small saloon of early ranching days. He said it was mentioned frequently by his father, who also had a saloon on the Bissonette site from 1878. The owners, Mr. and Mrs. Major Hale, have a number of coins dated in the 1885-1905 period which were found around the building. A dugout about 300 feet below the Bordeaux site was positively identified by Welcome Naylor as an early ranch owned first by the Powers' outfit and later by the first treasurer of Dawes County. Naylor helped demolish the building about 1915.<sup>25</sup>

A brief description of the trading post as it appeared in 1871 was obtained from John Bissonette, son of Joseph Bissonette and older brother of Herbert Bissonette, with the assistance of his nephew Hobart Bissonette. John lived several years at his father's post on Bordeaux Creek and said that he had visited James Bordeaux and his son many times, riding up to the Bordeaux Post on his pony. He is believed to have been the only person living in 1954 who had spent time at the post while it was being operated by James Bordeaux.

## ARCHEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS

### *General*

The site of the Bordeaux trading post, as determined by previous historical investigations, consisted of two adjacent depressions in a virgin pasture lying south of a cornfield about three and one-half miles east of Chadron, Nebraska. They were located on the north bank of Big Bordeaux Creek in a broad fertile valley bounded by the Pine Ridge and the White River.

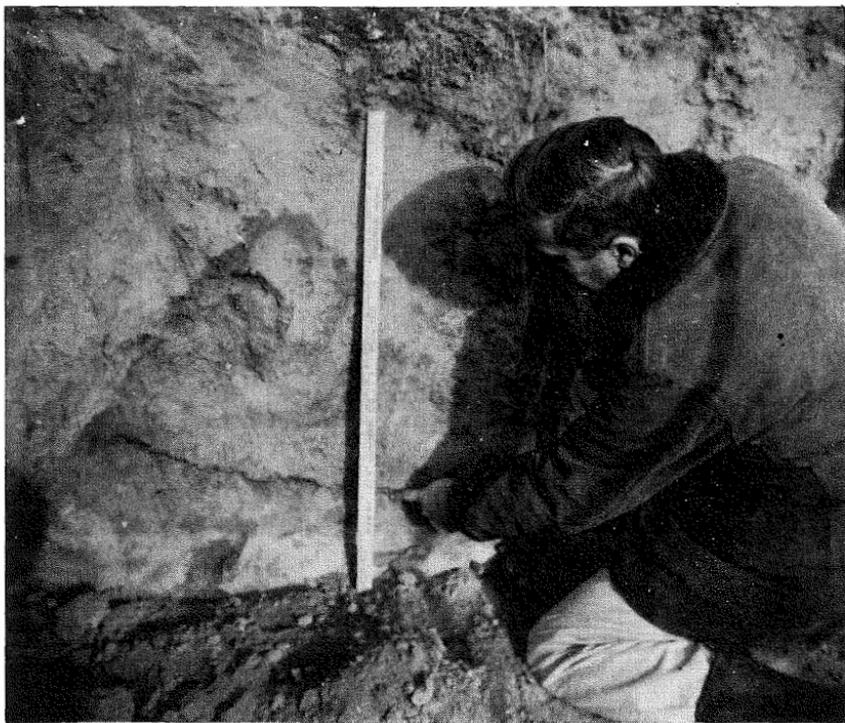
The immediate problem was the careful excavation of both building sites, first to verify their identification and second, to obtain the information necessary for anticipated reconstruction of the buildings as outdoor historical exhibits. The archeological investigations were initiated in April, 1955, were interrupted by other activities during the summer, resumed in September, 1955, and finally completed in May, 1956.

Archeological investigation of the storehouse site was accomplished during the period September through December,

1957. The work was under the general direction of the writer and was accomplished entirely by hand methods. The crew was composed primarily of volunteer high school and college students. The work leaders included Jerry Arnholt, William R. Hanson, and Cyrus Hall, Jr., Roger T. Grange, then archeologist and curator for the Nebraska State Historical Society at nearby Fort Robinson, generously provided technical advice through periodic visits to the work.

### *The Trading House*

*Excavation of the Building.* The site of the trading house itself was an oval depression immediately inside the pasture. Along the north side a fence about ten feet from the cabin wall separated the pasture from a cultivated field. Along the south side of this fence was a deeply-worn cowpath paralleling the



*The 1955-1956 excavation of the trading house revealed log remains in the south wall line.*

fence. Along the line of the woven wire fence, wind-deposited fine soil had accumulated, particularly during the dust bowl years, to a height 12 to 24 inches above the adjacent cropland.

Shallow trenches were dug along the two axes of the depression, and remains of the four log walls were immediately uncovered. It was then a simple matter to locate the corners of these walls and establish coordinates from the adjacent property line.

An elevation datum had already been established at the museum grounds based on an assumed elevation of 100.0 in the flow line of Bordeaux Creek. All surveys of the trading post were referred to this datum using a bench mark at elevation 130.0 near the southeast corner of the property.

Excavation then proceeded, by hand methods only, in level increments six inches deep. Since this was really a small excavation the interior area was divided into quarters for screening purposes. Significant artifacts found were identified by coordinates north and west of the southeast corner and by their elevation. All interior excavated material was screened on a ¼-inch screen in 6-inch levels, except the last 6 inches and the floor itself, which were screened in 3-inch levels on a fine screen, since the floor surface was found to contain over 100 seed beads.

Logs in the walls could easily be identified all the way to the floor line. They had been completely reduced to organic granular material except for numerous knots and long slivers. They were very obviously laid horizontally. A study of the knots showed the logs to be entirely pine. Remains of logs at the northwest corner showed some charring for which no ready explanation could be discovered. All excavations were carried out 18 inches beyond the centerline of the log wall.

Eleven large posts around the edge and two along the interior centerline were uncovered. Two of the posts appeared to be elm or ash; the rest were determined to be pine. These posts varied in diameter at the floor level from 7 inches to 11 inches. The holes were cleaned out and had an average depth of 23½ inches. The perimeter posts were immediately inside the log wall line in every instance.

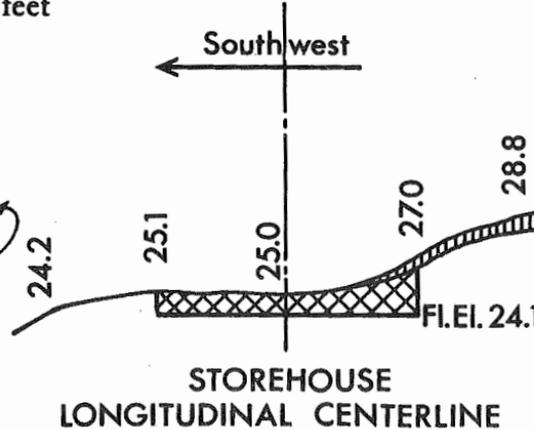
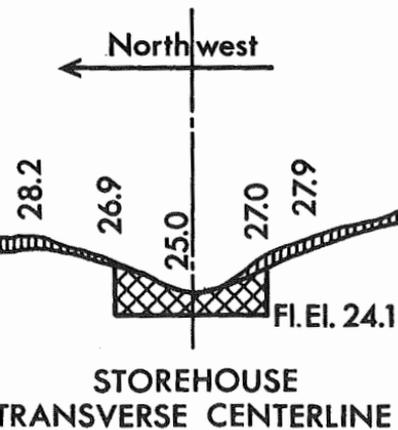
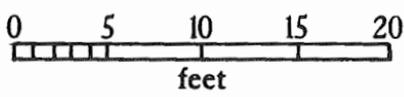
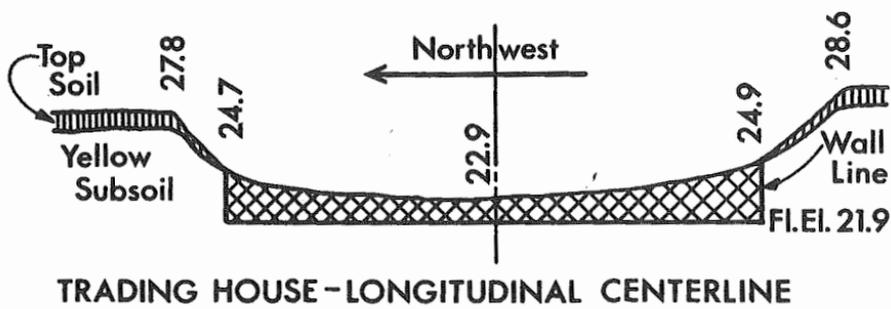
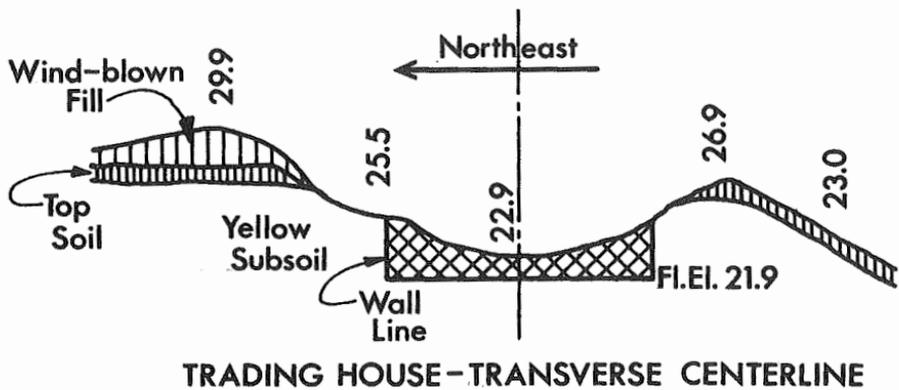


Figure 2: Bordeaux Trading Post sections

The earth outside the remains of the log walls was uniformly a sterile, yellow, sandy clay. The earth inside the walls was a moist, dark organic material. The floor level was easily identified by its extreme compaction and the uniformly mottled appearance of mixed fill. The foundation logs were carefully brushed out at the floor level. A doorway in the south wall was indicated by two small post holes 31 inches apart, the most westerly hole being 36 inches from the corner of the wall. There was no indication of a foundation log between these two post holes.

The other gap in the foundation logs, located in the north half of the east wall, was obviously the remains of the fireplace. A deep deposit of ashes and charcoal was outlined on three sides by loose stones and on the side along the cabin interior by six flat hearth stones. One of the lower base stones was first encountered in the wall line and the adjacent two feet of sterile outside earth at elevation 24.5. These stones were all blackened to some extent and were of local "butte rock" from the nearby Pine Ridge (probably Arikaree Group, Miocene).

The location of a counter or partition wall through the center was indicated by a mass of sawed-plank fragments, completely rotted but identified as pine, extending from the west wall to the most easterly interior post. South of this post, badly decomposed remnants of the large horizontal poles or small logs were found running to the south wall, indicating a partition along this line.

The two exploratory trenches disclosed remains of a very large log lying longitudinally down the middle of the floor and only separated from the existing surface of the ground by sod. Final excavations uncovered a continuous piece of this log 10 feet, 2 inches long in extremely rotted condition. It was assumed to have been the ridgepole of the roof, and this is in accord with John Bissonette's testimony that the cabin had a pitched roof with ridge in the center.

When Grange made a final inspection of the completed excavation, he recommended that additional exploration be carried out north of the wall line. In this area a deeply worn cowpath formed a depression to within two and one-half feet of the floor level at the center of the north wall. Grange felt that

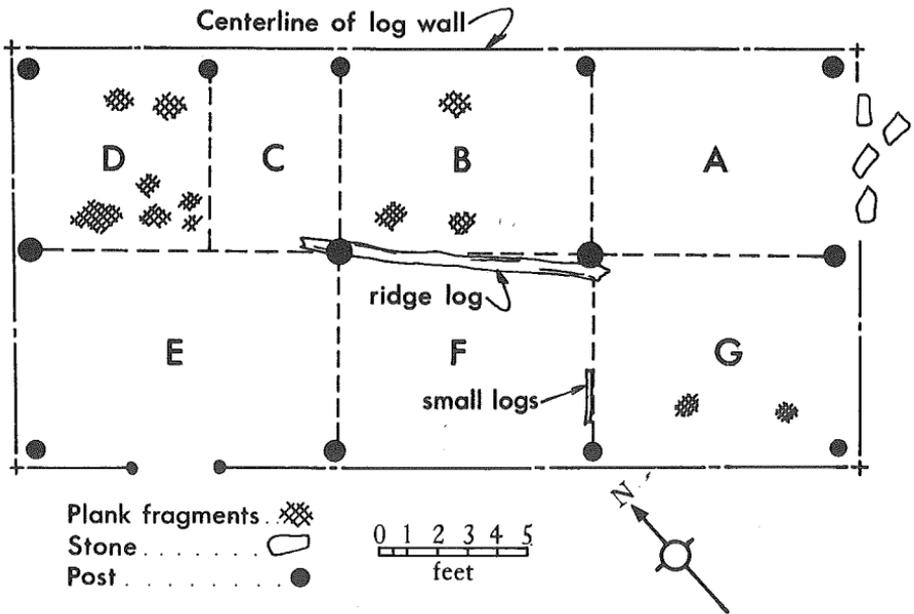


Figure 3: Plan of excavated trading house

there was a very remote possibility that some anteroom or cache could have existed outside the north wall at this point; at least the exterior earth was now gone. Two exploratory trenches 6 feet long to the northward at elevation 25.0 failed to disclose any evidence of previous excavations or structural work of any kind.

*Artifacts.* In the log walls at the northeast corner of the cabin, a glass "Heart Balm" bottle was found at elevation 23.0. No other objects, except for a number of stone fragments in area "A," Figure 3, were found until the excavations were 3 inches above the floor. The upright posts all having been identified at this point, the interior was divided into seven areas by a grid of lines connecting the posts (shown as areas A, B, C, D, E, F, and G on Figure 3). These areas were then screened.

Area "A" produced wood ashes, many small sandstone (butte rock) fragments, some fragments of deer leg bone, and a



*A nodule of flint quartz (left), a military-style gunflint (center top), and a gunflint or fire-striking flint were found in the trading house. An unidentified brass ornament (right top) was found outside the trading house door, and a brass tack (right bottom) was uncovered in the storehouse.*



*On the left are three homemade hooks for hanging merchandise. The other four items are cut nails.*

commercial butcher knife blade badly rusted. Area "B" disclosed little of significance except for some plank fragments as shown in Fig. 3. In area "C" were found about 6 seed beads, a complete gunflint and a large piece of flint, probably for splitting off pieces for guns or fire-making kits. Area "D" disclosed many plank fragments, a tin cup of about 1-pint capacity, scattered seed beads, and 6 handmade iron hooks. Areas "E" and "F" yielded no objects other than about 50 seed beads, about 12 fragments of window glass, a 1½-inch by 3-inch piece of glass along the south side of area "F", and two glass fragments along the west side of area "E." In area "G" were found a few decayed bits of plank, numerous bits of very small poles, 7 small cut nails, and some bone fragments. The remains here suggested that a bed or bunk had been built against the wall and slatted with small poles. Subsequent screening of the floor itself produced seed beads in white, blue, and red.

*External factors affecting site.* In making the excavation it was evident that many of the upper logs and the stones of the chimney had been completely removed from the site. This is understandable, since the post was finally abandoned about 1876 and ranches were established on Bordeaux Creek as early as 1878. Most of the logs were probably salvaged for firewood after the roof collapsed. The old Powers' ranch house was only about 300 feet below this cabin and the "old store" not more than one-half mile above it. Stones from the chimney were undoubtedly utilized by these early settlers for chimneys and foundations. It is also probable that they carried off any other objects of value which remained.

Old log cabins in this area have all failed by collapse of the dirt-burdened roofs and it is logical to assume the same thing happened here. The supposed removal of upper wall logs would have left the decaying remains in a depression like the one existing at the time investigations began. Such a depression collected rain and snow, hastening the complete decay of the remains. Continued activities of small rodents and grazing of the site by cattle over a long period of time were additional external factors in the decay and dispersal of the man-placed objects and materials. Erosion must have made changes in both depressions, particularly since both buildings had been built into rather steep banks sloping off to the creek.

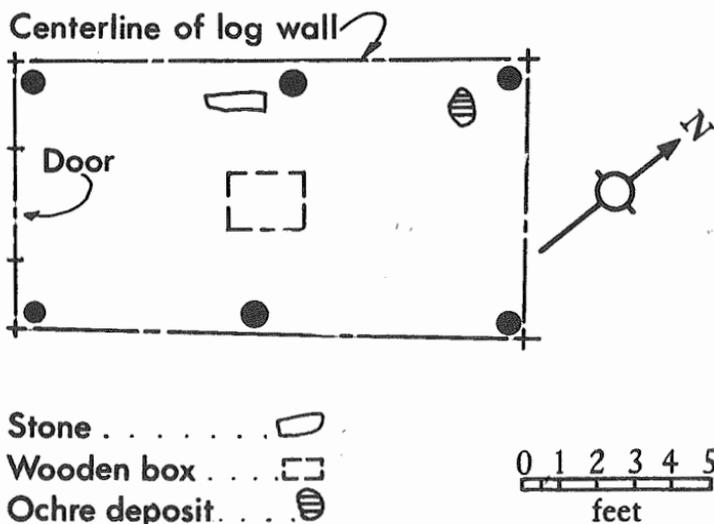


Figure 4: Plan of excavated storehouse

### The Storehouse

*Excavation of the structure.* The techniques used in excavating the trading house were also used in the excavation of the storehouse. It too was an oval depression located near the shoots of a huge old elm tree along the bank above the creek.

Transverse trenches located the east, west, and north walls, and the excavation was carried down in 6-inch levels. At about 1 foot above floor level the stub logs on each side of the doorway in the south wall were developed, showing a doorway 35½ inches wide.

The final level disclosed the complete foundation log lines with no openings. It was obvious that a doorway with a log threshold had originally existed. The horizontal wall logs were easily followed by knots and slivers. The logs were all pine. Bits of poles and heavy organic material were encountered about 12 inches above the floor. All material was screened by 6-inch levels on a ¼-inch screen. A fine screen was used for the last 3-inch level and the floor itself. The floor was of hard, smooth,

yellow soil, obviously compacted artificially. Material outside wall lines was generally sterile yellow earth up to elevation 26.5 and of black topsoil to the surface of the ground.

Six interior pine posts were uncovered just inside the wall lines. Diameters ranged from 6½ to 9 inches.

*Artifacts.* At elevation 24.7 a roughly shaped piece of local sandstone in the form of a tall truncated pyramid was encountered just inside the center of the west wall. It was approximately 19 inches long, 7 inches square at one end and 5 inches square at the other. No explanation for this stone could be developed. One foot inside the northwest corner of the floor was a small deposit of yellow ochre, about one handful in volume, directly on the floor level.

In the center of the floor and three inches below its surface was a badly decomposed box of thin pine boards 16 inches by 24 inches and 3½ inches deep. There was nothing in the box. It may have been a cache for some valuable item or items, like awls or flints, left there from one season until the next.

Other objects sifted from the earth on the floor level included 12 white seed beads, 2 light blue seed beads, and 1 cast brass tack.

## FINAL REPORT ON RECONSTRUCTION OF THE BORDEAUX TRADING POST—1956-1960

### *The Trading House*

When it appeared that all sources of available historical and archeological data about the trading post had been exhausted, plans for its reconstruction were carefully completed. Before the work actually began, batter boards and reference points were established to guide the builders in exactly reproducing the various parts of the structure.

Through archeological investigations, it had been established that the walls were of native pine logs. The oldest existing buildings in the area (period 1879-1885) were all made of native logs hewed flat on two sides and joined at the corners with the dovetail or box corner. A study of some fifty old log Indian houses on the Pine Ridge Reservation showed that the Indians all used the same style of construction, learned from the early

traders and "squawmen" who lived with them at the time the last reservations were established. The dovetail style of corner construction was observed in drawings and paintings of the Sarpy post at Bellevue (Schymonsky, 1854, and Kurz, 1851) and the Robidoux Post at Scott's Bluffs (Mollhausen, 1851). It is also evident in an 1882 photograph of a Montana trading post for the Assiniboines (Smithsonian photo).<sup>26</sup>

The above-mentioned illustrations also indicated that hewed logs were established practice in the 1840-1850 period. The hewing was actually very easy for skilled woodsmen, and old Indians were observed doing the job quickly and skillfully with no other tool than a common axe. The flattened logs shed rain and snow readily and were much more durable than round logs. They also permitted a better interior finish. This hewed finish is plainly visible in Mollhausen's interior view of the Bellevue post in 1852 and in some of the Fort Laramie buildings in Miller's painting of the interior in 1837. Elliott Coues mentioned that the two buildings of Fort Berthold which were still standing in 1865 were of "hewn logs."<sup>27</sup> Charles Larpenteur, western fur trader from 1833 to 1871, wrote his ideas of how Indian agencies should be built to be most efficient and economical: "No house should be frame, but all built of sawed or hewn logs, roofed with earth, having pine floors, doors and casings for windows and doors."<sup>28</sup>

In view of these data, the decision was made to reconstruct the walls of ordinary native pine logs with hewed sides and joined with dovetail corners. A local appeal elicited gifts of two log cabins in the Bordeaux Valley: the Redfern cabin built about 1879 three miles northeast of the trading post site, and the Brickner cabin built about 1880 five miles southeast of the site.

A foundation wall of reinforced concrete was first put down on the exact wall lines determined by archeological investigation to minimize decay and settlement. The salvaged logs which had been donated were then cut to length and used to erect the walls, maintaining the original dovetailed corners. Heavy peeled pitch-pine posts of the approximate original diameters were installed in the old excavated post holes to buttress the walls and support the longitudinal roof logs at eave line and ridge. It would not have been practical for Bordeaux's small party to

have carted out full-length logs for the whole building. Therefore, splices were put in each wall, covering the joint with a split log similar to that shown in a sketch of Fort Stewart by W. J. Hays in 1860 and in a painting made of the abandoned Joseph Bissonette post on Bordeaux Creek by an unknown artist in the 1880's. (A colored photographic copy is now in the Museum of Fur Trade Library. The original is owned by a daughter of P. B. Nelson now living in Chadron.) Backs of the walls below the ground were treated with pentachlorophenol and protected with a continuous asphaltic membrane. All walls were chinked with slivers of logs and mud mixed with hay.

The heights of the walls were carefully considered. John Bissonette said the roof was "just above the ground." Pictures of small trading posts mentioned above showed them all to be low with one or two logs above the door. It was found that ten logs carried the top of the wall 12 inches above the natural ground on the north side and allowed ample clearance for the 2-foot eaves. This made one full log above the door and allowed ample headroom for a tall man inside.

The roof was framed with three long 10-inch poles lying on top of the three longitudinal rows of posts—the only logical method based on archeological evidence. Long pine and cedar poles were then run transversely from ridge to eave, using as a general guide L. A. Huffman's classic photograph, "Interior of a Wolfer's Cabin in the Breaks of the Missouri." Instead of the grass and twigs originally used, these poles were covered with tin shingles coated with asphalt and then with sod retained at the edges by logs. General guides for the roof appearance included the paintings of Bissonette's cabin previously mentioned, Kurz's sketch of the interior area of Fort Union, 1851, and the 1882 photograph of the Montana post also previously mentioned.

John Bissonette stated that the trading post building had a pitched roof. Examination of contemporary pictures of early western cabins, including examples at Forts Pierre, Stewart, and Primeau on the Missouri and the Bissonette post on Bordeaux Creek, indicated roof slopes of 20 to 30 degrees. The Indian cabins examined generally had slopes less than that. In rebuilding the Bordeaux cabin it was found that three average

logs in the gable ends produced a slope of about 22 degrees and the supporting posts were trimmed to make that slope on the roof.

The original floor was determined by archeological investigations to have been compacted earth. This compacted layer about 6 inches deep needed to be made more durable for the expected visitor traffic. It was therefore dug up, carefully screened, mixed with about 7 percent Portland cement, and relaid with proper moisture content to the level originally determined by the excavation. The relaid floor was not noticeably altered in color or appearance from the original.

The fireplace was constructed of roughly squared pieces of local "butte rock" to the dimensions indicated by archeological evidence. The rocks needed to supplement those remaining at the site were obtained from the foundation of an early log cabin about two miles upstream along the creek. In *The Oregon Trail*, Parkman mentions the fireplace in Richard's trading post of 1846 as being made of flat rocks picked up on the prairie, and Rufus Sage mentions their fireplace of locally quarried rock on the White River in 1842.<sup>29</sup> He makes it clear that the chimney was also constructed of local rock. The painting of the Bissonette cabin also shows two low chimneys of rough stone blocks. This was a three-room cabin. While some traders have mentioned temporary huts with mud and stick chimneys, it is clear that houses of any permanence in this area used stone chimneys. In this case the chimney was only made large enough and high enough to carry the smoke out above the roof. It is rough and "spindly" as unskilled laborers would build it, and not like the tall massive chimneys often found on such reconstructions. The rough stone fireplace has a mantle log 54 inches above the floor, high enough to rest an elbow. This height was scaled from Mollhausen's interior view of Bellevue post.

The interior partition was constructed of small logs and poles following lines established in the archeological investigation and it was fitted with a narrow plank door. The large room was assumed to be a combination "trade store" and "Indian room" since it was the largest room and the only one other than the one which had every indication of being living quarters. Furthermore, it is the only room with an outside door and it is

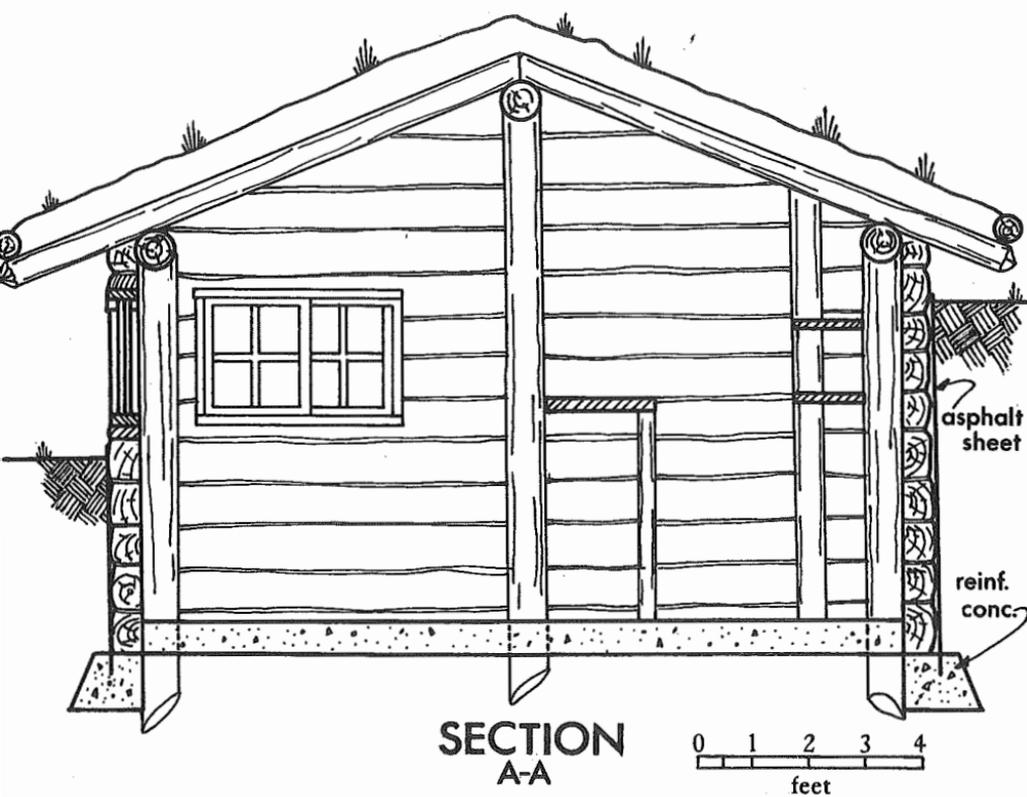
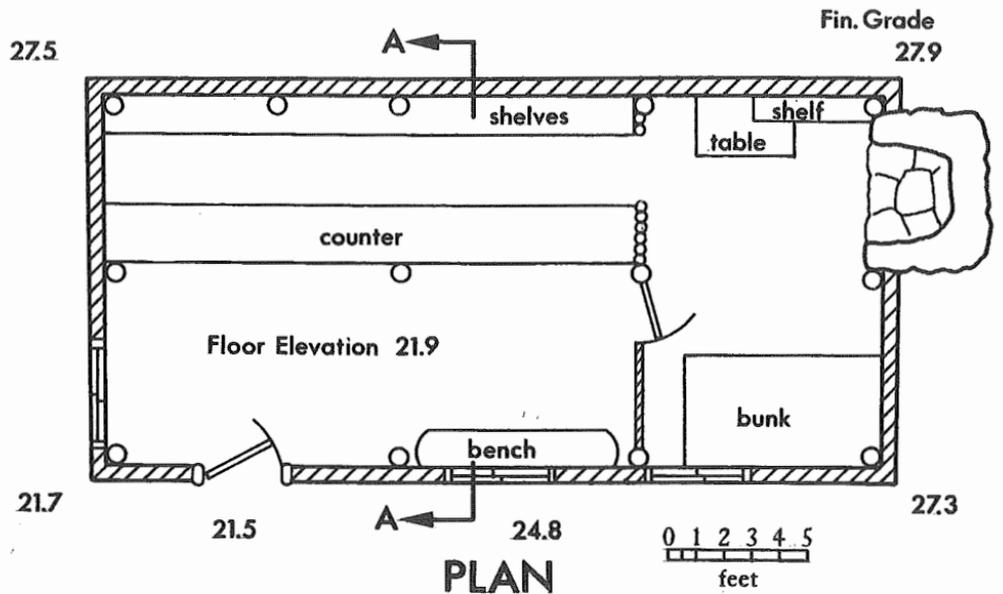


Figure 5: Bordeaux trading house reconstruction

the location where trade artifacts were found. Henry Boller, a trader of 1858-1860 at Fort Atkinson (operated by Clark Primeau & Co. on Upper Missouri River), described the new fort there of hewed timber in some detail. It included an Indian room, like those usually included in larger posts, with benches around the walls for smoking and visiting, and a trade room with a high counter far enough from the door to let a few Indians in at a time. Rough plank shelves held goods behind the counter. Sage's descriptions of his post in 1842 indicate that the principal room would accommodate many Indians at once.

In the Bordeaux post, archeological evidence suggested a counter longitudinally down the center of the room. This left adequate room for shelves and clerks behind it and the space in front would accommodate at least a dozen persons. A rough bench along the south wall was constructed to provide some functions of an "Indian room" or visiting place, and a high counter of rough pine planks was built down the line of the center posts. Behind the counter, rough pine shelves were built to the ceiling.

In John Bissonette's description of the Bordeaux post, he said the main room had a "long high counter." James Willard Schultz, who worked in the late Montana Indian trade, said their trade counters were 4½ feet high to permit the clerks to wear pistols without advertising the fact—and to hide the whiskey keg.<sup>30</sup> In his life of William Jackson, Schultz quoted Jackson's description of the Fort Benton trade store "where, behind breast high counters, were tiers and tiers of shelves upon which the various trade goods were displayed."<sup>31</sup> James Bordeaux was not a tall man, and in the Bordeaux post the counter was made forty-eight inches high, ample to prevent easy access from the front and to permit wearing guns undetected. The counter was made of rough-sawed heavy pine boards to simulate planks whip-sawed either near the site or at Forts Laramie or Pierre. A plain batten door was made of the same material and fitted with a hasp and huge padlock and with an interior bar with iron straps. Padlocks and hinges are, of course, ubiquitous in trading post inventories of the nineteenth century. Schultz mentions an inward-opening door with a bar at one of their Montana trading posts. When a trader unbarred the door to go out one night, the frozen body of an Indian killed in a drunken frolic fell inside.<sup>32</sup>

All nails used in the reconstruction of this building and the storehouse were either "square" or cut nails obtained in Ohio or large round spikes with hand-forged heads. Cut nails appear frequently in western fur trade accounts. The Fort Pierre requisition for 1846 included 300 pounds of cut nails and 300 pounds of spikes (Missouri Historical Society Collections).

The general arrangement of the "trade room" is similar to the Sutler's store at Fort Dodge, Kansas, as sketched by Theodore Davis for *Harper's Weekly* in 1867. Davis shows kettles suspended by hooks from the ceiling, and a number of long iron hooks found near the floor in the Bordeaux trading post suggest a similar use. Kettles are now hung from the ceiling and other trade goods are arranged on the shelves behind the counter.

Windows were installed at the locations described by John Bissonette. These locations were generally supported by bits of glass found during archeological investigations. Sashes used were the old-style small 4-pane "barn sash" pattern, with 8-inch panes, like those shown in the painting of the Bissonette cabin and the Montana post photo of 1882. The Robidoux post painted by Mollhausen appears to have windows of this size but details are indistinguishable. Window glass in 8-inch by 10-inch panes appears in several early post accounts, the earliest noted being an invoice to Fort Union in 1831 (Missouri Historical Society). These windows were placed in pairs in the three locations mentioned by Bissonette and are just adequate to light the interior in the daylight hours.

Many travelers and traders mention the whitewashing of traders' cabins inside and out. Since Bordeaux's was a remote post run by a saving and cautious trader, we have whitewashed it on the interior only.

Boller, among others, mentions elk horns as all-purpose racks in living quarters at posts. The Bordeaux post living quarters have been outfitted with a good set of horns for holding hats and powder horns, a few rude shelves, a rough homemade table, kegs for benches, and a pole bunk with willow rods (similar to an Indian willow bed) to receive the buffalo robes. Bits of small poles were excavated at this point in the room. Candlesticks, a buffalo rug, a brass crucifix, and a water bucket complete the appointments except for historically correct dishes and cooking utensils.

The exterior areas adjacent to the building have been restored to the original grades indicated by archeological investigations. On the north side windblown soil from the adjoining field has been removed to the original ground level.

The work of reconstruction began in April, 1956. Materials were provided by Eric DeFlon, Harry Brickner, Clyde Redfern, Vernon Roberts, and Clive Short. Tools, equipment, and transportation were provided by Henry Freed, Gordon Smith, Major Hale, and the Hoppe-Ely Lumber Company. Volunteer work leaders were Tom Brodersen, C. G. Beebe, Tom Darlington, and William Hanson.

The foundation was poured in June and work on the walls and roof framing occupied most of July and August; roof finish and floor reconstruction were completed in September. The formal dedication was held October 7, 1956. Principal speakers were Dan Potts, historian at Scottsbluff National Monument, and Roger T. Grange, curator of the Fort Robinson Museum.

### *The Storehouse*

The storehouse reconstruction was finally completed in the summer of 1960, using the same methods as those employed for



*The reconstructed Bordeaux storehouse illustrates dovetail or box corners and log hewing.*

the trading house. A concrete foundation with the same centerline dimensions as those determined for the original walls during archeological investigations was constructed.

Salvaged logs from two cabins donated by the families of early settlers were laid up, leaving the original dovetailed corners exposed at the south end. A wall eight logs high gave the edges of the roof 16 inches clearance above the ground at the north end with an inside height of 6 feet at the eaves. One log at the gable ends gave a roof pitch similar to that of the trading house.

A 3½-inch wide plank door with a heavy, hand-forged hasp was installed above a continuous bottom log. The width of the door and use of a door sill log was in accordance with archeological information.

The original compacted floor, about 6 inches thick, was dug up, screened, and recompactd with 7 percent Portland cement to provide a stable surface for visitor traffic.

The roof was made of transverse pine and cedar poles. Upright logs to buttress the walls were placed in the 6 post holes excavated during the archeological investigations. Diameters of the new posts approximated those of the original holes.

The roof was covered with tin shingles coated with asphalt and then overlaid with sod retained by poles laid around the edge. Log walls were chinked with split pieces of log and mud mixed with hay. Walls below grade were treated with pentachlorophenol and protected by a continuous asphaltic membrane.

No evidence of any windows or interior shelves and partitions was disclosed during archeological investigations and the storehouse was reconstructed simply as one enclosed storage space with a heavy door 2 inches thick.

#### SUPPLEMENT TO REPORT ON THE BORDEAUX TRADING POST

In July, 1963, representatives of the National Park Service and Guggenheim Productions Inc. of St. Louis visited the museum and arranged with Superintendent Lillian Ainslie to film the interior and exterior of the Bordeaux Trading Post

reconstruction for certain sequences in a documentary on western expansion for the National Park Service.

Field work was completed August 14, 1963. The entire film, in sound and color, is intended to provide orientation for visitors to the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial in St. Louis. A preview attended by the writer at the Cosmos Club in Washington, D.C., was most enjoyable. It is a fine film and in it the trading post is used to introduce the story of the fur trade in the West. As the viewer slowly approaches the cabin, smoke is curling out of the chimney. Through the door, he is provided detailed views of the interior and of a splendid display of authentic trade goods on the shelves as the commentary proceeds.

On July 2, 1967, the Bordeaux Trading Post was again accorded special recognition with the dedication of a Nebraska Historical Land Mark Council marker. The Sunday afternoon ceremony was attended by over four hundred people from eighteen states. The legend on the marker reads:

#### BORDEAUX TRADING POST

From about 1846 until 1872, an Indian "trading house" occupied a site near here. Built by James Bordeaux, the trading station was once attacked and set afire by hostile Crow warriors. Fortunately some friendly Sioux Indians came to the rescue and drove off the attacking Crow.

James Bordeaux was from a French settlement near St. Louis and while yet a young boy, he went west with fur traders. Bordeaux was active in the fur trade in the vicinity of Fort Laramie from the 1830's until the 1870's. In the 1840's he served as host to the explorer John C. Fremont and the historian Francis Parkman. He left his name to Bordeaux Bend near Fort Laramie, scene of the Grattan Massacre. His name also survives in the name of Bordeaux Creek near this marker.

The Indians brought buffalo robes, furs and ponies to this post to trade for guns, powder, beads, blankets, and whiskey. Some of the weapons may have been used against the troops at Fort Phil Kearny and Custer's troops at the Little Big Horn. The story of James Bordeaux's life is the story of the Upper Missouri country of the 1830's-1870's.

### AFFIDAVIT OF WELCOME W. NAYLOR

STATE OF NEBRASKA)

: ss.

COUNTY OF DAWES)

WELCOME W. NAYLOR, being duly sworn, deposes and says:

That the ruins and excavations now existing in the southeast portion of the tract owned by the Museum Association of the American Frontier in the SW¼ of the NW¼

of section 24, township 33 North, R48W, Dawes County, Nebraska, were personally identified on the ground to him and E. P. Wilson as being the remains of a trading post once occupied by a Mr. Bordeaux, by Herbert Bissonette of Chadron, Nebraska.

That such identification was made by Herbert Bissonette about 1952.

That Herbert Bissonette told him at that time that he, Bissonette, was born at the trading post of his father, Joseph Bissonette, about one-half mile northwest of the above-mentioned Bordeaux trading post.

That he and E. P. Wilson personally visited the site of the above-mentioned Bordeaux trading post in the company of Charles E. Hanson Jr. and Gordon L. Larson in 1954 and identified the exact location of the building as previously identified by Herbert Bissonette.

That he personally know the ruins and remains of buildings immediatly west of, and adjacent to, the tract now owned by the Museum Association of the American Frontier in the SW $\frac{1}{4}$ , NW $\frac{1}{4}$  of section 24- T33N-R48W to be the remains of a farmstead once occupied by the Hiram G. McMillan family.

That he lived on a farm along Big Bordeaux creek during the approximate period of 1907 to 1926 and helped to demolish the abandoned log buildings on the above-mentioned McMillan farmstead.

/s/ WELCOME W. NAYLOR

STATE OF NEBRASKA )  
DAWES COUNTY )

On this 7th day of January, A.D. 1958, before me, the undersigned Gordon L. Larson, a Notary Public, duly commissioned and qualified for and residing in said county, personally came Welcome W. Naylor, to me known to be the identical person whose name is affixed to the foregoing instrument.

/s/ GORDON L. LARSON, Notary Public

My Commission expires the 11th day of January 1958.

## INTERVIEW

ANSWERS PROVIDED BY JOHN BISSONETTE THROUGH HOBART BISSONETTE AS INTERPRETER, OGALALA, SOUTH DAKOTA, JULY 30, 1954.

Q. When were you born?

A. 1861.

Q. When did you spend some time at the Bordeaux trading post?

A. When I was ten years old.

Q. Where was the post?

A. About a half mile up above the Joseph Bissonette place, where the creek makes a sharp turn.

Q. How many buildings were there?

A. Two, the big log building and a little one of logs in the bank just west of it. The little one was a storehouse.

Q. Can you describe the main building?

A. It was made of logs and set back in the bank like a dugout. It had a pitched roof (by signs) covered with sod. It was an ordinary one story building with the roof just above the ground.

- Q. How many rooms did it have?  
 A. One big room with a long high counter and a living room at the east end.  
 Q. Was there a stove?  
 A. No, just a fireplace in the east end.  
 Q. Were there doors and windows?  
 A. There was a door on the south side near the corner. There was a window in the living room and another one in the south wall of the store. There was one in the west end too. The windows were small sashes with little panes of glass.

/s/ HOBART BISSONETTE

/s/ CHARLES E. HANSON, JR.

## NOTES

1. Two good references are Fremont's *Narrative* and Parkman's *Oregon Trail*.
2. Rufus Sage, *Rocky Mountain Life* (New York, 1887), 104-144.
3. See various passages and map in H. B. Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West* (New York, 1935).
4. Virginia Cole Trenholm, "The Bordeaux Story," *Annals of Wyoming*, 26 (July, 1954), 121.
5. Fort Pierre Letterbooks, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, Mo.
6. Trenholm, 123-124. See also Claim 4817, James Bordeaux. Records of U.S. Court of Claims, National Archives.
7. Fort Pierre Letterbooks.
8. Abandonment of the trail was directed in a letter from Fort Pierre to St. Louis, July 20, 1850 (Fort Pierre Letterbooks, Missouri Historical Society).
9. Letters received by the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Whetstone Agency 1874. National Archives.
10. Information given to Charles Hanson, Jr. in interviews with William Bordeaux, Hobart Bissonette, and John Bissonette, 1954.
11. Letters received by the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Whetstone Agency, 1873. National Archives.
12. *Ibid.*, 1876.
13. Statement by Louis Bordeaux in 1907 in the Ricker Interviews. Nebraska State Historical Society Library, Lincoln, Neb.
14. Emerson Hough, *The Covered Wagon* (New York, 1922), 189-190, 209.
15. Fort Pierre Letterbooks, Missouri Historical Society.
16. Trenholm, 121.
17. See Ricker Interviews, Nebraska State Historical Society Library.
18. Letter, Susan Bettleyoun to Prof. E. P. Wilson, April 16, 1942, with attachment, "The Story of Crow Butte."
19. Files of Prof. E. P. Wilson, Chadron, Nebraska.
20. Museum of the Fur Trade files, Chadron Nebraska.
21. Claim 1296, Francis Boucher, Records of U.S. Court of Claims, National Archives.

22. Original map, "Historical Map of the Valley of the White River in N. Western Nebraska. By H. D. Mead at Chadron 1923," in the Museum of the Fur Trade library. Mead's father had an Indian store near Pine Ridge in 1881.
23. Affidavit of Welcome Naylor, January 7, 1958 (see affidavit, pp. 162-163).
24. This date is substantiated by several early Pine Ridge Indian censuses.
25. Affidavit of Welcome Naylor.
26. Ralph B. Raphael, *The Book of American Indians* (Greenwich, Conn., 1953), 37.
27. Elliott Coues, ed., *The Personal Narrative of Charles Larpenteur* (New York, 1898), II, 386.
28. *Ibid.*, 424.
29. Rufus Sage, *Rocky Mountain Life* (New York, 1857), 113-114.
30. James Willard Schultz, *My Life as an Indian* (New York, 1906), 278.
31. James Willard Schultz, *William Jackson, Indian Scout* (Boston, 1926), 2.
32. Schultz, *My Life*, 92.