

"Records of the American Fur Company: An
Assessment of their Significance for
Hudson's Bay Company Research"

William R. Swagerty, University of Idaho

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Scholars of the North American fur and Indian trades have often been remiss in researching topics of comparative economic systems even when those systems are known to have been geographically linked. Such is certainly the case with the lack of attention of a comparative nature on two of the largest businesses in nineteenth century North America: the American Fur Company and the HBC. For the past three years I have been wearing two fur-trade hats: that of a student of the HBC in the Pacific Northwest and that of the AFC on the Northern Plains. My ultimate goal is twofold. First, I hope to be able to add to the growing body of literature on Indian participation in the trade. As you know, this has been grossly neglected for most native culture areas of the trans-Mississippi American West. Secondly, I plan to provide a comparative socio-economic analysis of servants who worked in the Columbia District of the HBC with those who worked on the Missouri and its tributaries for the AFC. These, in turn, will be compared with what is known about independents, smaller company employees, and freemen.

When thinking out various possibilities for sharing with you some of my recent discoveries, my original intention, as indicated by the printed title of the paper for this session, was to analyze AFC personnel's perceptions of HBC employees and to devote some time to areas of conflict as well as areas of cooperation between the two corporate giants. After two weeks in the archives earlier this summer, I came away disappointed with what I did not find by way of commentary by AFC officers, clerks, and field personnel on individual HBC officers and traders. If such remarks exist beyond broadest mention of Bay

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*Conversely, E. E. Rich's History of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1670-1870 (1959) largely ignores American posts and does little better than Chittenden in providing the reader with relations between the HBC and the AFC, much less smaller American concerns. * From his map one might conclude there were no posts or Indians on the northern Plains. His index includes the traditional British-American policy topics and a few pages on the AFC.

One could go on with similar examples. Fortunately since the 1960s important monographs by such scholars as John C. Ewers, Hugh Dempsey, David Mandelbaum, and Arthur Ray have introduced meaningful ethnohistorical criteria that has forced a new geography conforming to tribal culture areas rather than Euroamerican international borders. Many historians have not been willing to cross the cultural divide. * Here we see examples of these very different trends with Ewers' now-classic Blackfeet (1958) side-by-side John Sunder's important, but very geographically-restricted and whiter-centered study of The Fur Trade on the Upper Missouri (1965).

*Ewers was one of the first to alert us to an extensive Indian trade network connecting the Plains with the Plateau with trade centers, rendezvous, and middlemen trade cultures. Since his pioneering article, "The Indian Trade of the Upper Missouri before Lewis and Clark," (1954) which (incidentally) derived in part from his work in American Fur Company records, others have built upon these important concepts. Arthur Ray, Ray Wood, and Wood with collaborator Thomas Thiessen have done much to connect the Hudson's Bay Company trade with the Mandan/Hidatsa/Arikara and Sioux trade of the Missouri. Here's the map illustrating Wood and Thiessen's edited study of the northern Plains. I could mention several others who have filled in gaps on special aspects of inter-tribal and inter-ethnic trade on the northern Plains. *Susan Giannettino's "The Middleman Role in the Fur Trade: Its Influence on Interethnic Relations in the Saskatchewan-Missouri Plains," published in 1977 in a special issue of the Western Canadian

*In the time I have remaining I want to change gears and give up a brief tour of the archives where American Fur Company records are housed. As most of you know, the company was founded by Astor in 1808 and was headquartered in New York City under the direction of the Astors and Ramsay Crooks, and that the primary interest of the company was in the fur, skin, and robe trades. Few realize the extensive vertical integration pioneered by Astor and Crooks and the diversification of activities ranging from Lake Superior fisheries, the maple sugar industry, mining of lead, the sale and transportation of flour, outfitting of tourists, scientists, explorers, government agents, and artists on various western ventures, and steamboating on western waters and the Atlantic seaboard.

*After a false start in the Pacific Northwest with his Pacific Fur Company, Astor reentered the far western theater in 1822 by infiltrating the Saint Louis business establishment. Within three years he had secured a contract with *Bernard Pratte and Company for exclusive handling of AFC interests west of the Great Lakes. In 1827 the Western Department of the AFC was formed with Pratte and Company managing field operations and the New York house of Astor buying merchandise for the trade and selling furs abroad through agents in London and Leipzig. Interestingly, the AFC's English agent, C. M. Lampson, also worked on consignment for the HBC and was therefore somewhat of a double-agent, reporting HBC sales figures to the AFC and vice versa. That story in itself deserves a joint PBS/CBC production and there is plenty for a business historian to work with in both sets of papers.

*The Upper Missouri Outfit was formed in 1827 to tape the trade from the Big Sioux River to the Rocky Mountain. Under the direction of Kenneth McKenzie, a former North West Company clerk accused of deserting the HBC in 1822, trade was expanded beyond the Sioux and village Indians of the Missouri, long in contact with NWC and HBC traders, to include the Assiniboine, Crow, Blackfeet, and Gros Ventre. In 1829 Fort Union, the most

correspondence to date and 4 reels of receiving and shipping records.

*The other large collection is in Saint Louis at the Missouri Historical Society, whose home is in the Jefferson Memorial Building in Forest Park. This is the private Mo. Hy. Soc., not to be confused with the State Hy. Society in Columbia. *The largest single collection is that of Pierre Chouteau, Jr.'s private papers, some 60 boxes of correspondence, a few diaries, post journals, wills, tax records, and other miscellany. Most of the extant letters received by Chouteau and Co. are in these boxes curated by *Peter Michel and an able staff. *The collection is very well organized with summaries on most documents, some translations of the many French documents and a useful finding aid file that can be photocopied. (Show examples: summary sheet; cards on HBC and Red River Colony)

There are also papers of McKenzie (very few due to a housefire around 1880 that consumed most of them), William Clark, Andrew Drips, and many other Americans (and a few Canadians) connected with the fur trade. *One of the great resources that remains untapped is the 70-volume ledger holdings, now available on microfilm for \$1050 U.S. (in the vault shot; open shelf shot; example of Michilimackinac Ledger; microfilm edition publication).

A parting shot. Grace Nute noted in 1927 that the AFC was the largest American business firm in volume and in employees (outside the federal government from 1835 to 1845). More furs passed through AFC warehouse doors than all the other American fur companies combined during its existence. Yet no full-scale history has ever been written of this dynamic company. Perhaps Wilson Brown or some other historian of international trade will take this cue and get some graduate students to work on various aspects of the trade out of Saint Louis. We Americans admit we're behind the Canadian example in sophisticated fur trade studies. It is not for lack of materials, but lack of serious personnel to match the admirable students of the HBC assembled here.