Frontier Days Along *the* Upper Missouri

By
Grace Flandrau

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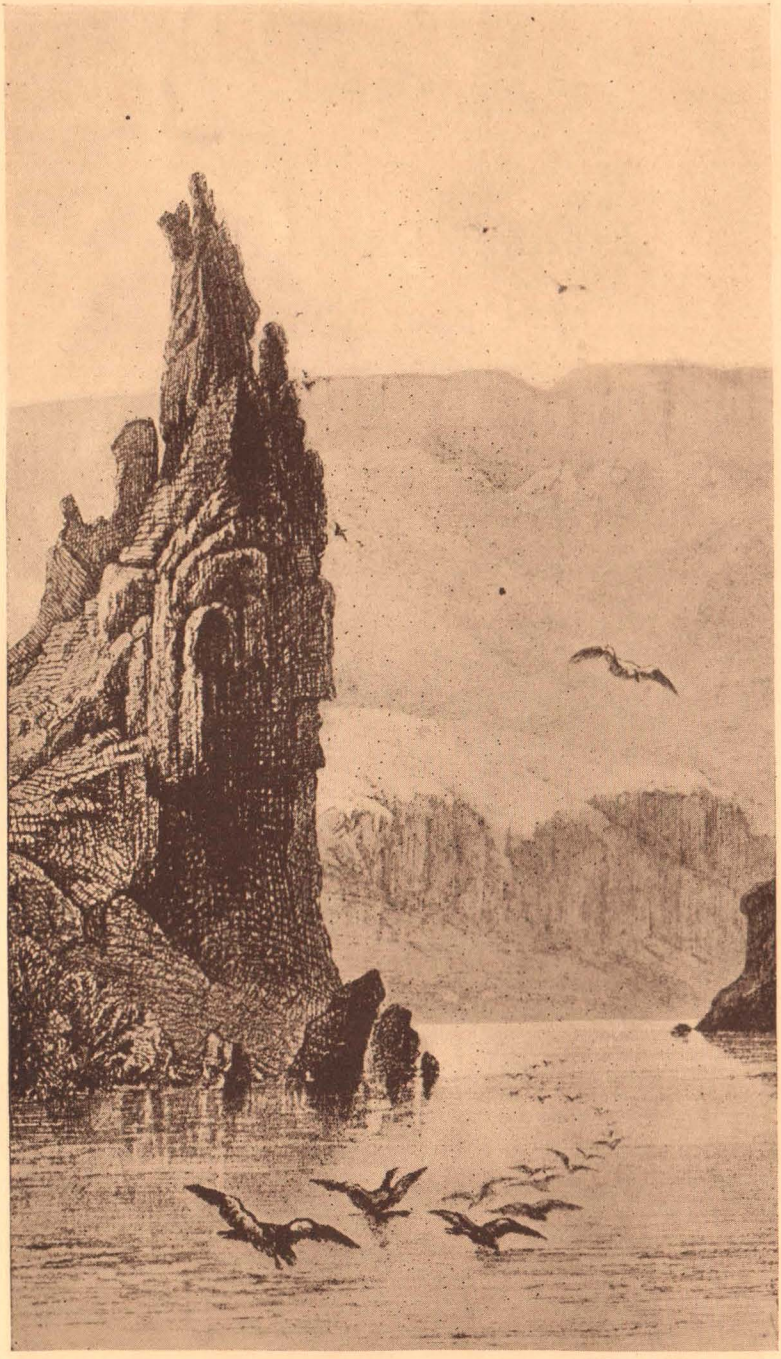
Compliments of the
Great Northern Railway



BODMER IN MAXIMILIAN'S TRAVELS

The Forgotten Highway

PAINTING BY E. S. PAXSON, STATE CAPITOL, HELENA, MONT

Lewis and Clark

Frontier Days Along the Upper Missouri

By GRACE FLANDRAU

As you travel westward through the spacious North Dakota scene and approach the Montana boundary near the town of Williston, you reach that great forgotten highway of the West, the Missouri River, which winds a twisted course of almost three thousand miles from the heart of the Rockies to its confluence with the Mississippi at St. Charles, Missouri.

The Great Northern Railway which follows near this historic stream for many hundreds of miles, first touches the river at Sioux City, Iowa. Approaching it again at Williston, North Dakota, the railway ascends the Missouri Valley to Helena, Montana, not far from the union of the three rivers—Jefferson, Gallatin and Madison, from which the Missouri is created.

For more than two centuries the actors of the thrilling frontier drama toiled, sang and fought their way along its now deserted course. In 1673, a hundred years before the American Revolution, two Frenchmen descending the Mississippi passed its mouth. Spaniards built a fort on its lower waters in 1722, ten years before George Washington was born; farther up stream a party of Frenchmen headed by a son of the great explorer La Verendrye, reached its banks in 1738 and two of the younger

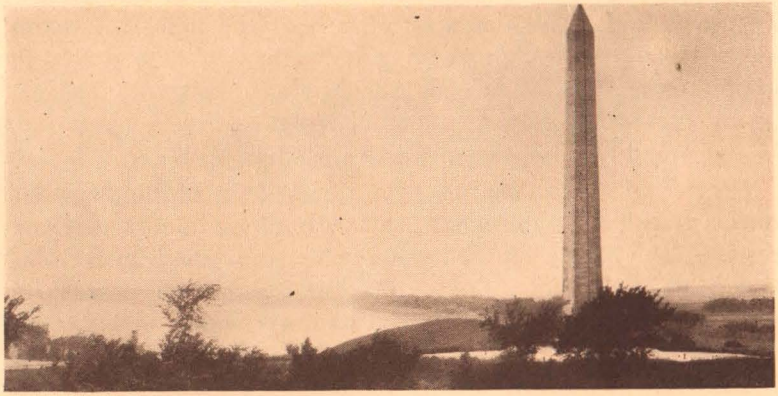
Verendryes crossed it again a few years later and were the first white men to see the "shining mountains", but it was over half a century after that before recorded history of the upper river began.

Lewis and Clark Expedition

On an April morning in 1805, you might have seen a small flotilla of green cottonwood canoes struggling upstream, manned by a rugged, eager crew—French voyageurs in bright sash and deerskin, American soldiers, a negro slave and a single Indian woman with a baby strapped to her back. Two young officers of the army of the new republic were in command, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark.

With high hearts they led their small, heroic band into the unknown West, following the Missouri to one of its sources in the Rockies, not far from the present city of Butte, Montana and thence across the Rockies to the Pacific coast, blazing the long-looked-for overland way to the ocean that washes the shores of the Orient. Their purpose was exploration, but commerce was already preparing to follow them into the newly discovered regions. The lure was not gold, but fur. The tributaries and upper waters of the Missouri abounded in a living treasure—the beaver —and the plains of Dakota and Montana, now rich with grain and meadow grass, were dark with buffalo.

The voyage of Lewis and Clark may be said to have inaugurated the fur trade of the upper river. At first one or two solitary trappers, steady of aim, fearless of heart, paddled their dugout canoes to these lonely and remote reaches of the stream, staking



Monument to Sergeant Charles Floyd at Sioux City, Iowa

their lives against the temper of the Sioux, Hidatsa and Assiniboines who were to be found along its shores. They ascended as far as the mouth of the Yellowstone, which empties into the Missouri a few miles west of Williston near the present station of Fort Buford, on the main line of the Great Northern Railway. They were followed by larger parties, among others, Manuel Lisa's which ascended some distance up the Yellowstone in 1807 and soon fur-trading organizations were formed in St. Louis—the Missouri, Rocky Mountain, American companies, successively, and others less well known, and these sent very considerable outfits up the river, first in keel boats, later by steamer.

First Fort at the Mouth of the Yellowstone

Had you passed this way over a hundred years ago—in the summer of 1822—to be exact—the river would have offered you a curious spectacle. Hurrying southeastward the brown stream, recently reinforced by the waters of the Yellowstone, passed through a scene of primitive and lovely desolation. In all the vast expanse of sky and plain nothing was to be seen but a band of slender antelope feeding alertly on a grassy highland. Suddenly a sense of danger passed like a breeze among them, they stood with graceful heads flung back, and waited, poised for flight, looking toward the river.

The lilt of a Canadian boat song had faintly pierced the crystal silence, and soon a long line of lean and toughened men came into view, bent under a tow rope. They marched single file

BODMER IN MAXIMILIAN'S TRAVELS

Evening Camp

BODMER IN MAXIMILIAN'S TRAVELS

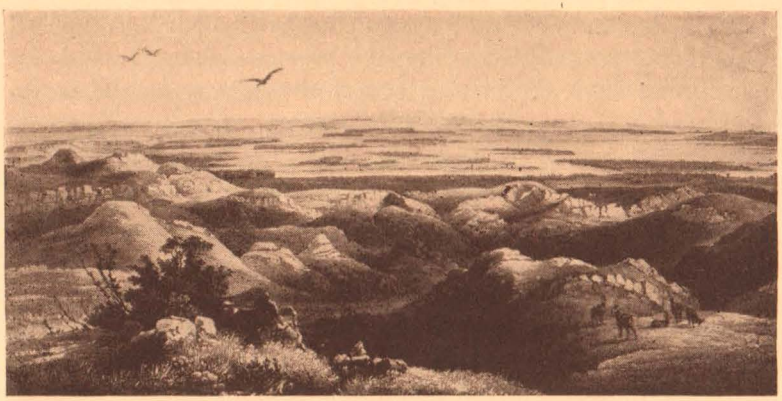
Indian Horse Race

along the muddy, shifting shore or crumbling bluffs of the capricious stream. Far behind them a lumbering craft, the rope fastened to its mast, moved slowly forward through the rapids.

The boat was seventy-five, perhaps a hundred feet in length and fifteen or eighteen wide. A cabin or cargo box occupied the deck reaching to within twelve feet of each end and leaving a narrow passageway on either side. The prow was ornamented by wide branching elk horns and the skins of grizzly bears were spread on stretchers to dry. The swift current fought its progress; from the deck, men armed with poles frantically prodded and pushed to keep it away from treacherous sand-bars, working to the shouted commands of a watcher in the prow; a square sail bellied languidly to a bit of favoring wind.

The antelope, trusting to their winged fleetness, still indulged their curiosity, staring amazed at the strange cortége. Then two horsemen appeared above the brow of the hill, cautiously raised their muskets and fired. The herd, like a handful of autumn leaves swept by the wind, passed down the slope and out across the billowing plains, the hunters in mad pursuit. But their galloping horses seemed to merely creep as the distance widened between them and the flying quarry and the riders turned back from the hopeless chase.

The setting sun poured a misty red-gold radiance over the plains and turned the river to fire; the sail flapped in the failing wind; the boat was pulled ashore and made fast. Hunters returned with the bleeding quarters of a buffalo tied to their horses and preparations for the night camp were made.



BODMER IN MAXIMILIAN'S TRAVELS

Confluence of the Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers

Meanwhile a band of fifty or more horses and mules which had been driven along shore appeared. The animals were picketed, leaving about thirty feet of pasturage to each one; a guard was set over them. Supper finished, the men lay about the campfire; a fiddle came out and squeaked a gay accompaniment to the voyageur songs; a wilderness of stars glittered sharply in the vast dark vault of sky. But soon the fires died away and the tired men, except for the night guards, slept.

The expedition was under the leadership of William Ashley and Andrew Henry, two notable figures in the trade and heads of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. Their purpose was to ascend the Missouri to the Three Forks, portaging around the Great Falls. The men were to spend the autumn trapping beaver on the headwaters of the river, pass the winter in solitary cabins in the mountains or with bands of friendly Indians, trap again in the spring and meet the traders sent out from St. Louis at an appointed rendezvous in the early summer. There they would dispose of their furs, and receive a new outfit for the following season or return with it to St. Louis. But, as the party approached the mouth of the Yellowstone, an incident occurred which changed their plans.

The boats had entered a channel on the opposite side of the river from that along which the stock was being driven. The sun reigned in unflinching brightness over vast plains as empty as the hot, blue sky. It must have seemed to the travellers, half drugged perhaps, with the heat and perfect stillness, that they were alone in a limitless and untenated world. Suddenly savage

yells shattered the silence; a great band of half naked, painted Assiniboines poured down from the broken highlands which for many miles flank the present line of the railway on the north.

They swept up to the horsemen, making friendly overtures, but at a given signal surrounded the animals and stampeded them. Before help from the boats could reach the handful of horse guards, the entire herd had disappeared in a cloud of dust over the coteaux.

Useless without horses to attempt to carry out the plan of spending the winter in the mountains. The expedition halted at the mouth of the Yellowstone where a fort was hastily built of cottonwood logs. This important site commanded the trade of the Assiniboines and also to some extent of the Crows whose hunting grounds lay south along the Yellowstone.

The men trapped, traded with the savages and hunted the buffalo. A small party travelled west with a band of Blood Indians, to their village near the mouth of the Musselshell River, where they wintered.

It was in the spring when these trappers returned to the rude fort at the mouth of the Yellowstone that an incident occurred which, attributed to other men and transferred to a different scene and period has become familiar to so many people through the celebrated moving picture, the Covered Wagon.

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Assiniboine Warrior

In reality the affair was not humorous, but one of the most tragic in the always dramatic story of the fur trade. Two men, Fink and Carpenter were celebrated among those picturesque and dauntless trappers, explorers, buccaneers of the early West known as the mountain men.

The friendship of Fink and Carpenter was proverbial along the Missouri, but a beautiful half-breed girl in the Blood camp was loved by both of them. She preferred Carpenter to Fink and the

old story of jealousy and a broken friendship resulted. When the men returned to the fort Fink suggested a reconciliation to be sealed by playing their old game of shooting cups of whiskey from each other's heads. When he raised his gun, however, he took his unerring aim, not at the cup, but a few inches lower and Carpenter fell forward shot through the forehead.

This first fort at the mouth of the Yellowstone was only occupied for two years. Difficulties with the Blackfeet Indians whose hunting grounds lay a few hundred miles farther west, along the east slope of the Rockies, and an almost superstitious fear of them felt by the trappers, caused the trading companies to give up for the time-being their plan of sending expeditions up the Missouri to and beyond the Great Falls.

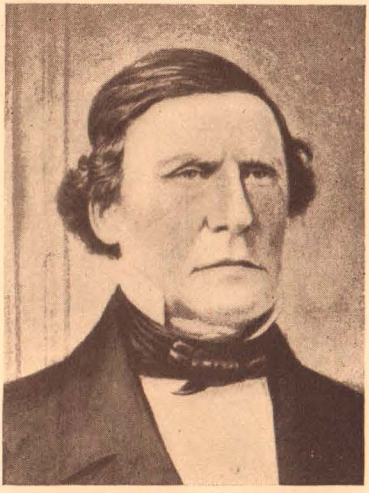
After 1823 Ashley's fort was abandoned and he carried his caravans overland to the mountains from more southerly points on the Missouri.

But this important site, and the rich trade in the Blackfoot country to which it was the gateway, was not to be neglected for long.

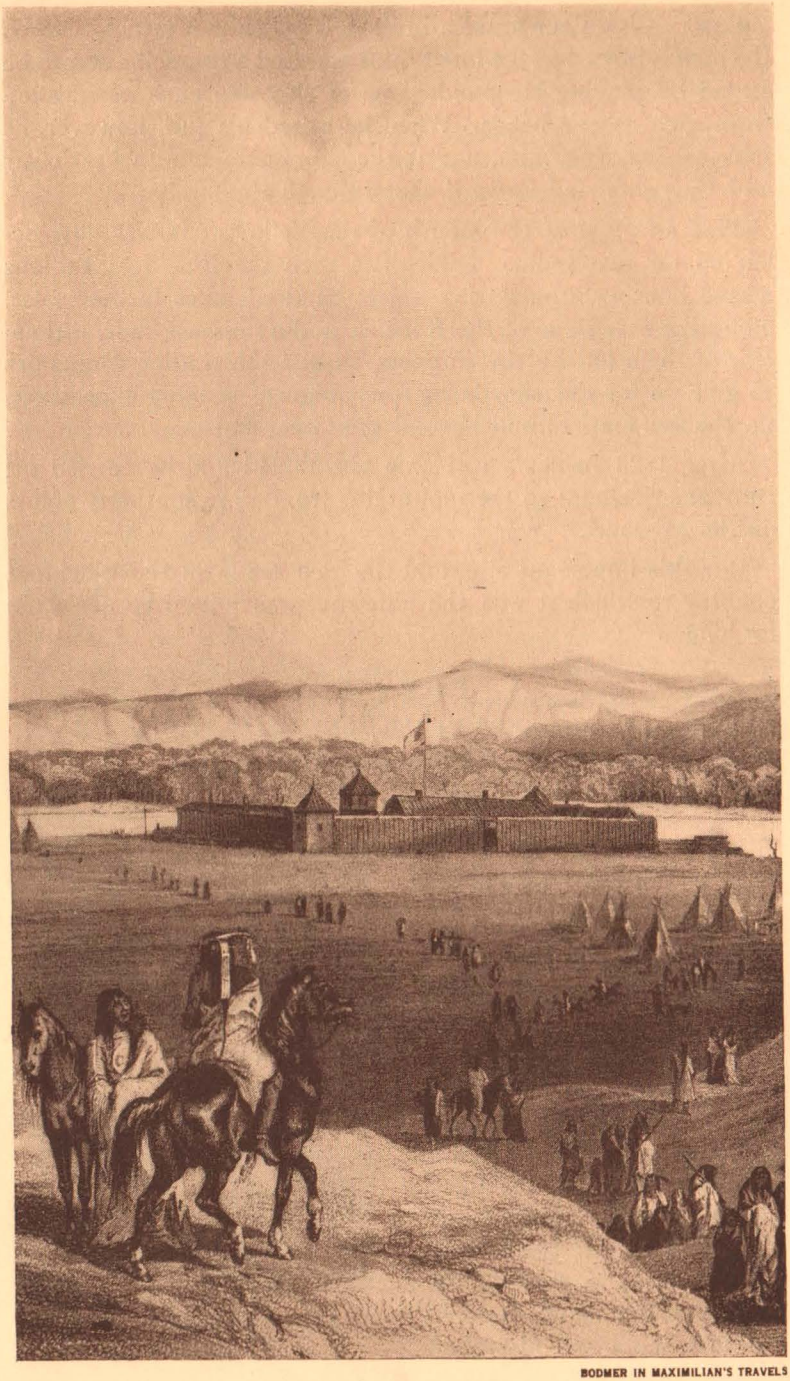
Fort Union

John Jacob Astor had by this time established himself very firmly in the Missouri River trade and his American Fur Company now prepared to conquer the upper river, Blackfeet and all.

On a September day in 1828 the keel boat Otter left the post of the American Fur Company among the Mandans and ascended the river to the mouth of the Yellowstone. There, not far from the ruins of Ashley's old post a fort was built, later known as Fort Union and for forty years the most important establishment in the Northwest. It was located on the present boundary between North Dakota and Montana,



Kenneth McKenzie, Founder of Fort Union



BODMER IN MAXIMILIAN'S TRAVELS

Fort Union in 1833

near the station of Fort Union. The main line of the Great Northern Railway passes within a few hundred yards of the site of this old post, which passengers may view from the car window.

Small opposition forts existed at various times a few miles away, but aside from this, Fort Union stood in an almost inconceivable isolation. In every direction the plains flowed endlessly away, the home of nomadic tribes and of uncounted hordes of buffalo.

Spread on its flat hilltop above the Missouri, the fort offered to travellers through these savage wastes a welcome and impressive sight. A high stockade of hewn cottonwood logs surrounded the buildings; the mouths of cannon peeped from the two formidable bastions built at diagonally opposite corners and high above, the American flag waved from its tall pole—a speck of brilliant color against the clear pale sky.

The life lived within the tall stockade was one of curious contrasts, at once dangerous and monotonous, colorful, sordid and romantic, and although conducted with an almost military discipline, gave way at times to the rough orgies of the frontier.

The bourgeois or factor in charge was a kind of king. His power was absolute. He sat at the head of his long table dressed with impressive elegance, surrounded in order of precedence by the guests and the "gentlemen" of the post. The word is conspicuous in the records of the trading-posts, but just where gentleman left off and plain man began is not always clear. The former term probably included partners and clerks.

The laborers, French Canadian or half-breed voyageurs and hunters and free trappers who had wandered in from their dangerous pursuits in the wilderness, ate at another mess or in quarters of their own.

Astor Medal

Excellent cooks were brought from St. Louis and the factor's table was loaded with such delicacies as smoked beaver tails, buffalo tongues and humps, elk meat, venison and wild sheep cooked in bear's fat or buffalo marrow. There were, too, corn, potatoes and green vegetables grown in the Fort Union gardens, fresh milk and butter from the dairy, and an unfailing abundance of good wines which

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Buffalo Dance

came up the river along with the contraband trade whiskey smuggled past Fort Leavenworth.

From the Indian camps usually pitched about the fort, incessant din arose; the throb of drums, the wild singing that accompanied gambling games and dancing, the shouts of children and constant barking of wolfish fighting dogs.

Over the pastel-tinted coteaux of the Missouri, from the north, up from the Yellowstone country, eastward from the Milk River Indians came to trade. In winter they brought furs, in summer dried meat, pemmican and tallow. In the early days the business was attended with impressive ceremony. Before reaching the fort the visitors halted to put on their robes of ceremony—deerskin leggings bright with embroidery of dyed porcupine quills and fringed with ermine; painted buffalo robes and gay blankets; the whole paraphernalia of charm and amulet—necklace of grizzly bear's claws or of eagles' wing bones, earrings and bracelets of shell. On their heads they wore feathers or the horned scalps of antelope or buffalo; they painted their breasts and arms and faces with splendid tribal designs; they hung scalps and fluttering ribbons on their coup sticks; wolf and fox tail symbols of enemies killed in battle trailed from their ankles. Barbarically splendid were these plainsmen in the days of their freedom and prosperity.

The drums beat, the warriors marched abreast chanting their war songs, the women and children drove the dog travois laden with babies, puppies and the packs of fur.

BODMER IN MAXIMILIAN'S TRAVELS

The Frozen Missouri

So they approached the fort. Now the brass cannon spoke in salute; the great gate swung open and the bourgeois himself advanced to meet them.

The chiefs were invited to his private apartment. They sat in rows upon the floor; with the peace pipe they saluted the east, the west, the north, the south, they handed it to one another and to the white chieftain to smoke; they waited, splendidly haughty, incurably and touchingly childlike, for the presents they knew would be forthcoming, for the cup that would be handed round.

Outside the women put up the leather lodges, brought water from the river and kindled the camp-fires.

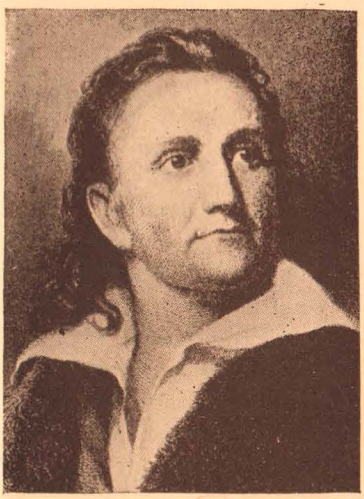
For days the great traderoom was crowded. Beaver, muskrat, wolf, fox, marten, mink and weasel and thousands of fine head and tail buffalo robes went over the counter in exchange for powder, balls, rifles, tobacco, blankets, kettles, knives, calico, mirrors, beads, beaver traps, needles and all the rest of it.

As night fell, the whiskey trading began. Better not to look too closely on the scene which followed. We all know that the blackest record in the dark story of Indians and whites is that of liquor selling. The government did what it could to prevent it; the large companies would have been glad to do away with it if they could have done so without losing their business to unorganized and unscrupulous rivals. At the important posts, such as Fort Union, the drunkenness was to a great extent limited. But in remote Indian camps to which the private whiskey traders took their goods, it reached heights of such murderous debauchery as are scarcely to be credited.

Had you been traveling near Fort Union in mid-winter nearly a century ago you might have witnessed a curious spectacle. The gates of the fort swung open and a little procession marched out into the biting cold—a handful of white men wrapped in furs and a sled drawn by a shaggy pony. The vehicle was covered with bells and carried a small keg of liquor. A violin, clarionette, drum and triangle were distributed among the men and in their pockets they carried vermilion and tobacco.

It is probable there was not much gayety among them as they turned their faces into the bitter wind. Soon, however, a large band of Indians approaching from the north was sighted. Immediately the violin came out of its box and with numb fingers the players began to make music on their several instruments to which the sleigh bells rang a loud accompaniment. The keg was tapped, the raw alcohol raced warmly through their chilled bodies; vermilion and tobacco were generously distributed. The music, especially the bells, filled the savages with delight. Never before had they come upon such a show as this out on their naked, wintry plains and needless to say, the opposition waited in vain for the furs it had hoped to win away from its powerful rival.

But it is just possible that the respect of red man for white slipped a degree farther along the toboggan down which it had been sliding since the savage first discovered to what an abandonment of pride civilized men would sink for a beaver skin. Excessive competition was at the bottom of all the evils of the fur trade. The above is an innocent example, but there are too many instances where every kind of trickery and even crime were resorted to by rival traders. The effect upon the Indians, who were as observant and impressionable as children, is self-evident.



FROM LIFE OF J. J. AUDUBON

John James Audubon

All travel to and from the Northwest passed through Fort Union and many distinguished persons, whom official duties,

scientific or artistic pursuits, sport, trade or mere curiosity took beyond the frontier, enjoyed its hospitality. Catlin, the painter; Prince Maximilian, his companion Bodmer, whose pictures of the primitive scene and of the Indians rival if they do not surpass Catlin's; Wyeth, the Yankee trader who, after being lavishly entertained at Fort Union, betrayed to the authorities the still which was being clandestinely operated by the first factor, Kenneth McKenzie.

The great naturalist Audubon spent a summer at Fort Union. Although nearly seventy years of age, he collected and painted many beautiful specimens of birds and small animals, hunted buffalo and rode horseback with the Scotchman who was factor at that time and his handsome Blackfoot wife. Audubon always refers to her as "the Princess" and while praising her many accomplishments, delicately deplores her habit of seizing the vital organs of a newly slaughtered buffalo and eating them raw.

Many famous mountain men—the most daring and romantic figures of the time—came to Fort Union. Trappers, explorers and Indian fighters they later became guides for official and exploring parties and covered wagon trains—the real pathfinders of the West.

Among them was tall Jim Bridger with keen, friendly eyes and dangerous quickness of movement, whose Western nonchalance, dare-devil courage and amazing craft of the frontier have made him a legendary hero of the trail. He first came to Fort Union with a band of trappers who had been hunting beaver on Milk River. The second time he escorted a more impressive expedition.

FROM "JAMES BRIDGER" A HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

James Bridger

This was the amazing hunting party of Sir George Gore, that Irish sportsman and millionaire who spent two years on the western plains and left a saga of fabulous anecdote dealing with the luxury and size of his outfit; his hundreds of horses, wagons, cattle, guns; his extravagance; the

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Blackfoot Chief of Yesterday

ruthless slaughter of wild game —thousands of buffalo left to rot where they fell, elk, deer, wild fowl destroyed with equally unsportsmanlike abandon. His last gesture, made before he left Fort Union, is characteristic. Annoyed and not unjustly, at the exorbitant price asked by the fur company to transport his effects down the river, he made a vast pyre of the wagons, saddles, harness, tents and other belongings and burned them up—guarding even the smoldering ashes till the iron parts of the wagons should be cool enough to throw into the river.

Bridger was his guide. After a long day of shooting, Gore liked to read aloud to the old scout from Gulliver's Travels, Sir Walter Scott and Shakespeare. The sum total of culture acquired during this proceeding by Bridger, who could himself neither read nor write, seems to have been slight. He decided that his own adventures with the Blackfeet if written down would just about equal Gulliver's experiences, while his only reaction to Shakespeare was the conviction that "Fullstuff" was a "Dutchman" who would have been better off had he drunk less beer and more good old Bourbon whiskey.

Another Irish traveller also appeared at Fort Union. This was John Palliser, a most gallant and scrupulous sportsman, whose book, "A Solitary Hunter", describing incidents of life at Fort Union and travel by dog sled along the Upper Missouri is extremely good reading. A few years after this first journey to America, Palliser was sent by the British Colonial Office, at the head of a considerable expedition, to explore British North America from Lake Superior to the Cascades. He was to make surveys, record the physical aspects and resources of the country and examine mountain passes with a view to railroad construction. Palliser's exact and copious reports were a most important contribution to the future development of the Canadian Northwest.

In the task of surveying a wilderness for a feasible avenue of modern transportation, Palliser was preceded, south of the border, by Governor Isaac I. Stevens, another visitor at Fort Union, whose memorable expedition in search of a northern railroad route to the Pacific was a precedent and an inspiration to Palliser.

Blackfoot Chief of Today

The Blackfeet

But talk of railroads has taken us a long way ahead of our story. We must go back to that early time when Fort Union rose from the virgin prairie, the first permanent establishment of white men above the Mandan villages on the Missouri; the first permanent advance of Aryan civilization into a vast and primitive region from which it was never to retire.

Fort Union stood in Assiniboine country; to east and south were the hunting grounds of Sioux and Crows; and westward, lay the buffalo ranges of the Blackfeet, the dreaded nation which had kept American traders at bay since the beginning of the fur trade.

Kenneth McKenzie was the factor in charge of Fort Union. He was a Canadian Scotchman and naturalized American, fur trader by tradition, leader of men by the gift of Providence. He was the nephew of Alexander McKenzie, head of the Northwest Company of Canada, who was the first white man to surmount the Northern Rockies and reach the shore of the Pacific, which he accomplished in 1793. Had you been McKenzie's guest at Fort Union in the fall of 1830 you would have participated in a rather amusing little drama.

The great gates of the stockade swung open and a party of about twelve French voyageurs emerged. Their leader, an old trapper named Berger, preceded them carrying an American flag, the legs of all were a little unsteady from the effects of the Dutch courage plentifully offered by the generous factor.

A cannon saluted their departure; the entire personnel of the fort streamed after them taking a final farewell, indulging in the

FROM PACIFIC RAILWAY REPORT

Hunting the Buffalo

facetiousness which grave danger always called forth in the days of the fur trader. These men were McKenzie's emissaries to the most dreaded barbarians in North America, the Blackfeet.

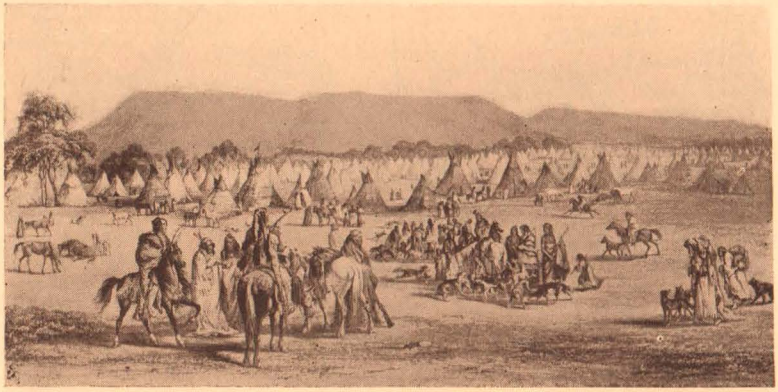
Some accounts say they were on foot, others on horseback, still others that they proceeded by keel boat. At any rate, they followed the course of the Missouri to the mouth of Maria's River—so-called by Captain Lewis in honor "of a lovely fair one."

In the vicinity of the present town of Fort Benton on the Great Northern Railway Berger came upon the savages. They belonged to that branch of the Blackfeet nation known as Piegans, who now occupy a reservation through which the railroad passes for many miles just east of Glacier Park.

At sight of these Indians about whom so fearful a tradition had developed, the men only thought of running away. But Berger, unfurling a large American flag, commanded them to fall in behind him and pluckily advanced. A band of naked, mounted warriors rushed upon them uttering blood-curdling yells, recognized Berger who had been in the service of the Hudson's Bay Company, leapt from their horses and greeted the white men with lively demonstrations of affection.

After this pleasant anti-climax, Berger persuaded a large band to return to Fort Union and arrange with McKenzie for a trading-post to be established among them.

The distance was greater than the Indians expected: they became suspicious or possibly merely bored. In any event the monotony of the journey was varied by their daily threats to kill and scalp every white man of the party and return to their own



BODMER IN MAXIMILIAN'S TRAVELS

Piegans' Camp

lands. At last, when within a day's march of Fort Union, they seemed about to put this painful plan into instant execution. Berger, however, made one last bargain with them: If the fort should not be reached the following day the white men would forfeit their lives without further remonstrance.

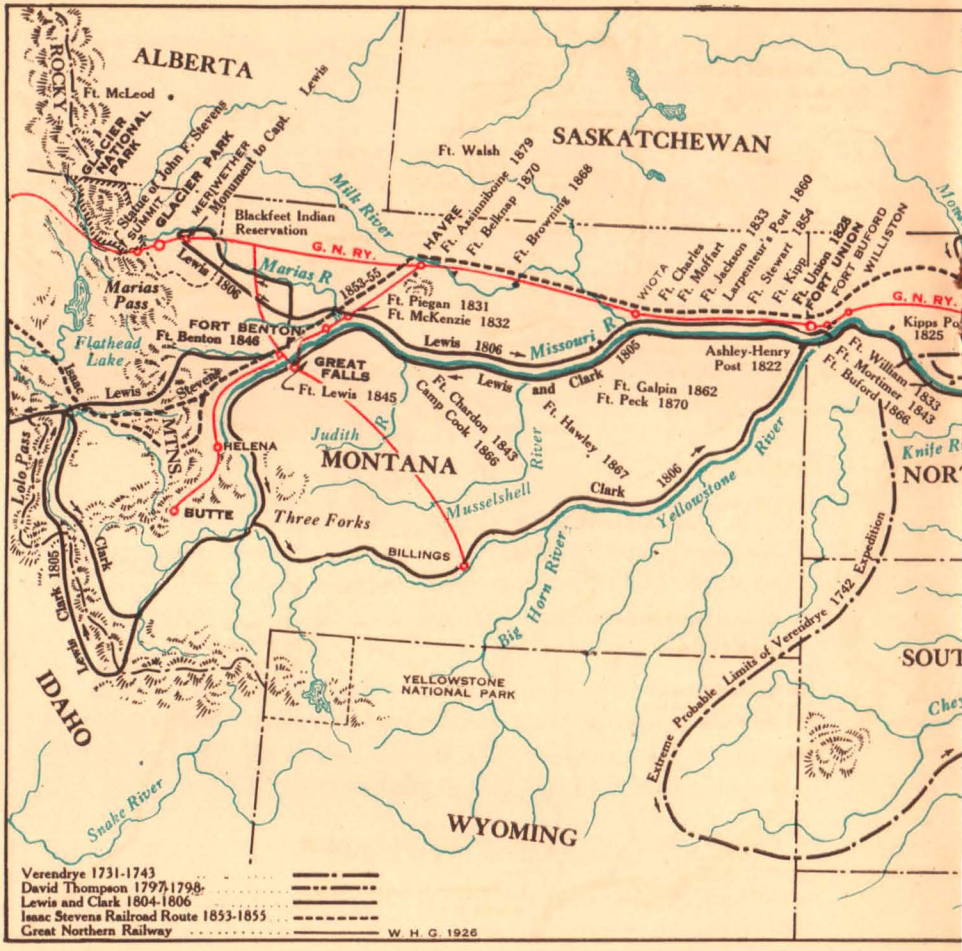
The great stockade and floating flag of the trading-post must have been a poignantly welcome spectacle to the little band of trappers. Its magnificence greatly impressed the savages and Berger led them in triumph to McKenzie.

Fort Piegan

The following year the first trading-post among the Blackfeet, Fort Piegan, was established. It was built in the angle formed by the confluence of Maria's River with the Missouri, near the present town of Chappell, where the Great Northern Railway crosses the Maria's.

The day after the arrival of the white men at this place hordes of Piegans appeared. They seemed friendly enough, but the presence of a tumultuous mob of curious, capricious and always uncertain-tempered savages would have made the building of the post very difficult.

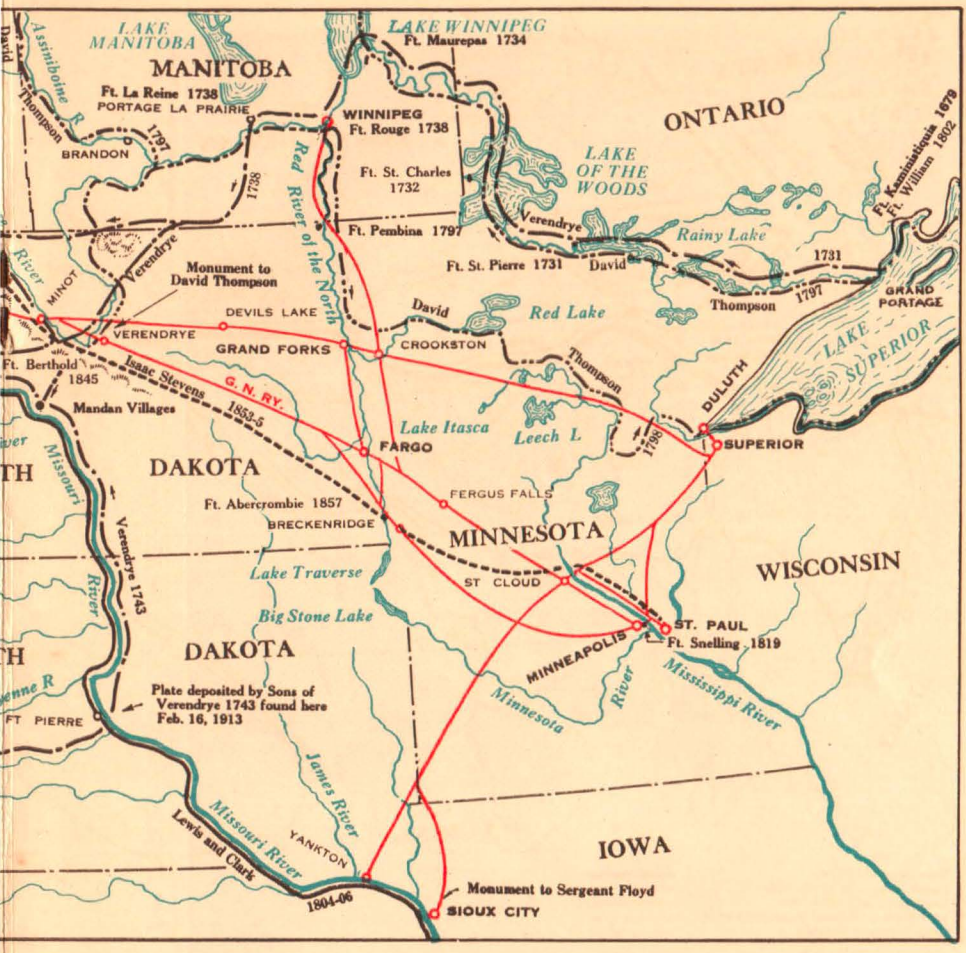
James Kipp, the well-known frontiersman who commanded the expedition, smoked with the chiefs, made presents to them and courteously requested them to withdraw their people for seventy-five days, at the end of which time, he said, the post would be completed and open for trade.



The Indians complied, but returned promptly on the appointed day astonished to find the buildings finished. "During the first ten days after the post was built there were traded, according to McKenzie, two thousand four hundred beaver skins with a prospect of bringing up the number to four thousand before the winter was over." (Chittenden) The price of a beaver skin—usually about $6.00—was the unit of exchange all through the fur country. Peltries were shipped in packs weighing about a hundred pounds each.

The Piegans would not permit a white man to set a trap in their country. They were, however, good beaver hunters themselves and the fort prospered.

In the spring Kipp left his post to take the furs down river to



Fort Union. His men refused to remain without him and the Indians, annoyed because the trading station was closed, burned it after the departure of the traders.

Fort McKenzie

The following summer when the keel boat Flora, loaded with trade goods and gifts from McKenzie to the Piegans, was ascending the river from Fort Union, she was caught one night in a violent storm. Dragged from her moorings, tossed and battered by wind and waves, she was at last hurled against a sand-bar and sunk with two of her crew, $30,000 worth of merchandise and the gifts which the large band of Blackfeet, who had come on to meet the boat, well knew were being sent to them. As logic does

BODMER IN MAXIMILIAN'S TRAVELS

Fort McKenzie and the Attack on the Blackfeet

not seem to have been a conspicuous attribute of the savage mind, it was impossible to persuade them that the gale and the loss of the keel boat had not been arranged by the leader of the party, David D. Mitchell, for the express purpose of defrauding them of their presents.

While he returned to Fort Union for a fresh supply of goods, they hastened westward to inform the rest of the tribe of these nefarious doings. When Mitchell and his men finally arrived at the site of Fort Piegan it was only to find the ashes of the ruined post and several thousand extremely hostile Indians waiting to receive him.

The history of frontier periods seems to be a catalogue of miracles. The Indians were in a murderous frame of mind and outnumbered the whites many hundreds to one. They could easily have annihilated the traders and helped themselves to the trade goods.

But by cajolery and an unbelievable exercise of tact and wisdom, Mitchell kept them placated until a new stockade was erected some miles away, the little cannon set up and the white men safely in their fort.

This post was called Fort McKenzie and with it began the permanent occupancy by the American traders of the Blackfoot country.

Prince Maximilian of Wied

In the summer of 1833 a shabby, toothless, bald, oldish gentleman in a white felt hat and a pair "of the greasiest trousers on the Missouri," turned up at this remote wilderness post. He was Maximilian of Wied, member of a small reigning house in Germany and a scientist of the first rank. His account of this expedition, together with Bodmer's paintings, form one of the most important and delightful records of the period.

These distinguished visitors had ascended to Fort Union by steamboat—the American Fur Company having brought this modern method of transportation as far up the river as the mouth of the Yellowstone. From there to Fort McKenzie, keel boats were used for another twenty years.

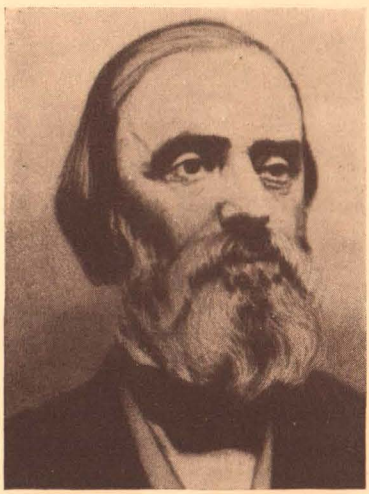
While at Fort McKenzie, Maximilian, who was a veteran of the Napoleonic Wars, took part in a very different kind of battle.

A band of Blackfeet were camped in and about the fort when a war party of Crees and Assiniboines fell upon them. Under the impression that hostilities were directed against the whites the

bastions and inner platform of the stockade were manned and the Indians fired upon. It was only when a hostile warrior seeing Blackfeet women and children being admitted to the fort rushed up to the gate crying "Make way White Man, I will shoot these enemies" that the traders understood the situation and stopped firing.

I think of all the curious scenes which have taken place on the historic old Missouri there is none more amusing than the return of Maximilian from Fort McKenzie to Fort Union.

An ardent naturalist he insisted on carrying back with him living specimens of the fauna of the country. Had you been able in September, 1833, to look "out of the car window" you would have seen floating down the Missouri a leaky, overloaded barge "which unfortunately proved too small," crowded with specimen cases and crates containing bears, squirrels and other interesting live stock. Besides Maximilian, his servant Dreidopple and the artist Bodmer there were a cook and three young Canadian boatmen to whom the navigation of the craft was entrusted, "ill qualified," say Maximilian, "for the voyage and did not even possess serviceable fire arms. . . . The great cages with my live bears were placed upon the cargo in the centre, and prevented us from passing from one end of the boat to the other; besides this, there was not room for us to sleep on board; this was a most unfavorable circumstance because it obliged us always to lie to for the night. . . . As we had reason to fear the Indians we regretted that my bears were unusually dissatisfied with their confinement and manifested their feelings by moaning and growling which might easily have attracted hostile visitors."



Major Alexander Culbertson, Factor at Fort Union

It poured rain, the boat leaked so badly that the striped squirrels were drowned; the botanical and other specimens had to be spread out almost daily to dry and

collected from the neighboring prairies when scattered by the high winds; the nightly uproar of the bears invited instant death. But in spite of all these untoward circumstances the party arrived safely at Fort Union. Unfortunately most of the specimens Maximilian had so carefully collected and guarded were later lost in the burning of the steamboat Assiniboine.

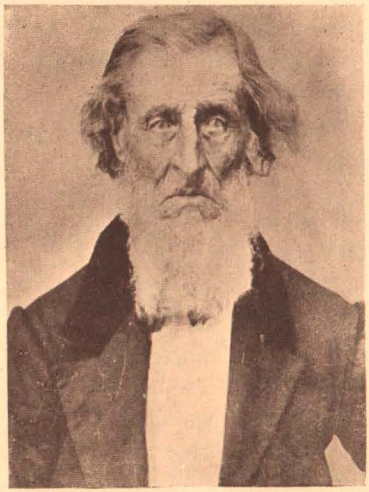
A very shocking occurrence brought about the destruction of Fort McKenzie. In 1843 a trader called Chardon was in charge of the post. During a brawl between engagés and Indians a negro servant was killed by the latter. In revenge Chardon, assisted by one Harvey, the most abandoned desperado in the fur trade, stabbed the chiefs who entered the fort and turned the cannon on the rest of the band of Piegans—men, women and children who were approaching the fort to trade.

This was the end of Fort McKenzie. It was, of course, destroyed, the malefactors escaped and established a temporary post called Chardon farther down the Missouri at the mouth of the Judith. But in 1845 a new fort was built some miles above the site of Fort McKenzie on the Missouri below the Great Falls. It was called Fort Lewis and later became the Fort Benton so celebrated in frontier annals.[1]

Fur-trading posts multiplied along the river between Forts Union and Benton and long after the beaver, marten, fox and other fine furs had practically disappeared, tens of thousands of buffalo robes annually floated down the river to the headquarters of the various companies in St. Louis.

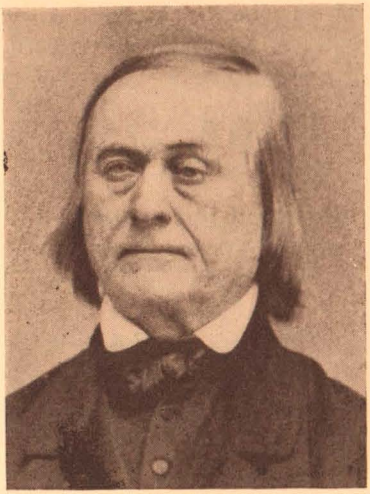
Other Wayfarers on the Historic Highway

It is not alone the vanished actors of the fur drama who have left ghosts along the Upper Missouri. Priests, soldiers, sportsmen, prospectors, scientists, engineers, immi-



James Kipp

1 The first location proved unsuitable and in 1846 Fort Lewis was moved to the present site of Fort Benton and in 1850 it was renamed Fort Benton in honor of Thomas H. Benton, legal adviser of the American Fur Company, Missouri's greatest statesman and friend of the Northwest.



FROM LARPENTEUR'S FORTY YEARS A FUR TRADER ON THE UPPER MISSOURI

Father De Smet

grants, all those who follow the frontier roads of adventure, necessity, achievement, passed this way.

Foremost among them is the noble figure of the missionary priest, Father de Smet. Time after time he appears at Fort Union after a perilous overland journey eastward across the trackless country from his missions beyond the Rockies; or, westward bound, continues up the Missouri a long river voyage begun in St. Louis.

Nor did he linger to enjoy the warm welcome, the comfort and safety offered by the fort. A few days to baptize the half-breed children, to admonish and pray with the men who, however hardened by long service in this desperate frontier traffic, never failed to yield respect and reverence to the simple, heroic and true-hearted missionary, and then off again on his arduous task. They were journeys of incredible hardship, over mountain passes, through tangled forests, along tumultuous rivers, across deserts, in snow, storm, cold or torrid heat, with scanty equipment and no protection from the savages but the almost universal trust and love they came to feel for this indefatigable and courageous Black Robe.

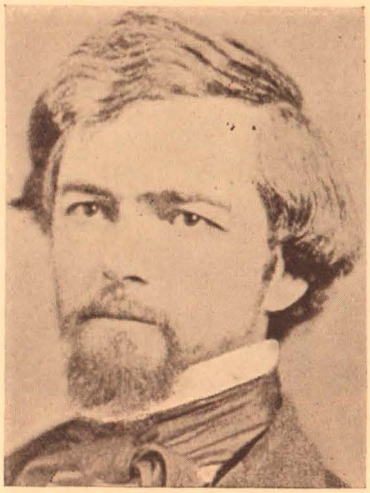
Father De Smet appeared for the first time among the Blackfeet at Fort Lewis (later Fort Benton) in 1846.

He had travelled eastward from St. Mary's mission in the Bitter Root Valley with a band of Flatheads. On the Judith River they met their hereditary foes the Blackfeet and due to the work of the missionaries a kind of peace was agreed to among them. Father Point who accompanied Father de Smet on this occasion remained with the Blackfeet a year.

In spite of Father de Smet's efforts, no permanent mission was established among this people until 1859. It was first built on the Teton River not far from Fort Benton and later on Sun River which flows into the Missouri just above the Great Falls. It was known as St. Peter's Mission.

In 1863 a steamer bound for the upper river was caught by low water and obliged to discharge freight and cargo at the mouth of Milk River, three hundred miles below Fort Benton, near the present station of Wiota on the Great Northern Railway.

A camp was made among the cottonwoods and the eighty or ninety passengers waited there a month for carts and wagons to reach them from Fort Benton.



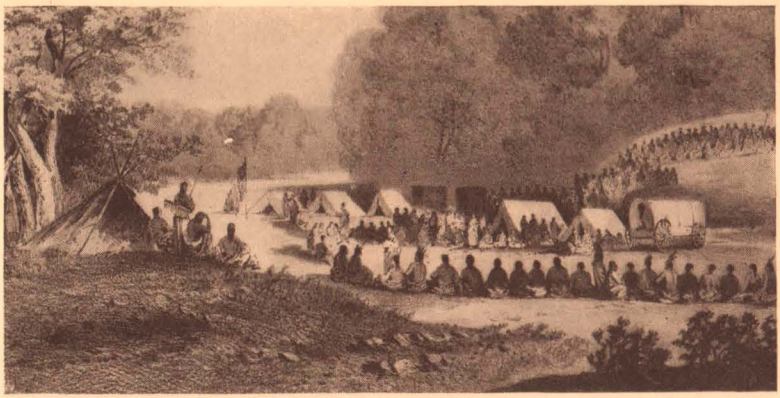
Isaac I. Stevens

The Sioux were at this time on the war-path and a band of six hundred braves attacked the little camp. Fortunate it was for the whites that Father de Smet was of their number. He advanced alone to meet the Sioux, was recognized and affectionately greeted by the chief and the lives of the ninety men and women entrenched among the cottonwoods were saved.

Repeatedly we find him official mediator between the government and a bewildered and outraged people who, seeing their lands invaded, treaties disregarded, the solemn promises made to them broken, were in many places in open revolt.

Isaac I. Stevens

Almost exactly on the spot where Father de Smet had brought the Flatheads and Blackfeet together at the confluence of the Missouri and the Judith Rivers a far more important treaty was consummated some years later. It was brought about by Isaac I. Stevens, governor of Washington territory. In 1853 Governor Stevens had ascended the Valley of the Missouri surveying for a northern railroad route to the Pacific. Incidentally, the route he recommended as being the most feasible is that now followed by the Great Northern all the way from St. Paul to Helena. The incessant conflict going on among the various tribes east and west of the Rockies made the country extremely unsafe for travellers and for immigration, and it was Governor Stevens' great desire to bring this unfortunate situation to an end.



FROM PACIFIC RAILWAY REPORT

Indian Council

In October, 1855, he saw the fruition of two years of unceasing effort among the Indians. A forest of lodge poles bristled on the plains along the Missouri River at the mouth of the Judith. Eight tribes, Blackfeet, Bloods, Piegans, Gros Ventres, Nez Perces, Koo-te-nays, Pend d'Oreilles, Flatheads were peaceably assembled for the first time in their long history of merciless warfare.

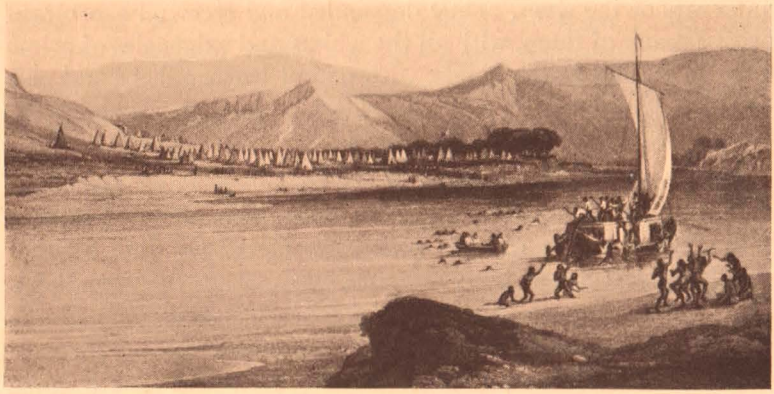
Many important agreements were made between the various Indian tribes and a formal treaty drawn up between the Blackfeet and the United States government. This treaty was ratified by the President in April, 1856; at present the Blackfeet Indians have a suit pending against the government based on alleged non-fulfillment of this and subsequent treaties.

The visit of any sympathetic listener to the present Blackfoot reservation east of Glacier Park produces many crumpled and dirty bits of paper which the Blackfeet believe to be copies of their treaty. Usually these documents turn out to be movie advertisements, printed ballot slips, or letters from professional Indian sympathizers filled with misguided propaganda.

Evidently many of the old full bloods possessed at one time printed records of the treaty which they put away in tomato cans or in sacred medicine bags and which like almost all of their possessions, great and small, have long since disappeared.

Development of Montana

It was not until 1859-60 that steamboats reached Fort Benton. They had ascended the river for short distances above Fort



BODMER IN MAXIMILIAN'S TRAVELS

Gros Ventres Camp

Union for some years and at last boats were built with light enough draft to navigate the "rain water creek," as Mississippi pilots called the Missouri, all the way to the frontier outpost below the Great Falls.

When the steamboat Chippewa with the famous pilot Joseph La Barge arrived in 1859 at the Brule Bottoms—the site of old Fort McKenzie, fifteen miles below Fort Benton—it reached a point farther from the sea by continuous watercourse than any boat had ever attained. The following year the Chippewa and also the Key West reached Fort Benton. It was three thousand five hundred and sixty miles by river from New Orleans to Fort Benton and the whole distance was from that time regularly covered by steamboats on a waterway unimproved by artificial works. (Chittenden)

The journey was one long bitterly fought contest between the river, plotting by every conceivable device to thwart the navigator, and the skill, patience and courage of captain, pilot and crew. Channels changed overnight; sand-bars rose by magic; floods swept whole forests into the river or the water was so low it could scarcely float the boat; hidden snags ripped gashes in the wooden craft; trees blew over and crashed into the cabin; machinery broke; boilers burst; ships caught fire. Half the time was spent by the crew, waist deep in water, unloading freight to ease the boat over a bar, or in steaming backward to try a new channel; and of course no travelling was attempted at night.

Only the most experienced and courageous men could undertake the navigation, and good pilots became the supreme

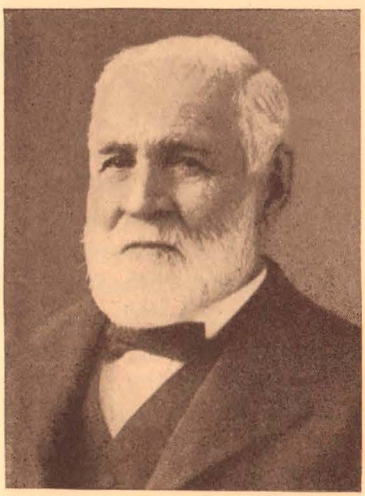
autocrats of the river. They demanded and received exorbitant prices; many of them, with all the whims and exigencies of prima donnas, elegant in diamonds, with patent leather shoes and pale kid gloves, arrived to take the wheel in carriages sent by the captain to bring them to the levees.

The greatest men, however, of the steamboat days were those who like Grant Marsh and Joseph La Barge were pilot and captain both. These leaders of their profession had little time for diamonds and kid gloves. Grave responsibilities devolved upon them.

In 1862 the long period of Sioux hostilities began and the Missouri was a storm center. The steamboats became military transports as well as passenger and freight boats. They came armed with cannon, their pilot-houses encased in boiler iron, their woodwork splintered with bullets.

If an error in navigation were made in a dangerous locality, well-armed Sioux warriors poured a deadly fire into the grounded ship from the surrounding bluffs. If the down river trip from Benton were undertaken too late, the steamboat froze stiff in the ice and stayed there till spring. A log hut was thrown up on shore, an unlucky portion of the crew told off to remain and guard the ship, and obliged to spend a perilous winter in the desolate, storm-swept plains, at the mercy of wandering Sioux.

Notwithstanding the many dangers and difficulties of travel by river the tide of humanity streaming westward along the Upper Missouri continued to swell in volume. Gold was the lure. It had been discovered in Idaho and then in the Montana gulches east of the divide. Gold seekers poured in and merchants to supply their wants. Steamboats carried thousands of dollars' worth of gold dust down river and a ruffian set of passengers, often as dangerous as the red enemy of the plains, whom the captain must command and control. The fact that the river business was immensely profit-



FROM HISTORY OF STEAMBOAT NAVIGATION ON THE MISSOURI

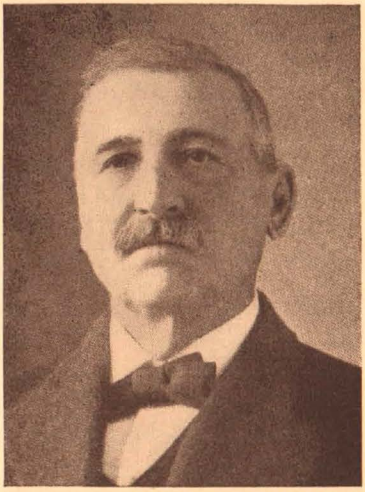
Captain Joseph La Barge

able, that twenty or thirty or even forty boats a year made the trip to Benton, shows that men equal to the situation were not lacking—and that they were not unappreciated. At least one of these pilot-captains received as much as $1,200.00 a month.

Fort Benton

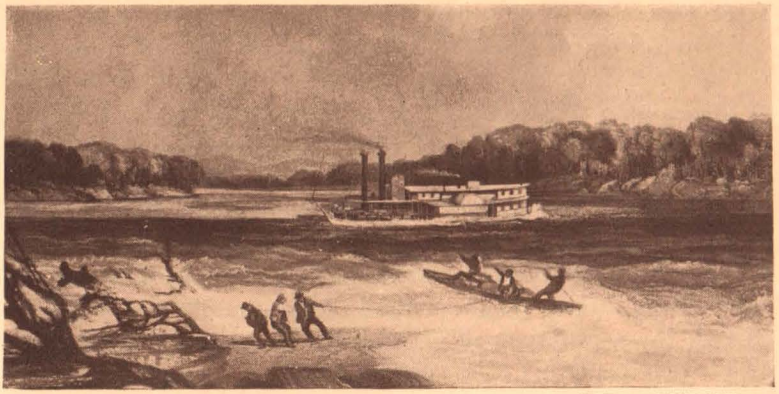
A town grew up outside the walls of old Fort Benton great enough now in population to dispense with the protection of stockades—a tumultuous crowd of gold-seeking adventurers, drawn from every class and kind of men spirited or desperate enough to answer the call of danger and gain from beyond the edge of civilization. Disbanded soldiers from armies of North and South, outlaws, criminals, respectable citizens, the old-time personnel of the fur trade—trappers, mountain men, voyageurs, wolvers, half-breeds and Indians—made up the motley crowd congregated at Fort Benton, and unfortunately for our prestige with the savage, those women who drag their sorry symbols of joy through the mud and dirt of treasure hunters' trails. The feeble arm of law did not reach from the capital of the new-made territory of Montana as far north as Benton. But there the riot of crime and lawlessness brought its own remedy—the swift and secret justice of the Vigilantes. This informal law-enforcement became so effectual in Fort Benton that men dropped their saddle-bags, heavy with gold dust in the trader's store and returned after a week's debauch to find them there untouched.

The straggling river town of log-walled, sod-roofed huts was the distributing center of a vast region. From there a famous military and emigrant trail, known as the Mullan road, crossed the Rockies and Bitterroots to Fort Walla Walla, thus connecting the Missouri with the Columbia River. Along this road out of Fort Benton the great freight teams passed, bound for the mining communities—six span of mules or oxen to a wagon, the crack



FROM THE CONQUEST OF THE MISSOURI

Captain Grant Marsh



BODMER IN MAXIMILIAN'S TRAVELS

Early Missouri River Steamboat

of the long whip and celebrated vocabulary of the mule skinners playing a constant accompaniment to the creaking loads.

In 1868 or 70 a boy fresh from a New England village boarded a Missouri River boat at St. Louis. The two and a half months on the river were one long and very exciting picnic. He shared for the fun of it the fried pork and tea of a trio of gold miners who had set up a small mess on the after-deck; he slept under the stars to the sound of softly lapping water; he watched the bluffs for feathered war bonnets and galloping ponies; helped hustle on board the wood which had been cut and stacked by those obscure daredevils of the plains, the wood-hawks—white men who risked and usually in the end succumbed to bullets and scalping knives of the Sioux to earn $8.00 a cord for their cut wood. He stood guard with the other armed passengers over the boat's crew when it landed to cut cottonwood for fuel, and he took his part in running skirmishes with Indians. Sportsmen shot at wild geese and elk and antelope from the deck, and once the steamer was held up ten hours while a migrating horde of buffalo hour after hour plunged over the crumbling bluff and swam across the river. For miles the channel was a tumultuous mass of shaggy monsters among which the boat could not hope to pass.

He listened awestruck and enchanted to the tales of the mountain men; he watched poker games and fights or stood beside the man at the wheel who sought with steady eyes to read the secrets of the treacherous brown river and who guided his top-heavy craft with such consummate skill. On the levee

FROM AN OLD SKETCH

Fort Benton

at Fort Benton, piled mountain high with freight, the youngster engaged passage—at an exorbitant price—on a stage leaving for Helena. On the first long grade of the Mullan road the passengers eased the load by walking, choking in the dust of the mule train ahead of them. When they reached the top of the hill, a tall, dust-grimed mule skinner indulged in a slow, derisive, pitying examination of our young friend. "I was wearing regular eastern shoes," said the old gentleman who told me the story last summer in Fort Benton, "and a top hat, and when he got all through looking me over the driver said, 'Have you got enough money to get you home?'"

The boy said he had. "Well, then, you turn right round and go—you're headed for the toughest country God ever put on earth and from the looks of you you won't last long enough to find out where you are."

But the shiny shoes and the high hat were not all there was to the young emigrant. He has already lasted some sixty odd years in Montana and plans to remain a good while longer.

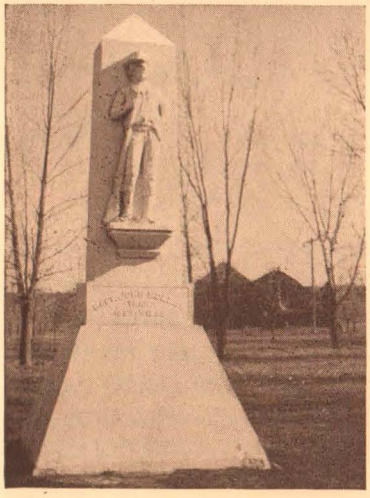
Fort Buford

The first permanent military establishment in Montana was Camp Cook, built on the south bank of the Missouri in 1866, at the mouth of the Judith River. The following year the famous old fur-trading post of Fort Union was torn down and its timbers used in the construction of Fort Buford now a station of that name on the Great Northern Railway. The building of this fort is an epic typical of the border warfare. Hostiles, inspired and encouraged by the incantations of the Ogolalla medicine

man Sitting Bull, constantly harassed the camp, shot into the tents, drove off the stock, captured the sawmill and from the circular saw Sitting Bull made a great war and medicine drum. I wonder where it is now? The American soldiers cut and hauled logs under armed escort and during the first long winter could not issue from their stockade to get water from the Missouri but were compelled to dig wells, so constant was the surveillance of the enemy. Dirt floors, dirt roof, snow drifting through unchinked logs, no window casements and no glass were the comforts of that hastily built post.

Fort Buford was one of the most important of the western forts. It occupied a strategic position at the confluence of the Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers; it was a supply base for the forts in the fatal Yellowstone country; Miles, Custer, Gibbon, Terry, Scott, all the famous fighters of the time passed that way and it was the headquarters of one of the most romantic and daring of all those romantic and daring knights-errant of the border—the white scouts.

When the Sioux troubles were at their height a quiet, well-educated youngster named Kelly came from New York state to the Upper Missouri in search of adventure—an excellent place to find what he was looking for. His first volunteer job was to carry the mail, quite alone, from the lower forts to Buford—a job previously performed by an entire company of soldiers. For a year he travelled safely where it seemed no white man could pass and live. The-Little-Man-With-A-Strong-Heart the Indians called him and believed that he led a charmed life. After a year of mail carrying to Fort Buford, Yellowstone Kelly, as he was called, built himself a cabin on the present site of Williston and, dressed in fringed deerskin and beaded moccasins, his long gun barrel covered with snake skin, he took to hunting and trapping in the wild country south of the Missouri. Early in the seventies he became one of the most famous scouts of the Indian wars.



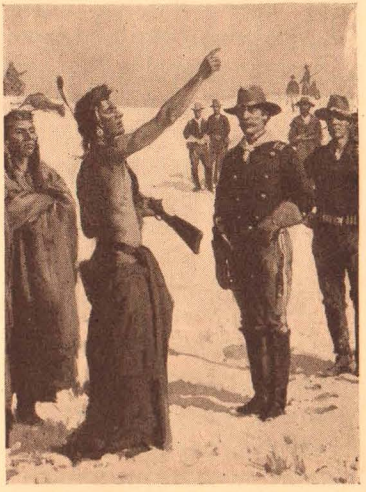
Mullan Statue, Fort Benton

Later he was a volunteer officer and held important positions under the War Department in Alaska, the Philippines and among the southwestern Indians.

Fort Shaw was established in 1867 on Sun River, and in 1879 Fort Assiniboine was erected near the present city of Havre. General Pershing spent the year of 1895 at this post as a young lieutenant of the 10th cavalry. The days of Indian fighting were ended when the trails of Sitting Bull crossed and recrossed the Upper Missouri, and Chief Joseph surrendered to General Miles in the Bear Paws just south of the railroad at Chinook, Montana, but a band of Crees, who had taken part in the last Riel rebellion ten years before, were wanted by the Canadian government. They were camped about Great Falls and when they heard of the approach of the soldiers from Fort Assiniboine, many of them fled. It took sixty-two days' hard riding, a campaign in which Pershing participated, to round them all up. They were duly shipped across the border, but promptly returned and were eventually given a reservation taken from a part of the old Fort Assiniboine military reserve—a land they still occupy.

In the early sixties overland immigration in covered wagons moved westward along the Upper Missouri under the semi-military protection of Captain Fiske. The first of these expeditions in 1862 camped near Last Chance Gulch shortly after gold was discovered; the emigrants remained there and were among the founders of the present city of Helena. The route they followed was that taken by Isaac Stevens in 1853 and later by the Great Northern Railway.

In 1867 a large emigrant train set out from Fort Ridgely with a certain Captain Davy at the head. It followed almost mile for mile the present route of the Great Northern Railway from Minnesota to Helena, Montana, crossing the entire state of North Dakota, a member of the expedition writes, without coming upon a single human habitation. On the



Surrender of Chief Joseph

Helena in Gold Rush Days

Milk River an amusing and dangerous incident took place, interesting because of its rather quaint revelation of savage psychology.

The party had been warned against bad Indians ahead and were proceeding cautiously when a band of five or six hundred well-armed warriors, naked and sinister in paint and feathers, bore down upon them. There could be no question as to their hostile purpose. The expedition was not equipped to offer adequate resistance and panic spread through the ranks.

At this critical moment one of the emigrants, a seasoned frontiersman, made a suggestion which could only have come from a man who knew Indians. He begged the captain to order out the brass band and have the men fall to playing instantly.

It is not probable that this band at best was very good, and doubtless the terror of the players did not tend to improve the quality. At any rate the sounds which issued from the strange, gleaming instruments, the like of which they had never seen before, so astounded and beguiled the warriors that they forgot to fight. Their women and children, who had been hidden in safe places till the shooting should be over, were lured from their retreat and the danger for the time being averted.

Passing of the Frontier

And still from every direction men and women poured into Montana; the fame of the placer mines grew and at Butte the greatest copper mines in the world outstripped the gold. The buffalo ranges became cattle ranches, Indians were retired to reservations.

State Capitol at Helena, Montana

At last canoe, keel boat, barge, steamboat, mule train, ox-cart, prairie schooner and stage-coach, all the old, laborious, expensive, dangerous methods of transportation gave way to the railroad and the modern history of the Upper Missouri began.

At Great Falls the tallest smoke-stack in the world towers above one of the largest smelting and refining plants in America. It lifts the fumes high above the plains where, on a June day over one hundred and twenty years ago, Meriwether Lewis found buffalo in such masses as he had never seen before; where he saw spray rise like a column of smoke from the plains and heard a "roaring too tremendous for any cause short of the great falls of the Missouri." He hurried forward and gazed, the first of all white men, on what he calls a "truly magnificent and sublimely grand spectacle." He longed for the pen of a poet or the brush of a painter to give some idea to the world of the sight which filled him with such "pleasure and astonishment."

Captain Clark, more matter-of-fact, and at the time preoccupied in dosing with strange remedies Sacajawea "the interpreter's wife," who had fallen ill, gives a more technical description of the falls which, he adds, "we had herd for several miles making a dedly sound," and which he, too, beheld with astonishment.

Today they would find that mighty power subdued, harnessed to copper wires and flashed hundreds of miles away to operate rich mines over which all unknowingly they had passed on their great westward journey.

There is now no place in Montana where the feeling of the past lingers more poignantly than in the shady, pleasant little city of

Rainbow Falls of the Missouri

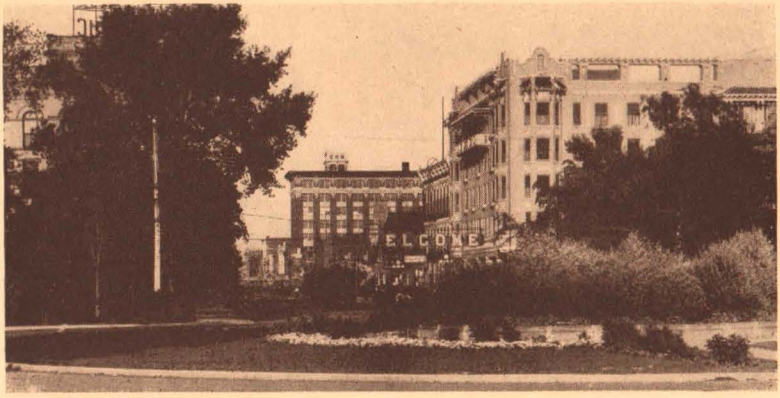
Fort Benton with its green plaza and great cottonwoods that hang murmuring over the brown waters of the Missouri. One of the bastions and part of the adobe walls of the trading-post still remain. And in the long, low workshop of the saddle-maker Sullivan a very few old survivors of the tumultuous days of fur trade and gold rush are still to be met.

The shop itself was established in the early seventies. Here came the cow-punchers—as fastidious of their specially made, hand-sewn saddles and silver-mounted bridles as fashionable ladies of their dress—who drove the great herds of longhorns northward over the Texas trail to the new ranches of Montana. Here came army officers from Fort Assiniboine; and here, too, you would have seen the men of the Northwest Mounted Police, smart in white gloves and scarlet coat, down from Fort Walsh or Fort McLeod. A part of their duty was to protect the Canadian fur posts from the competition of American traders who smuggled whiskey across the border—án amusing reversal of the direction of the present tide of bootlegging.

The old shop is very quiet now and Mr. Sullivan speaks regretfully of the gallant days before harness for farm horses took the place of Spanish tooled leather and polished silver ornament.

But to the old men who came into the long, low back room where the saddles were made, one drowsy afternoon last summer, the cattle days seem so recent as scarcely to belong to pioneer times.

One of the old men, the younger, had begun life in the mule freighting business and successfully survived the accident of a



Modern Great Falls

load of frozen buffalo meat tumbling over on him some sixty years ago.

Almost a century has passed since the other was born in Wales. When a boy he took ship from Liverpool and, like many of the pioneers from across the seas, travelled by way of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers to the heart of the Rockies without ever a day's journey by land.

"I walked ninety miles in '87," he said, "to that new town of Great Falls to see Jim Hill's train come in. That was the first railroad train I ever seen—and I never been on one yet."

A man who had never been on a railroad train—how interesting! "I must make a note of that."

"I wouldn't," observed the other veteran, "because it ain't so."

Finis

(Printed in U. S. A.)


GREAT
NORTHERN