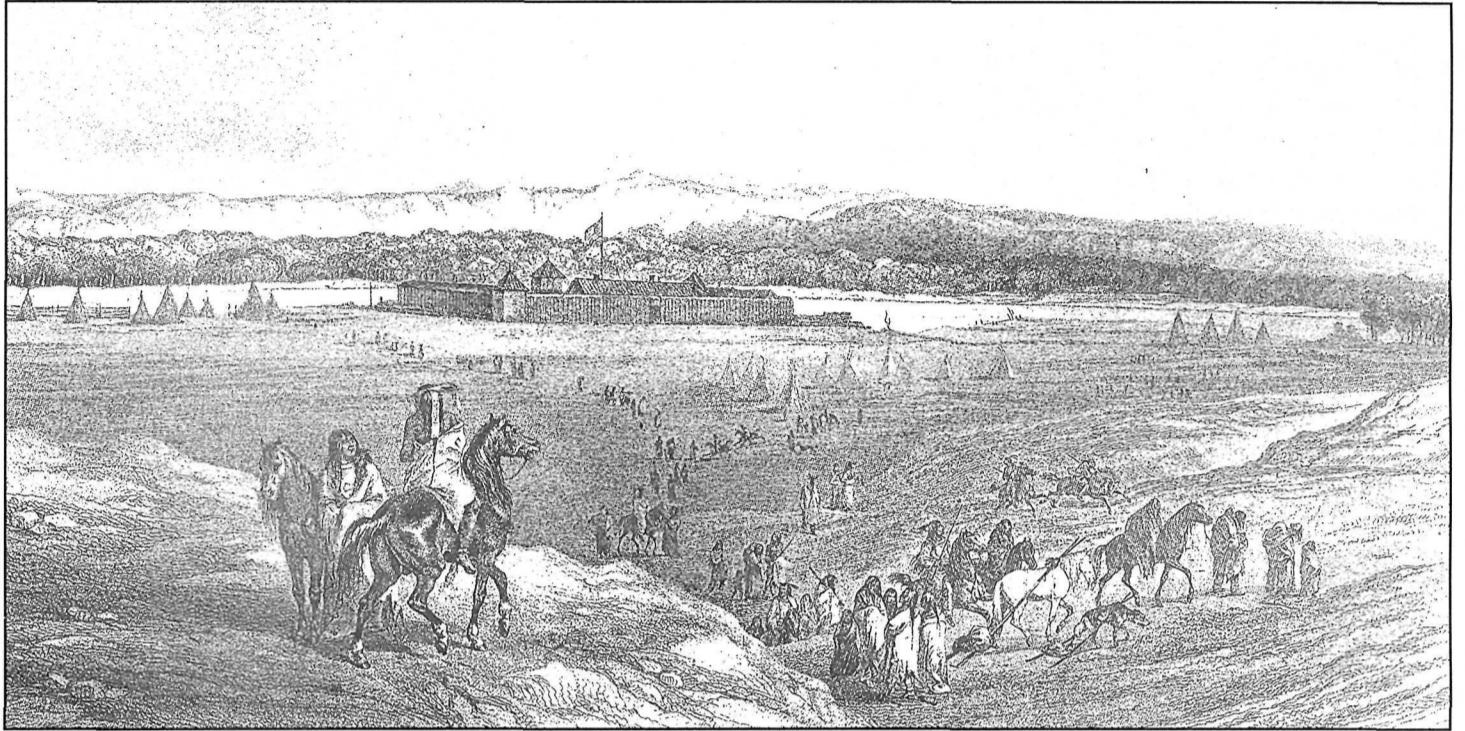


Fort Union Trading Post

THE ASSINIBOINE



Assiniboine Arriving at Fort Union – Karl Bodmer

ASSINIBOINE ORIGINS

Assiniboine, pronounced uh-SIN-uh-boin, comes from the Chippewa or Algonquian language family and means, “those who cook with stones.” This refers to stone boiling, the practice of heating stones directly in a fire and then placing them in water to boil it for cooking. British explorers and traders also used the name “Stoney” for the tribe. The Assiniboine term for themselves is “Nakodabi.”

The Assiniboine speak a Siouan dialect and were once part of the Yanktonai Sioux, living as one people with them in the Lake Superior



region of present-day Minnesota and southwestern Ontario. The Assiniboine split from the Sioux around 1640 and migrated westward onto the northern plains. They adopted the plains culture, becoming nomadic hunter-gatherers and moving their villages when necessary to find food. Assiniboine dress, shelters, tents, and customs are similar to those of the Plains Cree of the trans-border region of North Dakota, Montana, and Canada.

After acquiring horses through trade with other Indians, the Assiniboine ranged over greater expanses searching for buffalo and wild plants. Sometimes they traded meat and pelts with sedentary tribes such as the Hidatsa and Mandan on the Missouri River, receiving in exchange corn, squash, beans, sunflowers, and tobacco.

After white traders entered their domain, the Assiniboine bartered furs with both the French and English, receiving guns and other European trade goods such as brass kettles, knives, wool blankets, and metal implements. It was the Assiniboine who aided white contact with the Mandan. In 1738, French fur trader and explorer La Verendrye accompanied an Assiniboine trading party south from a post in Manitoba, reaching a Mandan earthlodge village in cen-

tral North Dakota, near today's Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site.

FORT UNION AND THE ASSINIBOINE

By 1828, when Fort Union was established, the Assiniboine inhabited northwest North Dakota, northeast Montana, and southern Saskatchewan. Kenneth McKenzie, Fort Union's first bourgeois or post manager, received permission from the Assiniboine to establish a trading post in their midst. McKenzie parlayed this agreement with the Assiniboine on behalf of John Jacob Astor and his American Fur Company.

The Assiniboine's vast knowledge of fur trading was of great value to the American Fur Company. As the dominant tribe in the Confluence area (where the Yellowstone River enters the Missouri), they exerted much influence and power and contributed to the success of Fort Union's fur business. During the fort's thirty-nine years, the Assiniboine were the main trading partners; they also protected the fort and its occupants. Fort Union's inhabitants found them to have a generous hospitality; they formed great friendships with the tribe. Many Assiniboine women became wives of Fort Union personnel, including Bourgeois Edwin Denig who in 1851 married Deer Little Woman; and Clerk (later Bourgeois) Charles

Assiniboine Man – Karl Bodmer

Larpenteur, who married Makes Cloud Woman.

For some of their history, the Assiniboine allied with the Cree against the Blackfeet, who lived further west on the Missouri. No military post was built to police the Assiniboine and no American troops ever warred against them. Some Assiniboine worked as scouts. In 1885, Assiniboine scouts assisted the Canadian North West Field Force in tracking down the Metis, a group of mixed-blood people who rebelled in Canada.

SMALLPOX TRAGEDY

In 1837 tragedy struck the tribes on the Upper Missouri. The American Fur Company steamboat *St. Peters* arrived at Fort Union, inadvertently carrying an extremely virulent strain of smallpox. The disease reached the fort as a band of Assiniboine arrived to trade. The traders urged the people not to come, as the fort was a plague post; they paid no heed. Other bands came as well and smallpox spread throughout the tribe. Before the disease the Assiniboine numbered 10,000 people, a number reduced by half with the epidemic.

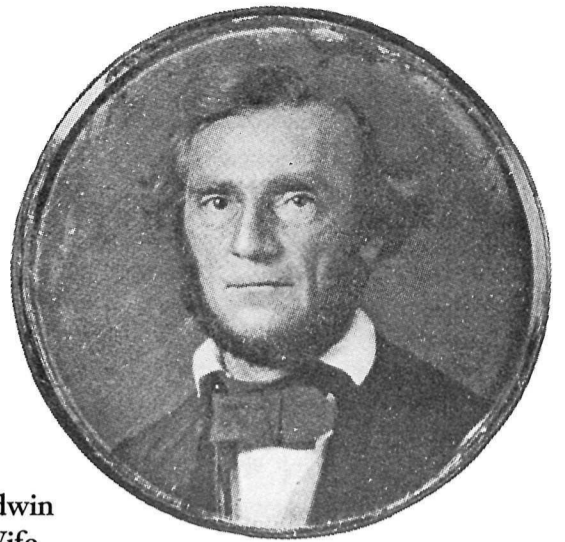
In 1867, the U.S. Army purchased Fort Union, dismantled it, and used the materials to aid in the construction of Fort Buford. In his memoir, *Forty Years a Fur Trader on the Upper Missouri*, Charles Larpenteur recalled the reaction of Crazy Bear, a chief of the Assiniboine: "We cannot understand those whites. We had a good country, which we always thought they would save for us; they have given it to our enemies [the Sioux]. Fort Union, the house built for our fathers, in the heart of our country,

the soldiers have pulled it down to build their Fort Buford, where we are scarcely permitted to enter."

THE ASSINIBOINE TODAY

The chemistry of the Upper Missouri had changed. In the 1870s different bands of Assiniboine settled on reservations on either side of the United States-Canada border. Today in Montana, the Assiniboine share the Fort Belknap Reservation with the Gros Ventres,

and the Fort Peck Reservation with the Sioux. In Saskatchewan, they share one reserve with the Sioux, and another with the Cree and Chippewa. A third band resides on two other reserves in Saskatchewan. The contributions of the Assiniboine to the success of Fort Union were many and dare not be overlooked.



Bourgeois Edwin Denig and Wife, Deer Little Woman



Fort Union and Distribution of Goods to the Assiniboines – John Mix Stanley

