

Fort Union Trading Post

NATIVE WOMEN

The Upper Missouri tribes including the Assiniboine, Crow, Blackfeet, Plains Cree, Plains Chippewa (Ojibwa), Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara, and Sioux (Lakota) came to Fort Union to trade and establish ties in the region. Native women of these tribes were crucial to the Upper Missouri trade. Most visibly they served as romantic companions to non-Natives. However, Native women were not important simply because they married the men of Fort Union. They also served as political and cultural mediators, as producers, traders, and consumers and even as warriors.

AS ROMANTIC COMPANIONS . . .

Native women became involved in the fur trade often through mixed relationships. At Fort Union, women from various Upper Missouri tribes married and formed relationships with the non-Native men of Fort Union, from the *engagés* (laborers) to the *Bourgeois* (managers). These kinship ties helped establish good trade relations between Natives and non-Natives. We will never know the stories of many of these women. The best records on Native women of Fort Union are of those few who married the *Bourgeois*.

Natawista or Medicine Snake Woman, was the Blackfeet wife of Fort Union *Bourgeois* Alexander Culbertson. They united in a Native American camp outside the fort in 1840 and remained married for nearly 30 years. Hai-kees-kak-wee-yah or Little Deer Woman, an Assiniboine, “married” *Bourgeois* Edwin Denig in a Christian ceremony aboard a steamboat headed to St. Louis in 1855. The couple had been together for many years at Fort Union beforehand. They remained together until Denig’s early death in 1858. In his will, he left everything to her and their métis children. The marriages of Natawista and Hai-kees-kak-wee-yah to the *Bourgeois* show that strong romantic bonds existed not just at Ft. Union, but elsewhere in the Upper Missouri Outfit. It is important to remember, however, that intercultural relationships varied greatly on the Upper Missouri. The people of Fort Union, Native or non-Native, were not especially wealthy, with the exception of the *Bourgeois* and a few traders and travelers. Intercultural relationships could be temporary arrangements beneficial to either or both sides or long marriages that spanned several decades.

AS CULTURAL AND POLITICAL MEDIATORS . . .

In 1853, Alexander Culbertson was selected by Congress as a special agent to the Blackfeet tribe by since “he had married a full-blood Blackfeet woman.” Just having Natawista as a wife secured Culbertson’s position. She did more than just reassure her people about white settlers. It was Natawista, not her husband, that convinced Blackfeet men and women to allow the railroad to pass through tribal lands. Natawista was just one of many Native women who served as mediators or “go-betweens” at Fort Union and along the Upper Missouri.



George Catlin's, "Assiniboine Woman and Child," Fort Union, 1832 (Image provided courtesy of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison, Jr. Object #: 1985.66.181).



Woman of the White Buffalo Cow Society. Drawn by Maximilian on a sheet of paper separate from the journals (Courtesy of *The North American Journals of Prince Maximilian of Wied: September 1833-August 1834*, 1986.49.491).

Another example of Native women as mediators is the Mandan White Buffalo Society. Mandan women performed this religious ritual inside Fort Union in exchange for payments of trade goods. Prince Maximillian described this society in great detail in his journals, which suggests its significance at Fort Union (See Maximillian quote). Traditionally, these groups made up of Native women were responsible for ensuring good hunts or plentiful harvests. Women often entertained at Fort Union with ceremonial dances and earned trade goods. Traders must have appreciated these dances since they were performed so often. Employees usually gave the dancers payment in the form of trade goods, such as beads. These religious rituals show that Upper Missouri Native women were important as cultural mediators. Participation in these type of religious dances also gave Native women another opportunity to acquire trade goods.

AS PRODUCERS, TRADERS, & CONSUMERS . . .

Long before non-Natives entered the Upper Missouri region, Native women controlled the trade amongst different tribes. Agricultural Native villages, such as the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara along the Missouri River offered corn, squash, beans, and pumpkins—all grown by women—in exchange for dried buffalo meat, dressed hides, and clothing items prepared by women of the nomadic tribes. Native women both produced and distributed items thus they were the principal traders.

Contact with non-Natives elevated men's roles in trade as horses and guns became more valuable trade items than food and clothing. Still, Native women traded as they always had. Upper Missouri Native women not only prepared items used for trade at Fort Union, such as buffalo robes and food, but they were often the prominent traders and consumers at the Fort. Calico from France was the most traded item at Fort Union. Native women came to desire the calico as it was cooler in the summer than buffalo hide. This means Native women were regular customers at the trade house. European visitors and traders wrote of the conditions of Native women on the Upper Missouri. For example, Swiss artist Rudolph Kurz often remarked that Native women were treated like slaves or property by Native men. In reality, Kurz and others may have not understood a culture that vastly differed from the Euro-American model. No doubt, Native women worked hard but so did Euro American women of the 19th century who worked on farms or in factories. Unlike Euro-American women, however, it seems that Native women often personally profited from that labor (See Denig quote). Native women became an important market for traders and the fur companies.

AS WARRIORS . . .

In many ways, Native women had more social freedom than European women of the 19th century. The most evident example of this near Fort Union is the story of Woman Chief. Woman Chief or Pine Leaf was a Gros Ventre who had been taken captive by the Crow when she was a young girl. Denig recorded the story of Woman Chief, as he had known her for twelve years. She often came to Fort Union to trade. Woman Chief was not only an accomplished hunter but a fierce warrior as well

(See Kurz quote). Denig recorded she could kill four or five buffalo, cut up

An idealized sketch of Woman Chief aka Bar-chee-am-pe (Pine Leaf) from James Beckwourth, an African American mountain man and fur trader who spent much of his life among the Crow. His account, although useful, is also thought to be romanticized and the details of Woman Chief seem somewhat exaggerated (See *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth*, 1856, reprint 1965, pg. 204).

Woman Chief reveals that although woman warriors may have been rare in Upper Missouri society, it was not frowned upon but just the opposite.

Woman Chief was a respected and celebrated leader, not just among the Crows, but among whites at Fort Union as well.

Denig himself seemed to have thought her status among the Crow was unique, when in fact it was not unheard of for women in Upper Missouri tribes to become warriors.

Travelers, Artists, and Traders Describe Native Women of Fort Union

Prince Maximillian describes the Mandan White Buffalo Society:

“They paint one eye according to the color of their liking. These are mostly old women. [They] have some tattooed lines running down their mouths on their chins. On their heads they wear a hussar's cap [made of] a broad band of skins from a white buffalo cow, with a tuft of feathers in front.”

Bourgeois Denig describes the Arikara trade at Fort Union:

“carried on by their women who bring the corn by pansful or the squashes in strings, and supply themselves by the exchange with knives, hoes, combs, beads, paints, etc. . . . It may also be observed that though the women do all the labour of tilling they are amply compensated by having their full share of the profits.”

Rudolph Kurz describes Woman Chief:

“She gave Mr. Denig a genuine Blackfoot scalp which she had captured herself. How amazed as well as overjoyed was I when Mr. Denig afterwards presented the long black scalp to me!”

