

THE FUR TRADE IN THE NORTHWEST AS AN INSTRUMENT
OF NATIONAL EXPANSION, 1821-1846

Sellers



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APPROVED:

William T. Hagan
Major Professor

H W Kamp
Minor Professor

Frank H. Gifford
Director of the Department of History

Robert B. Toulson
Dean of the Graduate School

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Richard West Sellars, B. S.

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CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND TO THE FAR WESTERN FUR TRADE

1803 to 1821

In 1803, with the acquisition of the Louisiana Territory, the United States extended its territorial domain for the first time to the Rocky Mountains. The Louisiana Purchase--over 900,000 square miles, more than doubling the size of the United States of 1803--extended from the mouth of the Mississippi River north and west to the westernmost reaches of the Mississippi drainage basin along the Continental Divide. The entire territory was drained by a vast system of streams inhabited by beaver and other commercially valuable fur bearing animals. The largest and most important stream was the Missouri River which, along with some of its tributaries, reached to the Divide and to some of the remotest regions of Louisiana.

Soon to be described by Meriwether Lewis as the richest fur country in the world,¹ these mountain regions and adjacent lands in the northwestern section of Louisiana (principally

¹Meriwether Lewis to Thomas Jefferson, September 23, 1806, Donald Jackson, editor, Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, with Related Documents, 1783-1854 (Urbana, 1962), p. 321.

those lands drained by the Missouri River, the Yellowstone, the Big Horn, and, to the south, the North Platte, which the expedition did not see) were to be the setting for vigorous fur trading activity during the decades following American acquisition. Across the Continental Divide and to the west of these American owned territories were other areas whose streams were to be trapped by the same men who operated east of the mountains. These rivers, the upper courses of the Green River, reaching to approximately forty miles southeast of the Teton Mountains, and of the Snake River, which rises in the Tetons and adjacent ranges, became very important in the mountain trade. To the west of the northern Rockies, from the Continental Divide to the Pacific Ocean and inclusive of the Snake River and the upper Green River, lay the Oregon Territory, rich in furs, and, in 1803, still the object of rival claims by the United States and European powers.

These areas, Oregon and the northern American Rocky Mountains, represented a "New Northwest" for the United States. As in the "Old Northwest" between the Ohio and upper Mississippi rivers, the British again sought the favor of the Indians and created formidable opposition to American interests. Aside from official explorations, the fur traders were the only Americans in the "New Northwest" until the scattered missionaries of the 1830's and the emigrant trains of the Forties. For four decades the fur traders were the manifestation of American expansion in the Northwest: in the northern Rockies

east of the Divide the trappers were a reminder to the British of outright American ownership; in Oregon, from the upper Green and Snake rivers west to the Pacific Ocean, a reminder of American claims.

Thus the trapper's activities in the Northwest were a tangible and real substantiation, ready for the national government to use whenever it pleased to claim dominion. But the fur traders pursued their game not for the benefit of the United States, rather for their own personal profit. As the trade progressed, however, they proved not unwilling to be used by the government for its designs on the West, as long as the cooperation would benefit the trade. Reciprocally, the government was often ready and willing to use the fur trade in its expansionist plans; that is, whenever sufficient agreement on national objectives could be reached to permit action.

Inability of the public and private interests to cooperate became a frequent handicap, and partially because of this, the Americans were not able to establish a lasting trade in the Northwest until 1822, nineteen years after the Louisiana Purchase. During this period, expansion of the mountain trade was highly erratic, frustrated by setbacks, temporary retreats, and even complete withdrawals. At the same time to the north, the British owned Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company, together representing

the only formidable opposition to American trade interests, extended their own bitter trade rivalry to the Canadian Rocky Mountains and in to Oregon. The men involved in the northwestern trade before 1822 were dominated principally by their relationship and reaction to the British fur companies and the Indians. A third important element was the United States' factory system. Although only distantly related to the commerce of the western mountains, the system nevertheless reflected overall governmental attitudes toward the trade. Until 1822, the government used it as the major means of controlling the trapping industry.

The factory system was already well developed by the time the first American trappers reached the western mountains. On March 3, 1795, Congress initiated the system by appropriating \$50,000 to buy Indian trade goods;² and the next year they raised the appropriation to \$150,000 and provided for the establishment of government trading posts, or factories. The President was to have control of the system, the establishment of factories, and the appointment and command of the trade agents, known as the factors.³ Under the factory system the government was to trade with the Indians at about cost prices to keep them well supplied with quality material goods and to guard against their being cheated in free trade.

²U. S. Statutes at Large, I, 443.

³Ibid., pp. 452-453.

The factors were given implicit instructions about their dealings with white traders, the prohibition of alcohol, and fair treatment of the Indians. They were directed to "obtain and preserve [the Indians] friendship, to be conciliatory in all [their] intercourse with them, and, by every proper means in [their] power, to secure [the Indian's] attachment to the United States."⁴

These instructions reflect the overriding reason for the factory system, that of fostering good Indian relations. Both humanitarianism and the protection of whites on the frontier made good relations desirable. If the Indians remained friendly, then the costs of expensive frontier wars could be saved. More urgently for the expansionists in the government, good Indian relations would undermine Spanish and British influence upon the Indians, and thus help secure the trans-Appalachian West.⁵ Before beginning the factory system, the Congress had reactivated an old law from the Confederation period which forbade any private trading with the Indians except by those persons licensed by the government. Thus, by the use of factories and of licensing procedures, the government had a system they hoped would operate

⁴Instructions to factors by John Mason, Superintendent of Indian Trade, December 12, 1807, American State Papers: Indian Affairs, Vol. II (Washington, 1832-1834), p. 520 hereafter cited as ASP:IA).

⁵Royal B. Way, "The United States Factory System for Trading with the Indians," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, VI (September, 1919), 221.

to the benefit of the Indians and the United States against ruthless foreign and American traders.

Theoretically, the factory system was extended to the Far West in 1804, when the government declared it and other public laws to be in effect throughout the Louisiana territory.⁶ Later, Thomas Jefferson expressed the belief that as the factories were established up the Missouri, they would oppose the British entry into the Missouri trade with the effectiveness of "as many armies."⁷ However, Fort Osage near present day Kansas City became the factory farthest up the Missouri. It was established in 1808, closed and temporarily moved at the beginning of the War of 1812, reopened again in 1815, and continued to operate until the end of the factory system.⁸

Effective control of the far western trade through the use of factories did not evolve. The far western trade did not mature until after the factories were closed, and the

⁶U. S. Statutes at Large, II, 285.

⁷Thomas Jefferson to Henry Dearborn, August 20, 1808, Andrew A. Lipscomb, editor, The Writings of Thomas Jefferson (Washington, 1904), XII, 140; One of Jefferson's less charitable schemes in use of the factory system was revealed to Secretary Dearborn in an earlier letter. He hoped the system could be used to get the Indian in debt, "which, when too heavy to be paid, they are always willing to lop off by a cession of land." Thomas Jefferson to Henry Dearborn, August 12, 1802, Clarence Edwin Carter, editor, The Territorial Papers of the United States, Vol. VII, The Territory of Indiana, 1800-1810 (Washington, 1939), pp. 69-70.

⁸Ora Brooks Peake, A History of the United States Indian Factory System, 1795-1822 (Denver, 1954), pp. 19-23.

remoteness of the western fur bearing regions would have created tremendous problems for such control had it been attempted. Furthermore, by the time the factory system was terminated, the far western trade had already developed characteristic methods of operations to suit its particular conditions. Throughout the Great Lakes area, the fur companies had found it profitable to establish permanent posts and to allow Indians to do most of the trapping. The whites acted mainly as traders, either remaining at the posts to receive their customers, or, if the competition required it, going out among the Indians to trade. With either type of operation, this trade was closer to civilization and better adapted for government observation and control, yet it still produced numerous law violations and much strife. As the trade of the Far West began to develop, however, the Indians of the area generally showed an unwillingness to trap. Whenever they did trap they preferred to trade for the superior quality goods of the British, thus forcing the Americans to harvest their own furs in the mountains.⁹ With practically no Indian participation in the early far western trade, there was no demanding need for extending the factory system into the region. The absence of factories in the Far West is indicative of the fact that the government was more concerned

⁹Lewis Cass to Andrew Jackson, February 8, 1832, Senate Documents, 22nd Congress, 1st Session, No. 90 (Serial No. 213), p. 3.

with the fur industry in areas closer to civilization and therefore easier to control. Rarely in the early and frustrating decades of the far western trade would the government give its support and encouragement to the trappers in the remote regions.

A very great exception to this over-all attitude was found in the efforts of Thomas Jefferson, one of America's two greatest expansionist presidents. As early as 1786, while in Paris, he had shown his interest in the Far West by promoting an expedition to the West Coast by way of Russia and Alaska. The Russian government halted this venture, but Jefferson's interest in exploring the western territories continued.¹⁰ As president, this concern became involved with promoting the fur trade. Prior to the actual purchase of Louisiana, he delivered a secret message to Congress, in which he requested funds for exploration of the territory, and noted the British activity in the Northwest, and their intercourse with the Indians on the upper Missouri. He also observed that with one continuous artery of transportation (the Missouri), the Americans would have an important advantage in the contest for the mountain trade against the British, who had to use a series of lakes, rivers, and portages to transport their goods to eastern markets. Thus, Jefferson saw the opportunity to secure the far western

¹⁰"Autobiography," Lipscomb, Writings of Jefferson, I, 101-102.

trade to the Americans instead of the British. Jefferson planned that leaders of the expedition would confer with the Indians about commercial possibilities and, more specifically, to "get admission among them for our traders as others [the British] are admitted."¹¹ Following trade alliances, friendship and close political ties would naturally arise between the Indians and the United States.

For the benefit of the French and other interested foreign parties, Jefferson claimed other reasons for promoting an expedition on to what was still foreign soil. He insinuated that the plan was a "literary pursuit" for scientific and geographic knowledge.¹² Yet he did not equivocate in his instructions to Lewis in November, 1803, when he stated that "the object of your mission is single, [to seek] the direct water communication from sea to sea formed by the bed of the Missouri & perhaps the Oregon."¹³ Thus, in light of his views on the fur trade, Jefferson's desire even for geographical knowledge, about which he otherwise had a natural curiosity, was commercially motivated. Commerce (principally the fur trade), geography, and expansionism were closely related on the Lewis and Clark expedition.

¹¹Report of Thomas Jefferson to Congress, January 18, 1803, Jackson, Lewis and Clark, pp. 12-13.

¹²Thomas Jefferson to Bernard L'Acépède, February 24, 1803, ibid., pp. 15-16.

¹³Thomas Jefferson to Meriwether Lewis, November 16, 1803, ibid., p. 137.

Within three years, the expedition had returned to St. Louis, having explored much of the main courses of both the Missouri and the Columbia. From St. Louis on September 23, 1806, Lewis made his initial report to Jefferson with very positive remarks about the fur trade: "We view this passage across the Continent as affording immense [sic] advantages to the fur trade. . . ." Further, "The Missouri and all it's branches from the Chyenne [sic] upwards abound more in beaver and Common Otter, than any other streams on earth, particularly that portion of them lying within the Rocky Mountains." Lewis also proposed that these furs could be shipped down the Columbia and thence to China.¹⁴ Aware of the increasing British strength in the northwestern trade, Lewis did not hesitate to advise aggressive government support. In the same report he declared: "if we are to regard the trade of the Missouri as an object of importance to the United States; the strides of [the British] toward the Missouri cannot be too vigilantly watched nor too firmly and speedily opposed by our government."¹⁵

¹⁴Meriwether Lewis to Thomas Jefferson, September 23, 1806, *ibid.*, p. 321.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 322.

Lewis' report was made in the fall of 1806.¹⁶ Two years later, as a first move, the United States established Fort Osage on the Missouri. But Indian hostilities on the upper river would soon make it too dangerous to establish additional factories farther up the Missouri and would delay the development of the far western trade. There is other evidence that the Lewis and Clark expedition created considerable interest in the prospects of the mountain trade. Even as they made their way back to St. Louis, the explorers met trappers bound for the mountains. Within a year numerous small hunting parties were on the upper river, some of them going to the area of the Three Forks, the headwaters of the Missouri.¹⁷

One important enterprise began when Manuel Lisa, an experienced St. Louis fur trader described by Washington Irving

¹⁶One other contemporary expedition met with much less success. In July, 1806, only two months before Lewis and Clark returned to St. Louis, Zebulon Pike began his trip to the headwaters of the Red and Arkansas Rivers. These rivers are western tributaries of the Mississippi, and thus, according to the purchase treaty with France, were part of the Louisiana Territory. Pike's expedition was linked to a plan of Governor James Wilkinson, who wished to further his own ambitions in the Southwest. But the trip was sanctioned by the War Department, which continually received reports from Pike. The Spanish, who claimed the area Pike was to explore, ended the expedition with a military arrest of Pike and his men in February, 1807. W. Eugene Hollon, The Lost Pathfinder, Zebulon Montgomery Pike (Norman, 1949), p. 165.

¹⁷Dale L. Morgan, editor, The West of William H. Ashley (Denver, 1964), p. xxxi.

as a "man of bold and enterprising character,"¹⁸ formed a partnership for trading on the upper Missouri. Beginning operations in the spring of 1807, Lisa's men headed up the river to the mouth of the Yellowstone and followed that river to the mouth of the Big Horn in present-day south-central Montana. There they constructed Fort Raymond and traded and trapped in the surrounding area with great success.¹⁹ Already the threat of Indian hostilities caused Lisa to avoid the Three Forks area. These rivers were the home of the Blackfeet, the most fierce of the tribes on the upper river.²⁰ At this time they were particularly aroused against Americans since two Piegans, members of the Blackfoot tribe, had lost their lives in a skirmish with the Lewis and Clark expedition.²¹

Returning to St. Louis in 1808, Lisa formed the St. Louis Missouri Fur Company in the spring of 1809. Besides Lisa and his field partner, Andrew Henry, the original partners of the company included William Clark, now an Indian agent at St. Louis, and two members of a prominent St. Louis fur trading

¹⁸Washington Irving, The Complete Works of Washington Irving: Astoria; Captain Bonneville (New York, 19?), p. 103.

¹⁹Richard Edward Oglesby, Manuel Lisa and the Opening of the Missouri Fur Trade (Norman, 1963), pp. 54-62.

²⁰William Gordon to Lewis Cass, October 3, 1831, Senate Documents, 22nd Congress, 1st Session, No. 90 (Serial No. 213), p. 28.

²¹Oscar Lewis, The Effects of White Contact Upon Blackfoot Culture, with Special Reference to the Role of the Fur Trade (New York, 1942), p. 23.

family, Pierre Chouteau, Sr., and Auguste Chouteau, Jr.²² The local St. Louis newspaper, The Missouri Gazette, predicted the new company would "bid defiance to any hostile band they may meet,"²³ but the Indian situation soon clouded the company's future.

During the following winter (1808-1809), Blackfoot aggressions forced the trappers to stay near Fort Raymond. Despite this disappointment, during the next winter (1809-1810), the company constructed a fort in the Three Forks area. While trapping out of the new post, several company men were killed or captured by the Blackfeet, who also stole company pelts cached on the Yellowstone River.²⁴ Except for a party trapping with Andrew Henry, Lisa's men returned to St. Louis. Despite their setbacks the Louisiana Gazette reported that the trappers returned with a "considerable amount" of furs. The paper also observed the trappers were expecting even better returns in the future.²⁵ Meanwhile, Henry and his party crossed the Continental Divide and thus became the first of many Americans to trap or establish a post west of the Divide. But upon returning to St. Louis in

²²Hiram Martin Chittenden, The American Fur Trade of the Far West (Stanford, California, 1954), I, 137-138.

²³St. Louis Missouri Gazette, March 8, 1809, p. 3.

²⁴Oglesby, Lisa, pp. 85-97.

²⁵St. Louis Louisiana Gazette, July 26, 1810, p. 3.

the summer of 1811, Lisa's field partner faced the expiration of the St. Louis Missouri Fur Company and the formation of its successor, the Missouri Fur Company.²⁶

Before the old company expired, one of its partners, William Clark, contacted government officials in Washington and asked for aid against the British, whom he blamed for inciting the Indians. The government did not respond favorably to Clark's many letters.²⁷ Beset by financial problems and intercompany jealousies, the firm underwent another reorganization.

The dangerous Indian situation and the possibility of a war with England made the new Missouri Fur Company's future a gloomy one. In early December, 1813, the company was dissolved because its profits were not sufficient to please the owners. Lisa, with other financial support, continued to cooperate, and in 1814 William Clark appointed him Indian Agent for the "Tribes on the Missouri above the Kanzies [Kansas Indians who lived in present-day western Missouri]." But the situation in the Northwest prevented any operations on the upper river, and all the other traders but Lisa had even left the lower Missouri.²⁸

²⁶Chittenden, Fur Trade, I, 145-146.

²⁷Oglesby, Lisa, pp. 101-102.

²⁸William Clark to John Armstrong, August 20, 1814, Carter, Territorial Papers, Vol. XIV Louisiana-Missouri Territory 1806-1814, pp. 786-787. Other Americans became interested in the Southwest and along the Arkansas, areas claimed or owned by the Spanish. These traders met with little success as the Mexican authorities invariably forced them to leave. Morgan, William H. Ashley, pp. xliii-xlvii.

During the same period in which Lisa operated upriver, another important American concern entered the far western fur trade. In what well may have been the most important single aspect of the trade to be used in later arguments supporting American expansionist's claims to the Oregon Country, John Jacob Astor extended his already expansive trade operations to the shores of the Pacific Ocean. Astor, a German immigrant, had become interested in the fur trade when he first arrived in America in 1783, and since then had used the Great Lakes trade to build his fortune. In the West Astor operated independently of the St. Louis traders, although he negotiated with them twice on possible partnerships. He was reluctant to join the Missourians unless it were absolutely necessary.²⁹

Astor's original plan, and one which he cherished until he retired from the trade in 1834, was to connect the Columbia and Missouri valleys with a series of posts from St. Louis to the mouth of the Columbia. By this means he could open trans-continental trade from New York to the Pacific Ocean and thence by sea to China. He could trade his furs to either New York or China and totally dominate the American fur trade.³⁰

²⁹Kenneth Wiggins Porter, John Jacob Astor, Business Man (Cambridge, 1931), I, 273-274.

³⁰John Upton Terrell, Furs by Astor (New York, 1963), p. 138.

For his trading operations in the West, Astor established two companies, the American Fur Company, incorporated in 1808, and the Pacific Fur Company, incorporated in 1810. The latter firm was established specifically for the Oregon trade after Astor had first attempted in 1809 to join operations in Oregon with the British-owned North West Company. Astor also negotiated with the Russians for a division of the trade on the Pacific Coast, but the proposal failed with the beginning of the war in 1812. ³¹

These propositions suggest that, if it were necessary for his own ambitions, Astor would not compete with the British in Oregon, but would join them. Thus, the trade operations would enhance the claims of both the Americans and the British. Yet early in 1808, Astor had appealed to President Jefferson's expansionist feeling by declaring that he (Astor) wished to exclude the British traders from American territories.³² This was, no doubt, true; but Astor's single motivation was his own personal profit, and, national expansion aside, he would do whatever was necessary and expedient to gain a foothold in the Oregon trade. Furthermore, if he were to drive the British out of Oregon, he wanted the trade for himself and not to share with other American concerns.

³¹Irving, Complete Works, pp. 313-314.

³²John Jacob Astor to Thomas Jefferson, February 27, 1808, quoted in Paul Chrisler Phillips, The Fur Trade (Norman, 1961), II, 271.

Astor's proposals did not involve a patriotic mission for American free enterprise. According to his chief biographer, Kenneth Porter, "It was his [Astor's] purpose to concentrate the western fur trade in the hands of only such American citizens as had been born in Waldorf, Germany, in 1763, and had arrived in the United States from London in the spring of 1784."³³ Astor's transcontinental schemes were to satisfy his personal greed, a factor which he did not relate to Jefferson.³⁴

The President received what he knew of Astor's plans with "great satisfaction," and further indicated possible government support. He replied to Astor:

You may be assured that in order to get the whole of this business passed into the hands of our own citizens, and to oust foreign traders, who so much abuse their privilege to excite the Indians to war on us, every reasonable patronage and facility in the power of the Executive will be afforded.³⁵

Accordingly, Jefferson encouraged Meriwether Lewis, then governor of Missouri, to give Astor's project "particular attention" as "Nothing but the exclusive possession of the Indian commerce can secure us their peace."³⁶ However, the

³³Porter, Astor, I, 169.

³⁴Ibid., p. 167.

³⁵Thomas Jefferson to John Jacob Astor, April 13, 1808, Lipscomb, Writings of Jefferson, XII, 28.

³⁶Thomas Jefferson to Meriwether Lewis, July 7, 1808, Jackson, Lewis and Clark, p. 445.

promise of executive aid was handicapped by the fact that it came from a president who had less than one year remaining in office.

Regardless of government attitudes in Washington, the North West Company's refusal to join with Astor killed any chance of British-American cooperation in Oregon. Instead it initiated a rivalry and a subsequent race to Oregon to establish trade, and much more important, to confirm claims of both nations to the Pacific Northwest. Astor began his western trade by sending two expeditions to the mouth of the Columbia, one overland, another by sea.

The expedition by sea, comprised of the ship, Tonquin, reached the Columbia in March, 1811, and established the post of Astoria. In the summer the ship sailed north to Vancouver Island only to become involved with hostile Indians who massacred the ship's crew. The next day one survivor enticed a large number of Indians on board ship before he ignited the cargo of gunpowder, which explosion caused "dreadful havoc" in killing and maiming over 100 Indians.³⁷ Thus, Indian relations were damaged, the Tonquin was lost, and only a few Americans remained at Astoria until the overland expedition arrived. As a result of tremendous difficulties and subsequent delays, the overland expedition under Wilson Price Hunt which had originally left St. Louis in November of 1810, reached the

³⁷Irving, Complete Works, pp. 84-91.

mouth of the Columbia at scattered intervals between January 18 and May 11, 1812, with seven more arriving on January 15, 1813.³⁸

While the overland expedition was still en route, a crew of North West Company men arrived at Astoria on July 15, 1811, following the arrival of the Tonguin in late March. By this margin of less than four months, the Astorians had greatly enhanced American claims to Oregon.³⁹ By 1816, Jefferson revealed the value he placed on the establishment of the Astorians when he wrote: "If we claim that country [Oregon] at all, it must be on Astor's settlement near the mouth of the Columbia . . . when a civilized nation takes possession of the mouth of a river in new country, that possession is considered as including all its waters."⁴⁰

As their numbers increased at Astoria, the American trappers moved east along the main branches of the Columbia where

³⁸Chittenden, Fur Trade, I, 182-199.

³⁹Lewis, Blackfoot, p. 20.

⁴⁰Thomas Jefferson to John Melish, December 31, 1816, Lipscomb, Writings of Jefferson, XV, 94; Astor's men were the first to establish a post on the mouth of the Columbia, but the North West Company had already established trading posts much farther up river on the western slopes of the Rocky Mountains. The Hudson's Bay Company also had a post in eastern Oregon, and even the American party under Andrew Henry had spent a winter across the Divide (but this was not used in expansionist arguments for Oregon). Jefferson and later members of the government were employing a concept concerning the importance of controlling the mouth of a river. See T. C. Elliot, "The Fur Trade in the Columbia River Basin Prior to 1811," Journal of the Oregon Historical Society, XV (December, 1914), 241-251.

they found profitable trapping, but the war with England began the following summer and soon ended the Oregon venture. Having petitioned for and received official sanction and naval support of the British government, the North West Company, in 1813, sent an expedition to capture Astoria. At the demand of the North West Company men who arrived in October, 1813, the Astorians readily surrendered the post and were allowed to sell their goods. The British took formal possession on December 13, and renamed the post Fort George.⁴¹

Astor appealed to Jefferson and to members of the government to help save his Pacific Coast operations. His relationship with the government was closer than that of the ordinary businessman, as Astor loaned the government money to finance war expenses. However, the bonds he received from the government made the venture quite profitable.⁴² In February, 1813, already aware that the British were planning to take Astoria, Astor appealed to the Secretary of State, James Monroe, for the support of a small military force. He stressed the potentiality of Astoria as a United States supply base for its Pacific operations, yet under the strain of a war with an Atlantic power, the government gave no immediate response. In March, Astor again appealed to Monroe and also

⁴¹Porter, Astor, I, 226-230.

⁴²Terrell, Furs, pp. 230-231.

to President Madison and to the Secretary of the Navy, William Jones. Finally, the government acted favorably by preparing the frigate, John Adams, for a voyage to Astoria. To Astor's frustration, the ship's crew was ordered to the Great Lakes instead, and the trip to Oregon was cancelled. Following this, Astor's plans to send his own ship, the Enterprise, were thwarted when the British blockaded the New York harbor.⁴³

In October Astor wrote to Jefferson and lauded the potential of the Oregon venture, but lamented that the government had been unresponsive to his request for aid. In the same letter Astor deceitfully avoided mention of the fate of the Tonquin, probably fearing that this example of poor Indian relations would not engender sympathy from Jefferson or the government. He even referred to the Indians as "friendly."⁴⁴ Although Astor's letter was not optimistic in tone, Jefferson replied in November that he viewed "with great pleasure" Astor's "progress." He warned that good Indian relations were necessary if any government action were to be expected. He also expressed his desire that the government would aid Astor, whom he believed was "doing so

⁴³David Lavender, The First in the Wilderness (Garden City, 1964), pp. 195-196.

⁴⁴John Jacob Astor to Thomas Jefferson, October 18, 1813, Porter, Astor, I, 541-543.

much for future generations of men."⁴⁵ Regardless of Astor's efforts, the aid was not forthcoming. His Oregon trade collapsed as a result of the British aggressions and because of the justifiable lack of enthusiastic support by the government of a nation which was involved in a major war.

After the war, Astor wanted to re-establish his Oregon trade. However, he felt he needed military support, both for general reasons of reoccupying captured territory and because of the bitter feuding taking place in Canada between the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company, which might involve his men should he send them to Oregon. Astor again pressured government officials but got little response. At Astor's request, Albert Gallatin spoke to President Madison about the matter. Although Madison "received the proposal favorably," he did not take any action.⁴⁶

In the fall of 1817, after Astor had realized the futility of his Oregon plans, the new administration under James Monroe decided to take formal action to confirm the claim to Oregon. Under directions from Monroe, representatives of the United States reached the Columbia in August, 1818, and made a proclamation of American claims to Oregon. In October the United States flag was raised over Fort George to prove

⁴⁵Thomas Jefferson to John Jacob Astor, November 9, 1813, Lipscomb, Writings of Jefferson, XIII, 432-434.

⁴⁶Albert Gallatin to John Jacob Astor, August 5, 1835, Henry Adams, editor, The Writings of Albert Gallatin (Philadelphia, 1879), II, 505.

American ownership.⁴⁷ However, the North West Company continued to operate out of Fort George until 1824; Astor did not resume his activities on the West Coast. The American trade in the Far West, including both the operations of Lisa and of Astor, had ended by the end of 1813. Until 1818, the national government remained at all times either too busy, too indifferent, or both, to render aid.

The period which witnessed the first big trading efforts in the Far West was also a time during which the Congress passed occasional laws and consented to treaties relating to aspects of the fur trade. After the initial legislation of the factory system in 1795, Congress legislated renewals of the system every two or three years. In 1802, it passed a very important law which dealt with a variety of problems resulting from the Indian trade. Because the territorial governments were failing to prevent the trading of liquor to the Indians, Congress authorized the President to take measures which he might deem necessary to prevent such trade.⁴⁸ The same law also restated the license restriction on traders and redefined Indian territorial boundaries. Furthermore, Americans were forbidden to hunt on Indian lands, and licensed

⁴⁷J. B. Prevost to John Quincy Adams, November 11, 1818, Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States (Washington, 1855), 17th Congress, 1st Session, Vol. 11, p. 2137 (hereafter cited as Annals of Congress).

⁴⁸Francis Paul Prucha, American Indian Policy in the Formative Years (Cambridge, 1962), p. 104.

persons only were permitted to trade with the Indians.⁴⁹ Thus, the trapping operations in the Far West were actually a violation of federal law. Yet, this fact was largely ignored for over two decades by government officials who were eager to counter, by any method possible, the British influence with the Indians.

Aside from the frequent renewals of the factory system, there was very little important legislation relating to the fur trade until after the war. The Senate ratified a commercial treaty with Great Britain in July, 1815, which guaranteed British trading rights in the United States' territories.⁵⁰ But nine months later, in April, 1816, Congress rescinded this right of the British by forbidding all foreigners to trade in territories of the United States without the consent of the President. By granting passports to foreigners so that they could enter United States' territory, the President made it possible for Americans to use the experience of the Canadian and British trappers who might wish to work for the American companies. The bill did not make exceptions to allow either foreign companies or independent foreign traders to operate on their own in the territories.⁵¹

⁴⁹U. S. Statutes, II, 139-146.

⁵⁰Ibid., VIII, 228.

⁵¹Ibid., III, 332-333.

The leading private citizen to promote the law was, in all probability, John Jacob Astor, although it has never been absolutely determined to what extent he was involved in the passage of the bill.⁵² At least it is certain that Astor had more at stake than any other individual, although at the time Astor was directly concerned about the upper Mississippi and Great Lakes trade and not the far western trade.

Astor's interest in a law of this type was basic to his over-all plans, which were constantly threatened by the British, not only in Oregon, but elsewhere. Even though the North West Company had refused Astor's offer in 1809 to share the Oregon trade, they agreed with him in 1811 to form the South West Company for sharing the commerce around the Great Lakes. During the war with England, the South West Company virtually ceased operations while the North West Company, with British protection, had moved into United States' territories in the Northwest where Americans were forcibly excluded.⁵³ After the Treaty of Ghent, the South West Company was reactivated so that the British might evade any law excluding foreigners and continue operations in the United States on grounds that the company was partly owned by Americans. Astor agreed to reactivate the company. He feared that, if he did not, and if Congress refused to pass such a law, the British would act

⁵²Porter, Astor, II, 694.

⁵³Ibid.

independently to dominate the trade.⁵⁴ But in 1816, motivated by ill feelings toward the Canadians who had given the United States considerable trouble during the war, the Congress, with very little debate, passed the bill.

The British evaded the law, at times, by merely hiring Americans to do the work in their own names. The Americans then would take the furs away from the posts and transfer them to British hands.⁵⁵ In addition, the British trade interests in the United States continued through their friendship with the Indians and because of the fact that the Indians preferred the British goods to those of the Americans.⁵⁶ The Americans realized that, despite this nationalistic trade measure, the British remained a very serious threat, particularly in the far northwest. William Clark was aware of the continued threat when he wrote in October, 1816, that "the upper and richer portion [of the Missouri River] has had no American Citizen since the [failure] of the Missouri Co. in 1811 and I am under great apprehensions that the British will take possession of that rich Tract." Consequently, Clark proposed a plan which was at once both similar

⁵⁴Lavender, Fist, p. 233.

⁵⁵Cardinal Goodwin, "A Larger View of the Yellowstone Expedition, 1819-1820," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, IV (December, 1917), p. 301.

⁵⁶William Gordon to William Clark, October 27, 1831, Senate Documents, 22nd Congress, 1st Session, No. 90 (Serial No. 213), p. 54.

and dissimilar to Astor's schemes. Clark suggested forming a single large and "overbearing" company to combat the British. However, instead of a monopoly by one person as Astor wished, Clark suggested that a larger number of persons should be involved. For such an ambitious project Clark believed the government would have to give "a little aid."⁵⁷ Neither the company nor the aid materialized.

After the British were excluded by law, Astor took steps to secure his trade position. He hired experienced trappers and boatmen who had previously been employed by the British. Furthermore, he requested Secretary of State Monroe to supply blank licenses which he could use on the Great Lakes for hiring the best available British traders. Eventually, through the War Department, Astor was able to obtain the licenses.⁵⁸ Early in 1817, Astor purchased the Canadian interest in the South West Company. In March of the same year he reactivated the American Fur Company with Ramsay Crooks and Robert Stuart as field partners. The company planned to concentrate on the upper Mississippi and Great Lakes.

In 1818, Astor's use of the experienced British traders was threatened when President Monroe decided to prohibit all foreigners from taking any part in any phase of the American

⁵⁷William Clark to Thomas Jefferson, October 10, 1816, Jackson, Lewis and Clark, p. 625.

⁵⁸Lavender, Fist, pp. 236, 244.

fur trade. Monroe had originally been uncooperative when Astor requested blank licenses, and now he viewed with positive distaste the presence of the British in American territory. He soon rescinded the order, however, as he came under pressure from the American companies.⁵⁹ In Canada, the Americans made so little use of their reciprocal trading rights granted in the Convention of 1815 that the British government was slow to retaliate against the American restrictions. Not until 1821 did Parliamentary legislation force the Americans to abandon their operations in Canada to the east of Lake Huron.⁶⁰ Thus the two governments had legislated exclusion of foreign traders in all areas except Oregon, where both nations had claims.

The American Fur Company did not immediately move into the Far West after its reorganization. It even stayed out of the lower Missouri trade. Astor's merchants were importing goods and buying furs in St. Louis, and, for the present at least, he did not wish to compete with his business associates. He ordered his trappers in the Mississippi Valley not to interfere with the Missouri River trade.⁶¹

After the war the principal fur companies on the Missouri included Berthold, Chouteau and Company (Astor's chief business

⁵⁹Porter, Astor, II, 708-709.

⁶⁰Chittenden, Fur Trade, I, 319.

⁶¹Lavender, Fist, pp. 311-312.

associates), Pratte and Vasquez, and the reorganized Missouri Fur Company in addition to several smaller groups.⁶² At first, these companies were not active in the Far West, but remained on the lower Missouri. The Missouri Fur Company became one of the most ambitious and active of the post-war trading companies. Under the leadership of Manuel Lisa, the company reorganized, once in 1818, and again in 1819. Lisa's partners included Bernard Pratte, Joshua Pilcher, and the Berthold and Chouteau partnership, which would a few years later become associated with the American Fur Company.⁶³ However, without reaching the upper Missouri again, Lisa died from an unidentified sickness in the summer of 1820. Joshua Pilcher succeeded Lisa as head of the company, and under Pilcher the firm in the 1820's became one of the leaders in the reopening of the upper Missouri trade.

The years between the law of 1816 prohibiting foreign traders, and the termination of the factory system in 1822, saw little government interest in developing or providing protection for the western trade. The primary illustration of the indecisive government attitude during these years came in 1819, with the military expedition bound for the confluence of the Yellowstone and Missouri rivers. John C. Calhoun, Secretary of War under James Monroe, was the

⁶²Phillips, Fur Trade, II, 391.

⁶³Oglesby, Lisa, pp. 168-170.

principal promoter of this ill-fated venture, known as the Yellowstone Expedition. The operations on the Missouri were planned as part of a larger scheme for exploring the upper Missouri, Arkansas, and Mississippi rivers, with the intention of securing better Indian relations and promoting American trade to compete with the British.⁶⁴

For the Northwest, Calhoun proposed that forts be constructed at certain locations on the upper Missouri, near the villages of the Mandan Indians (who lived in the area near present-day Bismarck, North Dakota), and at the mouth of the Yellowstone River. His choice for the location of the "principal post" was near the Mandan villages for protection against British intrusions on both the upper Missouri and the Red River of the North.⁶⁵ He believed the Americans would have little success in prohibiting British trade in the Northwest without first establishing military posts.

⁶⁴Goodwin, "A Larger View of the Yellowstone Expedition, 1819-1820," pp. 312-313. Under the leadership of Colonel Henry Leavenworth, another expedition inspired by Calhoun proceeded to the upper Mississippi in 1820 and established a permanent fort which was later named Fort Snelling. Operating out of Fort Snelling, the American authorities considerably improved Indian relations throughout the upper Mississippi Valley. Henry R. Schoolcraft and Lewis Cass, governor of the Michigan Territory, led a third expedition, crossing from the Great Lakes to the upper Mississippi and back in the summer of 1820. *Ibid.*, pp. 305, 310-312.

⁶⁵John C. Calhoun to Andrew Jackson, August 22, 1818, J. Franklin Jameson, editor, Correspondence of John C. Calhoun, Vol. II, Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1899 (Washington, 1900), p. 138.

Calhoun considered this to be a vital step as he wrote: "It is on that frontier only [the upper Missouri] that we have much to fear from Indian hostilities," therefore, the government must act to "cut off all intercourse between the Indians residing in our territory, and foreign traders."⁶⁶ President Monroe also supported the plan. To Calhoun he wrote that the expedition was the most ambitious step the government had supported "to secure to us the fur trade, and to break up the intercourse between the British traders and the Indians."⁶⁷

The expedition was an expansionist plan, in all respects, designed to enhance American enterprise and dominion in the Far West. A frontier newspaper, the St. Louis Missouri Gazette, expressed this idea when it stated that the expedition would "encourage Western emigration; it will protect and encourage the fur trade which is now productive of such important benefits to the country, and which can be made more productive. . . ."⁶⁸ But, not all persons interested in the western trade were wholly in support of the expedition. Ramsay Crooks, Astor's field partner, was apprehensive that

⁶⁶John C. Calhoun to the Chairman of the House Committee on Military Affairs, December 29, 1819, American State Papers: Military Affairs, Vol. II (Washington, 1832-1861), pp. 33-34 (hereafter cited as ASP:MA).

⁶⁷James Monroe to John C. Calhoun, July 5, 1819, ibid., p. 69.

⁶⁸St. Louis Missouri Gazette, April 2, 1819, cited in Phillips, Fur Trade, II, 392.

the government would attempt to establish a factory in the more remote areas of the West. He wished to extend the company trade without competition from the factories.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, the expedition proceeded.

Under the leadership of Colonel Henry Atkinson, the troops left St. Louis in December, 1818, but due to delays largely resulting from an attempt to use steamboats, the expedition only reached the Council Bluffs area by the fall of 1819. Their progress ended here in the following winter as a disastrous attack of scurvy weakened the expedition by causing many deaths. Unaware of the sickness at Council Bluffs, Calhoun wrote to Colonel Atkinson on February 7, 1820, that he was pleased with the success of the trip, which has "thus far been entirely satisfactory;"⁷⁰ yet at the same time the expedition was also in danger from Congress as well as from scurvy. The expedition did not have enough money to complete the trip and build the important post at the Mandan villages, and Congress was asked in the winter of 1819-1820 to vote the necessary appropriations. Considerable opposition developed in the House of Representatives. Opponents claimed the expedition would not be effective against the British, and that it would also irritate the Indians, who

⁶⁹Lavender, Fist, pp. 294-295.

⁷⁰John C. Calhoun to Henry Atkinson, February 7, 1820, Jameson, Correspondence of John C. Calhoun, p. 168.

might manage to trap the Americans up river.⁷¹ A further argument, that the project was already too expensive, helped the opposition to defeat the appropriation. Calhoun commanded the troops to proceed no further; Congress and scurvy had killed the Yellowstone Expedition.

One part of the expedition did, however, succeed. Under Major Stephen Long, a branch of the expedition was originally to have been scientific in nature, for observing the country and for surveying points along the forty-ninth parallel, the recently confirmed international boundary. The boundary had not been surveyed, and Calhoun believed a survey would reveal that British posts were located in American territory.⁷² When the main expedition to the upper Missouri was halted, Major Long took charge of a secondary expedition ordered to the headwaters of the Platte, Arkansas, and Red rivers. The expedition proceeded to the mountains and back along the two streams. The results of the expedition, however, had a negative effect on the westward movement when Long condemned much of the American Midwest as being too barren and dry to farm, thus discouraging potential settlers.

Aside from the Long expedition, the entire effort succeeded only in establishing Fort Atkinson above Council Bluffs,

⁷¹Annals of Congress, 16th Congress, 1st Session, II, 1788-1790.

⁷²John C. Calhoun to Henry Atkinson, March 27, 1819, Jameson, Correspondence of John C. Calhoun, pp. 159-160.

and in moving troops to the frontier. The government's failure to reach the upper Missouri pleased Ramsay Crooks and the American Fur Company.⁷³ Colonel Atkinson, having lost his chance for glory, insisted to Calhoun that troops were still needed upriver to counter British influence.⁷⁴ The Secretary also continued to believe in the necessity of keeping troops in the area. Reflecting on the expedition a quarter of a century later, he claimed that, regardless of its failure, the "fur-trade had received a great impulse," and had the venture been successful, the Americans would have had less trouble on the upper Missouri.⁷⁵

While Calhoun was busy promoting the Yellowstone Expedition, the American diplomats, Richard Rush and Albert Gallatin, were negotiating with the British over control of the Oregon Country. In 1818, the Oregon question was but one of many differences between the United States and Great Britain; nor was it a matter of extreme urgency. Secretary of State John Adams did not expect agreement on a boundary, but if one was to be reached, he wanted the United States to have at least up to the forty-ninth parallel.⁷⁶ The

⁷³Lavender, Fist, p. 307.

⁷⁴Morgan, William H. Ashley, p. 1411.

⁷⁵The Congressional Globe, 27th Congress, 3rd Session, Appendix, p. 141.

⁷⁶Samuel Flagg Bemis, John Quincy Adams and the Foundations of American Foreign Policy (New York, 1949), p. 289.

American diplomats found the British eager to negotiate on Oregon, but apparently determined that Great Britain must have all territory north of the westernmost part of the Columbia River.⁷⁷

In stating American claims to Oregon, Gallatin and Rush employed the experience and activities of Astor's fur trappers on the Columbia, and they noted that the "settlement at the place called Astoria" was the first permanent post in the area. Astoria amounted to but one of the three major American substantiations, the other two being Robert Gray's voyage to the mouth of the Columbia in 1792, and the Lewis and Clark expedition. Reluctantly for the British, or so Gallatin and Rush believed, the negotiators failed to agree on a permanent boundary, and the question was delayed by leaving Oregon open to both countries for a period of ten years.

⁷⁷Albert Gallatin and Richard Rush to John Quincy Adams, October 20, 1818, American State Papers: Foreign Relations, IV (Washington, 1832-1858), 381 (hereafter cited as ASP:FR). By the Convention of 1818, the boundary between the United States and Canada extended along the forty-ninth parallel from the Lake of the Woods to the Rocky Mountains. West of the Continental Divide, the forty-ninth parallel was not a boundary, but remained a possible compromise boundary. At a point approximately 170 miles west of the Continental Divide, the Columbia River flows south across the forty-ninth parallel. From this point it meanders south about 400 miles to where it reaches the forty-sixth parallel, and near this point its course becomes predominantly westward until it reaches the Pacific. The portion of the Oregon country which was most disputed was the area lying south of the forty-ninth parallel and to the north and west of the lower course of the Columbia River. This area today represents approximately the western one-half of the state of Washington.

Throughout all of the discussions, the American diplomats had not even been fully informed about American interest in Oregon, as on October 20, 1818, the day the Convention was signed, they reported to Adams that they had very little idea of the value their government attached to the territory.⁷⁸ Later, during his presidential campaign, Adams' opponents attacked him for his indifference to Oregon in this treaty. According to Benton, he had allowed the British to gain the advantage west of the Rocky Mountains.⁷⁹ This was true as long as the fur trade remained the principal activity in the territory.

While concerned with the talks with Great Britain, Adams had been negotiating with the Spanish minister, Luis de Onis, over the differences between their two countries. The question of the boundary of the Louisiana Purchase (which eventually led to discussions over the Oregon boundary) was but one of the problems mentioned, the most important being the purchase of Florida. Discussion over the boundary of Louisiana did not involve Oregon until the negotiations had progressed for nearly a year. In October, 1818, after Adams had continually tried to get Spain to cede parts of Texas, he agreed to withdraw the United States' claims to Texas if Spain would renounce all claims in Oregon above the forty-first

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹Fredrick Merk, Albert Gallatin and the Oregon Problem, Harvard Historical Monographs, Vol. 23 (Cambridge, 1950), pp. 32-33.

parallel.⁸⁰ After considerable negotiation, the treaty was signed on February 22, 1819, with a compromise line, the forty-second parallel, as the northern boundary of Spanish territory.⁸¹

The American fur trade in Oregon had an effect on this agreement in that the trade had given the United States one of its more substantial claims to the territory. On the other hand, Spain had not been at all active in Oregon. But substantiation of claims was not important. The Oregon boundary was not an urgent or dangerous problem between the two nations, and, as has been mentioned, was not even formally proposed until nearly a year after the negotiations began. Adams successfully employed the idea of settling the boundary to the Pacific as a concession for giving up claims to Texas.

After Spanish rights were withdrawn, Russia remained the only nation other than the United States and Great Britain

⁸⁰Bemis, John Quincy Adams, pp. 323-324.

⁸¹Correspondence between John Quincy Adams and Luis de Onís, December 12, 1818 to February 19, 1819, ASP:FR, IV, pp. 612-625. The United States Senate ratified the treaty at once on February 24, 1819, but internal political troubles in Spain caused a delay in ratification by the Spanish king, Ferdinand VII. The Spanish delayed signing for another reason. They feared the United States would extend aid to the rebellious Latin American colonies once the treaty was signed; and, to prevent this, they withheld the sale of Florida as stipulated in the treaty. Threats of a military takeover of Florida by the United States led to ratification by Ferdinand on October 24, 1820. Due to the delay by the Spanish, the United States Senate had to ratify the treaty once again, and did so on February 19, 1821. Bemis, John Quincy Adams, pp. 350-353.

that had claims to Oregon. With a trade monopoly granted by the Czar, the Russian-American Fur Company represented its country's commercial interest along the Northwest Coast. Primarily, the company was seeking the furs of the sea otter. Except for its establishment at Bodega Bay, California, which was used for growing food supplies, the firm's chief activities were north of the fifty-seventh parallel.⁸²

But, in 1821, the trade in arms and liquor between American ships and the coastal Indians prompted the Czar to forbid all foreign ships from operating along the coast north of the fifty-first parallel. Furthermore, the Czar claimed that the lands north of this parallel belonged to Russia. In brief replies to the Russian minister, Poletica, Secretary Adams denied the Czar's claims and stated that the Americans intended to continue the coastal trade.⁸³ Fearing possible difficulties with America and Great Britain, the Russian government soon began a series of negotiations to end the dispute. The Conference of Verona, problems in Latin America, and Russian-American diplomatic maneuvers delayed the final agreement until the spring of 1824.

⁸²John S. Galbraith, The Hudson's Bay Company as an Imperial Factor (Berkeley, 1957), pp. 114-116.

⁸³John Quincy Adams to Pierre de Poletica, February 25, 1822, ASP:FR, IV, 861; John Quincy Adams to Pierre de Poletica (March 30, 1822), ibid., p. 863; John C. Hildt, Early Diplomatic Negotiations with the Russians, Vol. XXIV of Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science (Baltimore, 1906), 159-164.

Instead of the interior fur trade, the coastal trading rights were the prime consideration of both nations. The American inland trappers, having completely withdrawn from the lower Columbia River, had never ventured north to near the Russian operations. In writing of the negotiations of 1824, historian John C. Heldt states that "apparently the only question involved was the lucrative trade of the Americans with the natives of that region [along the coast]."⁸⁴ Only as an important substantiation for the United States having any claims at all along the Northwest Coast, were Astor's operations in Oregon valuable to the Americans in their talks with the Russians. Accordingly, in presenting his opinions to the Russians, the United States minister, Henry Middleton, referred to Astoria as a "real occupation" on the Pacific Coast.⁸⁵ But from the beginning of the dispute, the Russian minister had recognized American rights to Oregon.⁸⁶ The Russians were primarily interested in securing a definite northern limit on American claims. As a result, the treaty signed in April, 1824, established latitude 54°40' north as a limit to the expansion of Russian or American claims from the north or south respectively.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 168.

⁸⁵Henry Middleton to John Quincy Adams, April 7, 1824, ASP:FR, V, 461.

⁸⁶Pierre de Poletica to John Quincy Adams, February 28, 1822, ASP:FR, IV, 362.

Coastal trading rights, with the exception of liquor and firearms, were to be held by both nations for a period of ten years.⁸⁷

With Russian establishments restricted to north of latitude 54°40' north, the dispute over the Oregon Territory was thus narrowed to Great Britain and the United States. Already the Oregon question had come up in Congress when in December, 1820, John Floyd, United States Representative from Virginia, initiated his attempts to gain protection for American interests in the area. With slight modification, the same arguments employed by Floyd were to be continually used in the Congressional debates over Oregon, which lasted for the next twenty-six years.

In the meantime, the American fur trade of the Far West had seemingly expired. In 1819, Major Thomas Biddle, while stationed on the Missouri at Fort Atkinson, wrote a report in which he described the dismal conditions of the trade. He listed the names of six companies which, aside from the United States factory at Fort Osage, were the only concerns active on the entire length of the Missouri, and none of the companies were operating with much capital. These companies were all active on the lower river, as Biddle stated that no American traders had ventured above the Arikara camps (in present-day central South Dakota) since the war with

⁸⁷United States Statutes, VIII, 302-305.

England. He suggested the Americans could successfully extend their trade and influence to the Indians of the West through the establishment of new factories.⁸⁸ This was the situation in 1819, nearly five years since the end of the war. For a few years, a similar condition continued to exist in the western trade, but, in the early 1820's, the trappers began to gradually return to the mountains.

Thus, largely because of the British and the Indians, the American trappers had been unable to secure a foothold in the rich fur country of the Far West. The national government, more concerned with the factory system and the trade to the east, had given the western trade little encouragement. The law of 1816, forbidding foreigners to operate in United States' territories, was designed to help the American trade, but at the time was more concerned with operations in the Great Lakes area. Neither Lisa nor Astor received any support from the government while they conducted the most ambitious trade operations west of the Mississippi. In fact, the Yellowstone Expedition represented the government's major attempt to directly support the far western fur trade, but Congress became so unenthusiastic that the venture was never completed.

⁸⁸Thomas Biddle to Henry Atkinson, October 29, 1819, ASP:IA, II, 201-203.

There were lesser signs of governmental interest, such as the plan to send the John Adams to Astoria, and Jefferson's continued interest in the western trade. However, the John Adams was given another assignment, and Jefferson's enthusiasm was not shared by a majority of government officials.

Nevertheless, the national government had been willing to use the trade operations to establish its claims in Oregon, yet in a very matter-of-fact manner. The trade seemed to be taken for granted as an occurrence which did not need any emphasis in the negotiations. The trade had also realized one other accomplishment, the exploration of much of the northwestern fur country. Although mostly accomplished by private trappers, the exploration had been initiated by the United States government with the Lewis and Clark expedition. Through this and subsequent ventures, the Americans gained a knowledge of the country, and also learned of its wealth in furs. The problem facing the trappers in the 1820's was how to safely establish and maintain the mountain trade.

CHAPTER II

THE RETURN TO THE MOUNTAINS: CHALLENGE AND RESPONSE, 1821-1825

With a small number of trappers operating on the upper Missouri in 1821, the far western fur trade once more became active. It developed slowly during the following years, but eventually intensified and spread throughout the Rocky Mountains and into Oregon. However, in a futile attempt to keep the Americans from re-entering the areas, the British and Indians resumed their opposition. Most particularly, the tribes along the Missouri made the western trade extremely hazardous, and threatened to halt the American operations once again. Significantly, this state of affairs occurred after the factory system was terminated.

While the mountain trade was in its earliest stages of reactivation, Congress abolished the very system by which it had hoped to stem the evil effects of free trade and to improve Indian relations. Opposition to the factories had existed from the beginning, but for years was insufficient to defeat the renewals of the system. During the postwar period, Major Thomas Biddle and other Americans who supported the factories faced increasing opposition from congressmen, fur

traders, and other interested persons. Both opponents and supporters of the system recognized that it had weaknesses. By granting licenses to private traders, the government allowed strong and often ruthless competition for the factories. Generally inefficient operations caused the system to lose money instead of paying its own expenses, and, in addition, Indian relations seemed unimproved.¹

There were, however, numerous important persons who wished to see the factories continue. Secretary of War Calhoun, one of the foremost proponents of government regulation of the trade, reported to the House of Representatives in 1818, that "the system had no doubt produced beneficial effects." He believed that "if wars have not been entirely prevented by it, they probably, without it, would have been more frequent." In discussing possible use of the factories in the Far West, he declared that control of the Indians and the extension of the fur trade into this area were "objects of great national importance." But for Calhoun, the western trade presented very difficult problems, and thus the government's "proper efforts" of control in the Far West should not necessarily include the factory system. In such remote areas, the system would prove "altogether inadequate." As an alternative, he suggested establishing a large private monopoly. A monopoly

¹Peake, Factory System, pp. 204-206, 215-224; E. B. Wesley, "The Government Factory System Among the Indians, 1795-1822," Journal of Economic and Business History, IV (May, 1932), 487-511.

would be more efficient, and would end competition and the evil maneuvers of greedy independent trappers, thus helping to win the confidence of the western tribes. To supplement his proposal, the Secretary suggested the establishment of military posts in the West, as his thwarted Yellowstone Expedition had intended to do. Thus, Calhoun would maintain the factories in the East (although he wished to revise their operations somewhat), but substitute a new system in the Far West.²

Three years later, upon entering the Senate, Thomas Hart Benton, from the newest and westernmost state of Missouri, assumed direction of the forces opposing the factories. Hoping that Calhoun had changed his mind, the Senator's first move was to seek the Secretary's support for termination of the system. But Calhoun, whose proposals had never been realized, still maintained faith in the government's control, and thus refused. Then Benton proposed to the Senate his bill to abolish the factories.³ Under his leadership, Congress, in May, 1822, enacted the law which "authorized and required" the President to end the system and sell the trade goods remaining in government stock.⁴ According to instructions,

²Report of John C. Calhoun to the House of Representatives, December 5, 1818, ASP:IA, II, 181-185.

³Thomas Hart Benton, Thirty Years' View, I (New York, 1856), 21.

⁴U. S. Statutes at Large, III, 679-680.

the President immediately began the long process of disposing of the supplies. For Benton's services in abolishing the factories, the American Fur Company, which had kept in contact with Benton during the Congressional hearings and debates, showed its gratitude by retaining him as legal council.⁵

Exactly how the factory system would have influenced the far western trade is difficult to determine. Calhoun's recognition of the problems resulting from the tremendous size of the trade area suggests the greatest obstacle of all, that of communication. In attempting to police such a vast territory, the government would have also had to spend huge sums of money and employ large numbers of troops. Yet the important matter is that the government did not try the factory system in the Far West. Before the western trade became fully established, the opponents of federal control and interference had abolished the system.

At the same time the factory system was terminated, Congress passed another law, an amendment to the Indian trade law of 1802. The law made slight changes in the licensing rules, and once again provided for licenses only to trade and not to trap. It also established a position of Superintendent of Indian Affairs at St. Louis for the tribes "frequenting that place."⁶ William Clark was appointed to

⁵William Nisbet Chambers, Old Bullion Benton, Senator from the New West (Boston, 1956), p. 111; Benton, View, I, 13.

⁶U. S. Statutes at Large, III, 682-683.

the position, which would, in addition, serve the far western tribes.

Abolition of the factory system was not the only major change which occurred in the fur trade during the early 1820's. In the Far West both the British and the Americans were experiencing significant new developments. Since 1811, the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company had continued their vicious rivalry, which led to stealing, open fighting, and bloodshed. In their efforts to dominate the trade, both companies extended their operations as far west as Oregon. Finally, alarmed by their increasingly poor financial condition, the North West Company proposed a union of the two companies as a means of halting the ruinous competition. The merger was accomplished in March, 1821, the new alliance retaining the name of the Hudson's Bay Company. The British government showed its approval the following December by granting the newly enlarged concern a monopoly over the trade from the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Coast.⁷ Although forbidden to trap in territories owned by the United States, the company continued its operations in Oregon and its contacts with Indians in the Northwest.

Corresponding to the changes taking place in Washington and in London and Canada, were the events occurring on the upper Missouri in the fall of 1821. The Americans reopened

⁷Galbraith, Hudson's Bay Company, pp. 5-8.

the far western trade, evidencing enough faith in themselves to extract rich profits from the mountain country despite the British opposition. Operating under the leadership of Joshua Pilcher, the Missouri Fur Company initiated the trade by sending a trapping party to the Big Horn River. There the company built a post which they named Fort Benton in honor of the new Missouri senator. From this post they planned extensive operations in the mountains, possibly even including trade with the Blackfeet in the Three Forks area. During the first season upriver, the trappers worked to the east of the Blackfeet country, and in 1822 they sent to St. Louis the first profits in furs from the upper Missouri since before the war with England.⁸ The company was then prepared to move into the Three Forks area in the following spring.

As they prepared to make their move, however, they were faced with the competition of a new and very aggressive concern led by the Lieutenant Governor of Missouri, William H. Ashley, soon to become one of the most important figures in the revived mountain trade. Ashley's first trapping parties consisted of men who had answered his advertisements in various Missouri newspapers during the early part of 1822. Significantly for the history of the fur trade, among the

⁸Chittenden, Fur Trade, I, 150-151; Oglesby, Lisa, pp. 179-185.

new employees were such men as Jim Bridger, Jedediah Smith, Tom Fitzpatrick, David Jackson, and William Sublette, trappers who would become the first true mountain men, their names becoming synonymous with the far western trade.⁹

In April, 1822, Secretary of War Calhoun issued Ashley's license which stated that he was allowed "to carry on trade with the Indians up the Missouri,"¹⁰ yet Ashley hoped to go to the very headwaters of the river and trap in the Blackfoot area. Meanwhile, government officials were debating whether or not the trappers should ascend the Missouri without military protection. Henry Atkinson, now a Brigadier General, and still hoping to establish a fort farther up the river, was against allowing trappers to enter the area of the "upper Tribes" without first sending in troops.¹¹ Benjamin O'Fallon, Indian agent on the upper Missouri, thought otherwise. In a letter to Calhoun in which he supported Ashley's plans, O'Fallon outlined his rather contradictory proposals for the future of the trade and Indian relations on the upper river. He wrote:

As I can see no probability of the military expeditions progressing up the Missouri this year; I think there is no impropriety in allowing hunting

⁹Phillips, Fur Trade, II, 396.

¹⁰John C. Calhoun to William H. Ashley, April 11, 1822, ASP:IA, II, 428.

¹¹Henry Atkinson to John C. Calhoun, January 25, 1822, Morgan, William H. Ashley, p. 1.

and trapping above the Mandans, on the lands of Indians who are unfriendly to us, and under foreign influence; but, as soon as we have an opportunity of counteracting that influence, and producing a good understanding between us and those Indians, then, hunting and trapping should be prohibited and our traders confined alone to a fair and equitable trade with them.¹²

Thus far, all American trapping activities on the upper Missouri had been endangered by Indian hostilities. But, after allowing more trappers in the area, which was a violation of the laws prohibiting hunting on Indian lands, O'Fallon hoped to produce a "good understanding" with a show of military force. After that he planned to limit operations to trading with the Indians. Rather typical of the government attitude toward the Indians, O'Fallon's proposal contradicted the desires of the upper tribes who were not eager to trap, and preferred to be left alone by the Americans.

Somewhat in agreement with Major O'Fallon, both Calhoun and William Clark had hopes that, in spite of past difficulties, the American activities on the upper Missouri would strengthen government influence with the Indians.¹³ The troops did not precede the expedition. Ashley's men made their way to the upper Missouri, an area rumored to "contain

¹²Benjamin O'Fallon to John C. Calhoun, April 9, 1822, Ibid., p. 6.

¹³John C. Calhoun to William Clark, July 1, 1822, Ibid., p. 17; William Clark to John C. Calhoun, August 9, 1822, Ibid., p. 18.

a wealth in Furs, not surpassed by the mines of Peru."¹⁴ In the late fall, while his men continued their first trapping season along the lower Yellowstone, Ashley returned to St. Louis with a fresh supply of beaver pelts. For winter quarters, the trappers who remained in the field built a post at the confluence of the Missouri and the Musselshell, approximately 100 miles north-northwest of the Missouri Fur Company wintering party on the Big Horn. Both companies were prepared to enter the Three Forks area in the spring of 1823.

The venture into Blackfoot country soon led to disaster for both groups. After poor trapping in the area during the early spring, the Missouri Fur Company men encountered a friendly party of Blackfeet apparently interested in trade. The two groups separated on good terms, and the trappers headed back to Fort Benton. But the Blackfeet gathered nearly 400 of their tribe and ambushed the hunting party, killing or wounding eleven men and taking all of the furs and equipment, a serious loss to the financially insecure company.¹⁵ Ashley's men experienced two similar defeats at the hands of the Indians. As Andrew Henry's party moved up the Missouri toward the Three Forks, the Blackfeet attacked them, killed

¹⁴St. Louis Enquirer, April 13, 1822, as cited in Donald McKay Frost, Notes on General Ashley (Barre, Massachusetts, 1960), p. 65.

¹⁵William Gordon to Joshua Pilcher, June 15, 1823, ASP:MA, II, 583.

four men, and forced the trappers to retreat in confusion.¹⁶ Two months later, as Ashley was returning to the upper Missouri with additional men and supplies, the Arikara Indians attacked his party, killing and wounding twenty-three men.¹⁷ Thus, within a two-month period, Indian hostilities had seriously endangered the entire upper Missouri trade.

The remoteness of the Three Forks area made immediate retaliation against the Blackfeet impossible. But the Arikara attack had occurred near the present-day border of North and South Dakota, close enough to Fort Atkinson to result in the first battle between American military forces and Indians in the trans-Mississippi West.¹⁸ Upon Ashley's urgent request, Colonel Henry Leavenworth led over 200 troops from Council Bluffs into the area. There he joined Ashley's men and additional trappers, including a group of Missouri Fur Company men under Joshua Pilcher. After several brief skirmishes, the Americans, supported by bands of Teton and Yankton Sioux, forced the Arikaras to beg for peace. But, after signing a peace treaty, the Indians disappeared from the area overnight. Hired hands of the Missouri Fur Company

¹⁶Benjamin O'Fallon to Henry Atkinson, July 3, 1823, ASP:MA, II, 579-580.

¹⁷William H. Ashley to Benjamin O'Fallon, June 4, 1823, ASP:MA, II, 586-587.

¹⁸Henry Putney Beers, The Western Military Frontier, 1815-1846 (Gettysburg, 1935), p. 51.

then burned the deserted villages.¹⁹ Leavenworth returned his command to Fort Atkinson, believing the attack on Ashley's men had been "honorably avenged . . . in such a manner as will teach [the Arikara] and other Indian tribes to respect the American name and character."²⁰

For once, the United States Army had taken direct action for the protection of the far western fur trade, yet the fighting was indecisive. The Arikara had been humbled, and they begged for peace, but in the eyes of numerous Indians and fur traders, the Army had fought disgracefully and failed to retaliate fully. Such conduct would only inspire the contempt of the Indians along the Missouri. In addition, the disappearance of the Arikaras and the burning of the villages made the treaty valueless. Consequently, a bitter debate ensued over the outcome of the expedition. Leavenworth denounced the Missouri Fur Company for setting fire to the villages and giving the Arikara cause to seek further revenge. He believed the company wanted to endanger all river traffic and thus keep their competitors from trading up the Missouri as they themselves probably would be unable to do.²¹

¹⁹Henry Leavenworth to E. P. Gaines, August 30, 1823, ASP:MA, II, 592-593; Morgan, William H. Ashley, pp. 52-57.

²⁰Henry Leavenworth to his troops, August 29, 1823, ASP:MA, II, 594.

²¹Henry Leavenworth to E. P. Gaines, August 30, 1823, ASP:MA, II, 592-593.

Joshua Pilcher, an unusually literate fur trader, replied to Leavenworth's charges with a belittling, sarcastic denunciation of Leavenworth's handling of the entire campaign. He accused him of cowardice, laziness, jealousy, and stupidity. The Colonel's "school boy" actions and the "imbecility of [his] conduct and operations had created and left impossible barriers" for the Missouri River trade.²² However, Leavenworth's commanding officers expressed approval of the expedition. While General Atkinson believed the operations had failed to keep the Missouri open to American trade, he nevertheless was satisfied with the Colonel's campaign.²³ Major General E. P. Gaines, commander of the army's Western Department, wrote Secretary Calhoun that Leavenworth and his troops deserved "marked applause."²⁴

Regardless of the outcome of the Arikara campaign, the Blackfeet still threatened the upper Missouri trade. Both Ashley and Pilcher warned the government of the dangers. The Missouri Fur Company losses were so great that they completely withdrew from the area and were never able to return.²⁵

²²Joshua Pilcher to Henry Leavenworth, August 26, 1823, Frost, General Ashley, pp. 98-108.

²³Henry Atkinson to E. P. Gaines, September 13, 1823, ASP:MA, II, 594-595.

²⁴E. P. Gaines to John C. Calhoun, October 16, 1823, ASP:MA, II, 596.

²⁵Chittenden, Fur Trade, I, 155.

In the fall, Ashley moved his operations south from the Blackfoot country to the valleys of the Green and Big Horn. Around the Teton and Wind River ranges, this intermountain area was inhabited by the more friendly Crow Indians, who preferred to take the white man's horses instead of his scalp. With this change of location, Ashley kept the mountain trade alive.²⁶

Meanwhile, as a result of the Arikara and Blackfoot troubles, the national government began a series of debates, hearings, and proposals, eventually leading to more direct action along the river. In Washington, Secretary Calhoun had been kept advised of the developments. Both William Clark and General Gaines reported to the Secretary and warned him of the folly of allowing the traders to be forced back to the lower Missouri. Clark wrote that he believed the Leavenworth expedition would "have a very good effect, if pursued by a show of troops on the Upper Missouri next spring. . . ." Otherwise, he predicted, the trappers "may be driven down below the Mandans, in that case the Upper Tribes will depend entirely upon the b[r]itish for supplies. . . ."²⁷ Similarly, General Gaines proposed giving further military support to the fur trade, which "forms the rein and curb by which the turbulent and towering spirit of these lords of the forest

²⁶Don Berry, A Majority of Scoundrels: An Informal History of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company (New York, 1961), pp. 48-61.

²⁷William Clark to John C. Calhoun, September 18, 1823, Morgan, William H. Ashley, p. 61.

can alone be governed." But Gaines considered the value of the trade to be "little or nothing" in comparison to its potential to win the friendship of the Indians of the Northwest.²⁸ Calhoun responded by giving him permission to lead two or more regiments from St. Louis as far upriver as would be necessary to "maintain peace and protect our citizens" should Leavenworth's expedition fail.²⁹ However, the troops remained downstream, and the proposed movement became involved in a more complex scheme.

Disturbed by reports of Indian hostilities on the Missouri, the next session of Congress became more receptive to plans to relieve the problems on the northwestern frontier. Once again, the most active congressman in support of the western trade was Thomas Hart Benton, who headed the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs. During the winter the committee studied testimony on the recent hostilities which Benton produced from frontiersmen and officials in Washington.

Of particular concern to the committee was the effort to determine the Hudson's Bay Company's role in the Indian troubles. In testimony concerning the Arikaras, Indian agent Richard Graham declared that he "had no reason to

²⁸E. P. Gaines to John C. Calhoun, July 28, 1823, ASP:MA, II, 578-579.

²⁹John C. Calhoun to E. P. Gaines, August 14, 1823, ASP:MA, II, 581.

believe" the British had been involved.³⁰ Similarly, Joshua Pilcher stated that the Hudson's Bay Company's influence "does not extend as low [on the Missouri] as the Arickaras."³¹ Instead of British instigation, both men believed Ashley had provoked the attack when he refused to compensate the Arikaras for the killing of two of their tribe by members of the Missouri Fur Company.³² But farther up the Missouri, British and Indian friendship was clearly recognized as a barrier to the American trappers. This situation had been reported continually by Clark, Gaines, Atkinson, and other officials in the West. Pilcher testified emphatically that: "The disposition of such tribes of Indians as have intercourse with British traders . . . has been uniformly hostile towards American citizens." He also stated that the Hudson's Bay Company traded firearms to the Blackfeet, who in turn killed American trappers and stole their furs to trade back to the British.³³

³⁰Richard Graham to Thomas Benton, February 10, 1824, ASP:IA, II, 452.

³¹Statement by Joshua Pilcher, in letter, Graham to Benton, ibid., p. 455.

³²Ibid., pp. 452, 455. Shortly after the attacks occurred, the St. Louis Missouri Intelligencer had expressed the same opinion, but Ashley had written that before the attack the Arikaras had claimed they held no grudge against the Missouri Fur Company. St. Louis Missouri Intelligencer, July 1, 1823, as cited in Frost, General Ashley, p. 69; William Ashley to Benjamin O'Fallon, June 4, 1823, Morgan, William H. Ashley, pp. 27-28.

³³Statement by Joshua Pilcher in letter, Richard Graham to Thomas Benton, February 10, 1824, ASP:IA, II, 455-456.

The committee heard further suggestions for military action in the Northwest. As in the past, Calhoun insisted that the "only effectual" action would be either the establishment of an army post on the upper Missouri, or "occasional" visits to the area by American troops.³⁴ He produced an official estimate that the establishment of a permanent post would cost \$13,100.³⁵ When questioned about this plan, both Pilcher and Graham agreed that the government must extend its protection up the Missouri if the trade in that area was to survive.³⁶ As an important addition to the military expedition, the committee considered sending an agent upriver to make treaties with the tribes in the area. It further deliberated creating new Indian agencies on the upper Missouri.³⁷

A final consideration by the committee was a plan to allow the Indians to do all of the trapping in the West. The white trappers would be restricted to no more than trading operations and only from designated posts. Occurring

³⁴John C. Calhoun to Thomas Benton, February 23, 1824, ASP:IA, II, 448.

³⁵Thomas Jessup to John C. Calhoun, February 18, 1824, ASP:IA, II, 451.

³⁶Richard Graham to Thomas Benton, February 10, 1824, ASP:IA, II, 452; Statement by Joshua Pilcher, in letter, Graham to Benton, ibid., pp. 455-456.

³⁷Thomas Benton to John C. Calhoun, February 11, 1824, ASP:IA, II, 448.

after the termination of the government's earlier method of control, the factory system, this plan was meant to halt the deterioration of Indian relations on the frontier. Many knowledgeable persons believed the Indian animosities to be a result of allowing whites to trap on their lands, a practice which violated federal laws already in effect but not enforced. Pilcher and Graham, the two witnesses who were most familiar with conditions on the frontier, testified that unrestricted trapping on Indian lands created considerable resentment. As a solution, Graham would have the government prohibit whites to trap at all, and allow only the controlled trading operations.³⁸ Pilcher, who himself was a private trapper, supported designating the trading posts, but would also allow the Americans under close surveillance, to trap. Relative to this suggestion, Pilcher gave a curious justification of his company's trapping operations in the West. Commenting on the law forbidding hunting on Indian lands, he declared:

no Indians . . . ever objected to traders . . . killing what was necessary for their subsistence. That comes under the notion of hospitality. The trapping done by the men of our company was in conformity with the practice, [subsistence--hospitality] and not under any license; the one which we receive from the government is to trade.³⁹

³⁸Richard Graham to Thomas Benton, February 10, 1824, ASP:IA, II, 453; Statement by Joshua Pilcher, in letter, Graham to Benton, ibid., p. 457.

³⁹Ibid., pp. 456-457.

Although the Missouri Fur Company men had traded with the Indians whenever possible, Pilcher falsely insinuated that those who trapped (in some of the most remote and dangerous territories of the United States), had done so for subsistence and not profit.

The committee having considered the testimony, it reported the proposed bill to the Senate in late March. A debate followed on the bill's four major sections. They were to send troops up the Missouri and establish a post, to make treaties with the upper tribes, to establish more Indian agencies, and to designate the only trading posts to be used.⁴⁰

As the Senators began discussion of the measures, they were doubtlessly aware of conflicting opinions of the trade as it had been conducted. The Detroit Gazette observed that the "hunters in defiance of the law, enter the Indian country, [and] put to hazard the peace of the frontiers. . . ." Furthermore, they "destroy more game in a year than [the Indians] would . . . in any age." Consequently, the Gazette recommended excluding all white trappers from the West.⁴¹ Opposed to this plan was the Louisville Public Advertiser, which wanted the troop movement and the post up the Missouri

⁴⁰Annals of Congress, 18th Congress, 1st Session, Vol. 1, p. 442.

⁴¹Detroit Gazette, October 17, 1823, as cited in Frost, General Ashley, pp. 97-98.

for the protection of the Americans.⁴² Colonel Leavenworth also attacked the trappers in a letter which arrived in Washington during the debates. He declared that "the trap-
ping business is carried on under a license to trade. . . . But they take the beaver of the Indians without consideration of any kind . . . a violation of the rights of a poor miserable set of savages." He proposed sending the expedition upriver with the primary object of eliminating all American trapping operations.⁴³ More moderately, President Monroe had declared in his last annual message that he hoped the Leavenworth expedition had itself been successful and would "prevent a recurrence of future hostility." He gave no further encouragement to troop movements, either to protect or prohibit trappers.⁴⁴ Finally, it is quite likely that the American Fur Company lobbied for the bill with the expectation of out-trading all small competition when strictly confined to the designated posts.⁴⁵

⁴²Louisville Public Advertiser (no date given), as cited in Frost, General Ashley, pp. 114-115.

⁴³Henry Leavenworth to Henry Atkinson, November 22, 1828, Morgan, William H. Ashley, p. 65.

⁴⁴James Monroe to Congress, December 2, 1823, James D. Richardson, editor, A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789-1897 (Washington, 1896), II, 212.

⁴⁵Porter, Astor, II, 738.

In the Senate debates, Benton insisted that the government act immediately against the enemy. He recognized the British innocence in the Arikara attack, the Indians having acted alone for "love of blood and plunder,"⁴⁶ but he blamed them for instigating the Blackfoot troubles. The Senator reasoned that as the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company had killed and robbed one another during their rivalry, the new monopolistic concern would not hesitate now to do the same to Americans. Therefore, Benton stressed the military aspects of the bill as the most effective recourse.⁴⁷

Other senators were not prepared to go so far. Dickerson, of New Jersey, maintained that no post was needed on the upper Missouri, as the one at Council Bluffs was close enough to the Indians. He also quoted Major Stephen Long's report that the area east of the mountains was barren. He believed this region should be used as a refuge for the Indians and that all differences with the British traders should be handled through negotiations with their government.⁴⁸ Senator King, of New York, protested that the United States should obtain permission from the Indians before sending troops into their territory.⁴⁹ Similarly, Senator Holmes, of Maine, observed

⁴⁶Annals of Congress, 18th Congress, 1st Session, I, 437.

⁴⁷Ibid., pp. 441-442.

⁴⁸Ibid., pp. 450, 454.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 458.

that, "We certainly ought not to carry a military force among them while we admit their competency."⁵⁰

After considerable debate, the Senate passed the bill in May. As if to emphasize its moderate and peaceful nature, the title was changed at the last minute to "An act to enable the President to hold treaties with certain Indian tribes, and for other purposes."⁵¹ Very shortly after Senate passage, the House approved the bill without debate.⁵² The act was indeed considerably less militaristic in nature than Benton and his supporters had wished. It appropriated \$20,000 for the expense of sending commissioners to treat with the western Indians. Half of this sum was to cover costs of military escort, but only if the President deemed such escort necessary. Thus, if the troops went at all, they would go not to build a fort but to protect the treaty makers. The bill also provided for the appointment of two subagents for the upper Missouri, and enlarged the powers of the superintendent at St. Louis. In addition, the law took direct action against the trappers. The Indian agents were to designate certain posts for conducting all trading operations; trade at any other place would be illegal.⁵³

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 461.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 762.

⁵²Ibid., II, 2696.

⁵³U. S. Statutes at Large, IV, 35-36.

Essentially, the new law was a victory for the moderates. No permanent posts were to be established for the military, and troops would not even ascend the river unless the President so desired. With the new subagents, the location law, and the treaty expedition, the act was an attempt to control the trade and the Indians in a nonaggressive way. For the future of the upper Missouri trade, the government had chosen to depend on the good faith of the Indians rather than military occupation of their lands.

Even though the bill received full approval in May, it was too late for the expedition (which was to include the military escort) to assemble. But the following spring, General Atkinson led nearly 500 troops up the Missouri from Council Bluffs. Both Atkinson and Indian agent Benjamin O'Fallon were appointed commissioners for the purpose of treating with the Indians. The expedition reached the upper Missouri and built a temporary post on the mouth of the Yellowstone. Having been joined by Ashley and some of his trappers from the Green and Big Horn, the troops returned home in the late summer. During the trip, Atkinson and O'Fallon were able to secure "trade and friendship" treaties with twelve tribes along the Missouri, including the Arikaras, who agreed to a "firm and lasting peace."⁵⁴ Generally, the treaties allowed the United States government the right to

⁵⁴Treaty with the Arikaras, July 16, 1825, ASP:IA, II, 599.

control the Indian's trade with the whites, which would be conducted only at designated posts, and only with licensed traders. Also, the treaty recognized the "supremacy" of the United States over the Indians, and acknowledged that the tribes lived in American-owned territories.⁵⁵ The troops were unable to locate and treat with the Blackfeet who wandered "promiscuously" along the upper Missouri.⁵⁶ The expedition did little to further the hopes of those who still wanted to construct military installations on the upper river. Atkinson and O'Fallon advised that such action was not necessary. Except for the Blackfeet, they reported that the Indians east of the Rockies were friendly. Furthermore, with regard to the British, they stated that "notwithstanding the many rumors that the northwest traders were holding intercourse and exercising an injurious influence over the Indians on the Missouri, no such fact appears to exist."⁵⁷ As a permanent post would not be worth the expense, however, Atkinson proposed in a second report that troops be sent into the area every three or four years. This show of force would create a "friendly understanding with [the Blackfeet], and

⁵⁵Treaties between the United States and Several Tribes, June-October, 1825, *ibid.*, pp. 595-605.

⁵⁶Henry Atkinson and Benjamin O'Fallon to A. L. Langham, November 7, 1825, *ibid.*, p. 607.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*

open a profitable intercourse for our traders."⁵⁸ Atkinson's opinion greatly influenced the government's later refusals to fortify the upper Missouri. But his proposal to send future expeditions to the area failed to impress Congress. It took three decades for the government to decide to establish a fort farther upriver than Council Bluffs.⁵⁹

In the meantime, while Congress was legislating their solution to the Indian problems, protests had reached Great Britain over the alleged involvement of Hudson's Bay Company traders in the Arikara and Blackfoot attacks. The company denied any guilt, but stated that its field hands had traded with Blackfeet tribes for furs marked "H.B.Co.," which they assumed were stolen from Pilcher's men. Furthermore, it was anxious to return the pelts at cost and to reach an agreement with the American traders that neither side would trade with the Indians for stolen goods.⁶⁰ Apparently, no agreement was

⁵⁸Henry Atkinson to Jacob Brown, November 23, 1825, *ibid.*, p. 656.

⁵⁹Beers, Military Frontier, p. 52. During the same year as Atkinson's expedition, another government project on the frontier got under way as surveyors began marking the Santa Fe trail from Fort Osage in Missouri to Taos. The trade with the Mexicans in Santa Fe had begun in 1821, and increased tremendously with the caravan of 1824. Senator Benton, the principal supporter of the surveying project, also wanted military protection for the trade, but failed to secure approval for this proposal. Benton, View I, 41; Robert Glass Cleland, This Reckless Breed of Men, (New York, 1950), pp. 128-135.

⁶⁰Extract from Edmonton Factory Journal, October 23, 1823, A. P. Nasatir, editor, "The International Significance of the Jones and Imbell Massacre and of the Arikara Outbreak in 1823," The Pacific Northwest Quarterly, XXX (1939), 82-83; J. H. Pelly to George Canning, November 11, 1824, *ibid.*, pp. 80-82.

ever reached. In accord with the company's claims, British Foreign Secretary George Canning instructed his Charge d'Affaires in Washington to explain the British trader's innocence.⁶¹

Thus the Atkinson expedition, coming nearly two years after the Indian troubles, represented the second troop movement up the Missouri in response to the fur trader's problems. But government response, which besides the military action had included a new trade law, was not sufficient to open the upper river to the Americans. Within a year after Leavenworth's campaign, the Arikara had already killed more of Ashley's men.⁶² Atkinson had been unable to locate and treat with the dangerous Blackfeet, who continued their hostilities. They finally opened a precarious trade with the Americans on the upper Missouri in the early 1830's. Neither the expeditions

⁶¹George Canning to Henry Addington, December 11, 1824, *ibid.*, p. 88. Private correspondence and journal records, which surely were not meant to be seen by the Americans, reveal that the Hudson's Bay Company was doubtlessly innocent of direct involvement. (Various correspondence and journal records, *ibid.*, pp. 80-90). But it is possible that some of the company traders, acting independently, might have instigated the attacks. Furthermore, the company did not discourage such acts of violence when it traded firearms and liquor to the Indians. As one of many witnesses, Joshua Pilcher declared he had seen the Indians carrying British weapons, and had seen "rum kegs . . . branded with the marks of the Hudson's Bay and Northwest Companies" around deserted Indian campsites. Statement by Joshua Pilcher in letter, Richard Graham to Thomas Benton, February 10, 1824, *ASP:IA*, II, 454.

⁶²*St. Louis Enquirer*, June 7, 1824, Morgan, *William H. Ashley*, pp. 76-77.

nor the various parts of the 1824 trade law were satisfactory to the militants like Benton and Pilcher. Instead of forcefully securing the traders' private profit through military occupation, the 1824 law had consisted of measures designed to win the Indians' allegiance. Following the termination of the factory system, the location law represented a new attempt to restrict the trade. The government sought to benefit the national interest through protection of the Indians. The location law even threatened the Americans' trapping operations, the very method by which they procured most of their furs. Indeed, the national government had not proved to be the aggressive supporter of the fur trade many had sought. General Gaines put the trade in the right perspective when he remarked that its greatest value was in its potential influence with the Indians. Insofar as the government was concerned, the Indians held a very important advantage over the traders, the fact that their loyalty had not been secured to the United States. To win this loyalty, Congress had accepted the moderate and less militant methods. Without aggressive government support, the far western traders temporarily shifted their interests away from the upper Missouri and began to concentrate on the intermountain area. But in the next few years, both of these remote areas would become the scene of much American activity, as the trappers, far removed from government observation, arranged their own terms with the Indians.

CHAPTER III

THE FAR WESTERN FUR TRADE AND THE REACTION OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT, 1825-1834

Beginning in the mid-1820's with William Ashley's move to the intermountain area, the far western fur trade embarked upon its decade of greatest activity. Increasing numbers of American trappers scattered throughout the Northwest in vigorous rivalry with one another. The operations were further intensified when the western Indian tribes, seeking a chance to profit from the invasion of their lands, began to conduct a more active trade with the Americans. Although there were minor companies involved, the competition narrowed to the American Fur Company and the various successors of William Ashley. Most of the free trappers became aligned in some degree with one of the two rival American groups. When dealing with the many trappers in the field, the Indians usually traded to the highest bidder. To their great disadvantage, the bid was often in liquor, for which the Indians had little resistance. This problem was increased in Oregon and along the Canadian border, where the Hudson's Bay Company presented powerful competition.

While the government interest remained focused on the problems of the upper Missouri, William Ashley had continued the far western trade by moving to the intermountain area. In 1826, he withdrew from active participation in the trade and concentrated on Missouri politics. He sold his interests to Jedediah Smith, David Jackson, and William Sublette.¹ As their agent in St. Louis, he maintained his connections with the trade. Before retiring, however, Ashley had initiated the rendezvous system with which he was able to reduce his own activities in the field, and at the same time raise his profits considerably. By allowing the trappers to live permanently in the mountains, Ashley did not have the expense and risk of maintaining a post. But perhaps the greatest effect of the rendezvous was to increase the competition. The new method encouraged hundreds of free trappers to come to the mountains with little, if any, obligation to the companies, yet with a trade fair available to them (and to the Indians) each summer.

¹During his tenure in the mountain trade, Ashley and his associates made two contributions which were to be extremely important to the immigrant trains of later decades. The trappers explored, and reported the existence of, South Pass and that part of the Overland (or Oregon) Trail to the east of the Continental Divide. Although they did not discover either, the men were the first to use them regularly, and on his way to the 1825 rendezvous, Ashley took the first wagon up the Platte River and across the Divide at South Pass. In the fall, on his return to St. Louis with the homeward bound Atkinson expedition, Ashley informed the General of his experiences. Atkinson relayed the information to his superior officers in Washington. Henry Atkinson to Jacob Brown, November 25, 1825, ASP:IA, II, 656-657; Berry, Majority of Scoundrels, pp. 70-73.

Following the sale of Ashley's interest, Jedediah Smith began his firm's operations by making important pathfinding expeditions in search of new fur country to the southwest. During three years of wanderings, he explored routes to California and then to Oregon. While he was gone, Jackson and Sublette continued to trade, and even managed to carry on a brief commerce with the Blackfeet. But the Indians renewed their hostilities and ended the trade relationship. In one attack, believed to have been instigated by the British, the Blackfeet killed or captured twelve Americans.² The firm conducted much of its trading and trapping across the Continental Divide in the eastern mountain areas of Oregon where the men came in frequent contact with Hudson's Bay Company personnel. After four years Smith, Jackson, and Sublette sold out to a group of their associates including, among others, Jim Bridger, Thomas Fitzpatrick, and Milton Sublette, brother of William. These men formed a new concern, the Rocky Mountain Fur Company.

During the same period in which Ashley and his successors were developing their commerce in the intermountain area, John Jacob Astor was re-entering the far western trade.

²William Ashley to Thomas Hart Benton, January 20, 1829, Morgan, William H. Ashley, pp. 186-188. The continued Blackfoot hostility was partially a result of the whites' trading arms to the tribe's traditionally weaker enemies. Thus, the Blackfeet resented losing some of their power and authority in the region. Lewis, Blackfoot, pp. 20-21.

Although beginning its trans-Mississippi operations in 1822 by joining with St. Louis traders in the formation of the Western Department, Astor's American Fur Company did not truly become active in the Far West for five more years. In 1827, he quit his original partners and merged with Bernard Pratte and Company, who operated near St. Louis. He also absorbed the Columbia Fur Company, which trapped the upper Missouri as far as the Mandan villages in present-day central North Dakota. Using the experience of the former Columbia Fur Company men who were knowledgeable of the area and its Indians, Astor first attempted the upper Missouri trade.³

Under the leadership of Kenneth McKenzie, the company established Fort Union in 1828, at the mouth of the Yellowstone. But it took three years for McKenzie to establish trade relations with the Piegan tribe of the Blackfeet. As these Indians did not like white trappers on their lands, the company built a fort at the mouth of the Marias from which they planned trading operations only. This trade was temporarily halted when another, more hostile, group of Blackfeet burned the post. The company rebuilt, and continued its commerce with the Indians. For the trade of the upper

³Formed in the early 1820's after the two British companies had merged, the Columbia Fur Company consisted mostly of dissatisfied or jobless Canadians. But to evade the law of 1816 forbidding foreigners to trap in the United States' territories, the company included American citizens among its list of officials. Porter, Astor, II, 745.

Missouri's southern tributaries, McKenzie had another post built in 1832 at the confluence of the Big Horn and Yellowstone rivers. The greatest competition on the upper river came from the British, but another formidable rival appeared in 1833, when William Sublette and Robert Campbell constructed a trading house near Fort Union.⁴

While developing its trade on the upper Missouri, the American Fur Company had also begun to compete in the intermountain region. By the early 1830's the firm had trappers in the area who followed the wily Rocky Mountain Fur Company men through the fields, learning their techniques and their preferred hunting grounds. Fitzpatrick and Bridger attempted to halt this annoying competition by leading their rivals north into an ambush by the Blackfeet. McKenzie retaliated by inciting the Crows to rob his opponents. The Indian hostilities (most particularly from the Blackfeet) considerably endangered the trappers of both groups and eventually helped the American Fur Company drive its weaker rival from the trade. In a single attack in 1832, the Blackfeet killed or wounded eleven trappers, most of them associated with the Rocky Mountain Fur Company.⁵ Under pressure and competition, the company was finally dissolved in 1834.

⁴Chittenden, Fur Trade, I, 330-337.

⁵Ibid., II, 657-663.

At about the same time, the American Fur Company agreed with Sublette and Campbell (the new competition on the upper Missouri) to withdraw from the intermountain area, while the latter would retire from the river trade. This agreement gave the company complete domination of the American commerce on the upper Missouri. However, it did not stop its trade in the intermountain area as it had promised. Bridger, Fitzpatrick, and Milton Sublette soon began to trap the region for the company.

During this important year in the history of the fur trade, John Jacob Astor withdrew from the American Fur Company. He retired partially because of ill health. But also, as early as 1832, he had suspected a decline in the trade, believing the world market for beaver fur would soon collapse. In the transactions, Astor sold his Western Department to Pratte, Chouteau and Company, who began to concentrate mostly on the upper Missouri.

Thus, for approximately a decade, the companies and individual trappers had been extremely active throughout the Northwest. They had developed various relationships with the Indians, and had been in continuous competition with the Hudson's Bay Company. Yet the increased activity did not produce any government interest in the trade. After 1825, the government was almost completely indifferent. Unlike the response to the earlier Blackfoot and Arikara attacks,

until the early 1830's there was no direct relationship between events in the field and the infrequent government action. Most of the national interest in the western trade became centered on the Oregon Territory and futile efforts in Congress to protect American claims on the lower Columbia River.

Nevertheless, as the commerce in the Far West had been developing, there were several attempts by members of the government to improve the trade situation. In April, 1825, before the Atkinson expedition had even gotten under way, Senator Benton announced that he would present the next Congress with a new proposal to establish a permanent army post on the Yellowstone. He believed this was the only way the Americans could "expell the British from the Upper Missouri . . . recover the rich fur trade of the Rocky Mountains, and . . . maintain their own position in that remote region."⁶

The location law also was creating considerable dissatisfaction among participants in the trade. The American Fur Company soon began to complain of the proposed trading sites. But, with the permission of William Clark and Thomas McKenney, the latter the new head of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the company selected some of the locations. Yet the

⁶Thomas Hart Benton to James Barbour, April 30, 1825, Frost, General Ashley, p. 128.

firm still believed the law would only help the British and the renegade American traders. Astor's associates, Bernard Pratte and Robert Stuart, requested Secretary of War James Barbour to seek repeal of the law, but without success.⁷ To extend the law to the Far West, William Clark designated locations in as remote areas as eastern Oregon. But for the benefit of the trade and national interests, he questioned the wisdom of applying trade restrictions in areas jointly trapped with the British. The trappers never used the locations; the rendezvous remained the dominant method in the mountain trade.

Responding to these attitudes in the following winter (1825-1826), the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs reviewed written testimony on the results which the trade and treaty law of 1824 had produced on the fur trade. Practically every opinion was expressed in the few letters which the Committee received. Probably speaking for the entire trade, Bernard Pratte and Robert Stuart, agents of the American Fur Company, denounced the location law. According to them, the law was an inconvenience to the Indians who often moved around and trapped at great distances from the posts. Unless the measure was repealed, they claimed, the Hudson's Bay Company would

⁷Porter, Astor, II, 738-739.

⁸William Clark to James Barbour, October 24, 1825, Morgan, Ashley, p. 138.

retain the loyalty and trade of the Indians.⁹ Although more moderate in his opinions, Governor Lewis Cass of Michigan related to the committee that the location law had "produced little advantage," and should be terminated.¹⁰ Opposed to this position, Thomas McKenney supported the law as the best protection the Indians had against the whites, regardless of the advantage it gave the British. According to McKenney, the "source of all difficulty" in the trade was not the location law, but the incessant use of liquor in commerce with the Indians.¹¹ After studying the testimony, the Committee reported a bill designed "for the better regulation of the fur trade."¹² Regardless of the threat of British opposition, there was no interest in the measure and it died.¹³

For several years Congress showed little concern for the trade other than the role it played in the Oregon question. Debates over the tariff bill in the Spring of 1828

⁹Bernard Pratte and Robert Stuart to James Barbour, January 28, 1826, ASP:IA, II, 658.

¹⁰Lewis Cass to James Barbour, February 2, 1826, ibid., pp. 658-659.

¹¹Thomas McKenney to James Barbour, February 14, 1826, ibid., pp. 659-661.

¹²Report by the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, March 8, 1826, ibid., p. 657.

¹³Register of Debates in Congress, 19th Congress, 1st Session, I, 135-137 (hereafter cited as Register of Debates); Porter, Astor, II, 739.

did bring a brief reference to furs and woolen blankets. The furs were being imported free from England. And, by the tariff of 1824, Congress had placed a 25 per cent import duty on woolen blankets, a major item in the Indian trade.¹⁴ Thus, the traders had to pay higher prices for one of their most important trade goods, while they had to compete in their home markets with the tax-free furs from England. This situation prompted Senator Benton to propose that Congress abolish the tariff on blankets. He claimed that the American mills did not produce enough for the home market, creating a shortage felt most severely by the traders.¹⁵ He also asked Congress to place a duty of 33-1/3 per cent on all imported furs. Benton was opposed by Senators Smith, of Maryland, and Eaton, of Tennessee, the latter claiming that the duty on blankets had actually stimulated competition of domestic manufacturers and thus lowered the price. Without further mention of the duty on furs, the Senate rejected Benton's amendments.¹⁶ Instead, having become involved in the sectional feud over tariff protection, Congress completely

¹⁴United States Statutes at Large, IV, 25-26.

¹⁵Register of Debates, 20th Congress, 1st Session, I, 782-783. Although Benton did not mention it at the time, if the tariff was lowered on blankets, the Americans could use them in their trade. The Indians considered the British-made blankets to be the best.

¹⁶Ibid.

ignored the problems of the trade and raised the duty on blankets to 35 per cent.¹⁷

When the next session of Congress met in December, the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs began another investigation into the need for protecting the fur trade. Practically all of the correspondence included in the Committee's report emphasized the tariff situation.¹⁸ In an effort to encourage the trade (which, in the report, was uniformly considered to be declining), Thomas McKenney proposed lowering the duty on woolen blankets. This, he believed, would help the Americans in their competition with the British along the border and in Oregon.¹⁹ Similarly, Lewis Cass and William Clark agreed that some form of action was necessary. They left no doubt that primary emphasis should be placed on the national interest. They observed that the trade was "more important as a measure of policy affecting our relations with the Indians than as a branch of national industry and enterprize."²⁰

¹⁷United States Statutes at Large, IV, 272.

¹⁸As many of the complaints involved the tariff situation, it is possible that Benton specifically requested opinions on this matter.

¹⁹Thomas McKenney to Peter Porter, January 3, 1829, Senate Documents, 20th Congress, 2nd Session, No. 67 (Serial No. 181), pp. 4-5.

²⁰William Clark and Lewis Cass to Thomas Hart Benton, December 27, 1828, ibid., pp. 9-11.

Another letter to the Committee came from John Jacob Astor, also complaining of the high duties on woolen blankets and other trading goods. His greatest concern, however, was the fact that imported furs were not taxed, a situation which produced excessive British competition. Contrariwise, the Americans had to pay duties when shipping furs to foreign ports. As the leading fur merchant in America, Astor particularly wanted to see his foreign rivals taxed. His only specific request of the Senate was that it should place a duty of 15 to 20 per cent on imported furs.²¹ Accordingly, the report which Benton presented to the Senate in February stated that the Committee was "deeply impressed with the necessity of doing something for the protection of this trade at the present session, and unwilling to incur the risk of doing nothing by proposing such," and, therefore, it proposed only to place a tariff on "foreign furs."²² But the Senate ignored the proposal and the remarks on the depressed state of the trade. It refused to take any action at all, even to tax incoming furs.²³

After this futile attempt, two more years lapsed before Congress took any interest in the mountain trade. In the

²¹John Jacob Astor to Thomas Hart Benton, January 29, 1829, *ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

²²Statement by the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, February 9, 1829, *ibid.*, p. 3.

²³Register of Debates, 20th Congress, 2nd Session, p. 52.

meantime, in 1831, William Ashley entered Congress as a representative from Missouri. Despite their common interests in the advancement of the fur trade, Thomas Hart Benton opposed Ashley's election, principally over the national bank issue. Ashley served on the House Committee on Indian Affairs during his six-year tenure.²⁴ The fact that he very seldom appealed to Congress in support of the fur trappers evidences the over-all lack of interest in the trade.

In the same year that Ashley entered Congress, Comanche depredations on the Santa Fe Trail resulted in an investigation of the Mexican trade and the fur trade in general. Lewis Cass, now the Secretary of War, presented the report early in the following year. It contained a series of letters with the standard complaints about the condition of the trade. The trade was said to be on the decline because of British activity, the unfavorable tariff situation, and the intense competition, which was killing out all of the important fur bearing animals. Cass estimated that over 500 "rabid" American trappers were causing the "entire destruction of the beaver" in the West.²⁵

Although the testimony generally agreed that the trade was declining, efforts to determine the exact profits in

²⁴Chambers, Benton, pp. 178-179.

²⁵Lewis Cass to Andrew Jackson, February 8, 1832, Senate Documents, 22nd Congress, 1st Session, No. 90 (Serial Set No. 213), p. 4.

furs were met with stubborn silence, thus leaving the government confused on this matter. Many of the traders apparently did not wish to disclose their profits or losses. John Dougherty, Indian agent at Council Bluffs, had inquired about the investments and returns of the traders, but was not "favored" with any replies. Although allowing that his calculations were made "without having access to the books and accounts of the traders, which privilege it is believed many of them would be unwilling to grant," Dougherty estimated that on the upper Missouri alone nearly \$1,700,000 in profits had been realized.²⁶ Another witness wrote that persons who were informed on the profits of the trade were "unwilling to say any thing about it."²⁷ William Clark had experienced the same difficulty, and to get the information, he suggested having the traders submit statements of their annual business.²⁸

Letters from the American Fur Company added to the confusion. In an earlier report, John Jacob Astor had failed to state his exact returns, but indicated that they were low.²⁹ Astor's son, William B. Astor, reported a more likely

²⁶John Dougherty to William Clark, October 25, 1831, *ibid.*, p. 53.

²⁷Thomas Forsythe to Lewis Cass, October 24, 1831, *ibid.*, p. 70.

²⁸William Clark to Lewis Cass, November 20, 1831, *ibid.*, p. 6.

²⁹John Jacob Astor to Thomas Benton, January 29, 1829, *ibid.*, p. 62.

situation when he estimated the company had a yearly profit of "about a half a million of dollars."³⁰ It is probable that only about one quarter of this amount was net profit from the far western trade.³¹ These were the returns of the largest company in the West, a firm which virtually monopolized the Missouri River trade. As such, these profits did not represent the returns of the average trading concern. If, as many persons believed, the trade was actually depressed, then those who were losing the most should have willingly proven their circumstances to the government. Instead, they let the wealthiest man in America (however influential) do their pleading.

Nevertheless, the trade still had its supporters. As a solution to their problems, William Clark suggested that a tariff be placed on furs, and the existing duties be lowered on trade goods. In addition, he wanted Congress to put mounted troops on the frontier to protect settlers and the trade. He believed that such a force could have great influence on the Indians of the upper Missouri. But at the same time, Clark proposed a restrictive measure for the trade. Recognizing that the liquor trade was doing injury to the Indians, Clark

³⁰William Astor to Lewis Cass, November 25, 1831, *ibid.*, p. 77.

³¹Porter, *Astor*, II, 819-820.

suggested that all alcohol be excluded from the West.³² Within a few months, Congress had passed laws providing for each of these measures.

In the summer Congress enacted a new tariff law which returned the duty on woolen blankets to 25 per cent.³³ The act also placed a tax of 12½ per cent on all incoming "dressed" furs, and a 15 per cent tax on such trade items as baskets and beads.³⁴ Another law authorized stationing 600 cavalymen on the western frontier. Futile employment of infantry along the Santa Fe Trail had proved the necessity of using horse soldiers in the West. Although Congress was primarily seeking protection for the settler's frontier and the commerce with the Mexicans, it gave passing consideration to the fur trade. Before William Clark made his proposal, Senator Benton had declared that mounted soldiers should be used to protect the trappers in the West. He claimed that "in the region of the fur trade, where the Indians are excited by the British, the destruction of lives and property is horrible."³⁵ William Ashley also spoke in favor of a mounted

³²William Clark to Lewis Cass, November 25, 1831, Senate Documents, 22nd Congress, 1st Session, No. 90 (Serial Set No. 213), p. 7.

³³United States Statutes at Large, IV, 584.

³⁴Ibid., 589-590.

³⁵Register of Debates, 21st Congress, 1st Session, p. 272.

infantry. He wanted the troops to provide general protection of the frontier, and particularly to protect the Santa Fe trade and fur traders who came in contact with the British along the Canadian border.³⁶ However, the Far West presented the same obstacles of size and distance that it had to earlier attempts to provide military protection. Joshua Pilcher stated the problem succinctly when he wrote to the Secretary of War of the "impracticability of affording any general protection [over the mountain trade] . . . the very nature of that business is such as to put its protection out of the power of any reasonable number of troops. . . ." He concluded by saying: "It would cost more to [protect the trappers] than the whole fur trade is worth."³⁷ After debating almost entirely on the need to protect the settlers, and not the fur trappers, Congress authorized the President to raise the troops.

Even though these acts passed in 1832 related to the fur trade in some manner, they were both much more deeply involved in other issues, such as sectional disputes over the tariff and protecting the more civilized frontier. The same year, however, Congress enacted a law which, for the

³⁶Ibid., 22nd Congress, 1st Session, III, 3391.

³⁷Joshua Pilcher to Lewis Cass, December 1, 1831, Senate Documents, 22nd Congress, 1st Session, No. 90 (Serial Set No. 213), p. 17.

first time since 1824, was a direct response to the operation of the trade, particularly in the Far West. This new act positively forbade bringing alcohol into the Indian country for any purpose.

The law was another in a long series against the liquor traffic. Similar restrictions had been enacted during the entire history of the western trade. But, until the 1820's, the liquor law violations involved the eastern trade areas almost exclusively.³⁸ Following the termination of the factory system in 1822, Congress found it necessary to restate the earlier prohibition acts. The new law gave the President the authority to order searches of traders' goods whenever necessary.³⁹ However, the chief executive allowed the traders to carry alcohol into Indian country for use by boatmen and others who had to endure extreme physical hardship. This frequently enabled companies to evade the law by padding employee rosters. In addition, government officials sometimes cooperated. Indian Superintendent William Clark allowed liquor for "boatmen" listed as traveling with overland caravans headed for the mountain rendezvous.⁴⁰ Clark later

³⁸As the early trappers on the upper Missouri did not carry on a thriving trade with the Indians, they had only slight chances to use liquor in their commerce. In Oregon, Astor's men had orders not to use it in dealing with the Indians. Porter, Astor, II, 794-797.

³⁹United States Statutes at Large, III, 682.

⁴⁰Berry, Majority of Scoundrels, p. 300.

acknowledged his awareness that the traders' goods were not always searched, and that the alcohol designated for boatmen was being used for the Indians.⁴¹

The location law of 1824 represented another attempt to check the liquor problem, but the remoteness of the developing western trade made evasion of the prohibition acts more rampant than ever. Nearly all government officials wanted to halt the liquor traffic. In 1826, Secretary of War Lewis Cass acknowledged that the present laws frequently went unenforced. He proposed a new law for total abolition of the liquor trade in "any place, or under any circumstances." Cass believed that strict prohibition would "guard the Indians against the improper conduct of the traders, and would strengthen the authority of the officers of the Government."⁴² More than any other person, Thomas McKenney was vehemently against any and all liquor trade. He believed that the nation's honor was at stake, and to end this "cause of wretchedness and so many evils," he demanded that Congress make it a capital offense to trade alcohol to the Indians for any reason. Furthermore, the British use of liquor gave the Americans only the "right to complain," not the right to profit at the

⁴¹William Clark to Lewis Cass, November 20, 1831, Senate Documents, 22nd Congress, 1st Session, No. 90 (Serial Set No. 213), p. 7.

⁴²Lewis Cass to James Barbour, February 2, 1826, ASP:LA, II, 659.

expense of the Indians. McKenney wanted the government to negotiate the liquor problem with the British instead of allowing the traders to use it as a means of competition.⁴³

Although the government did not act according to McKenney's wishes, the American Fur Company did attempt negotiations. Finding the traffic to be harmful in areas where the company was coming in contact with the British, William B. Astor, in 1829, proposed to the Hudson's Bay Company that the two firms should agree to end the liquor trade. But the British company replied that it had "already accomplished this desired object in a large portion of the Interior with the most beneficial results to the Indians and to the Trade." Moreover, the company could "strictly" control its own employees in such matters, and therefore the abolition of the liquor traffic would "entirely depend on the conduct of the American traders."⁴⁴ Consequently, the two companies did not reach any agreements on the problem, and one government official estimated that in the following year traders on the upper Missouri had realized an additional profit of \$50,000 from the liquor traffic alone.⁴⁵

⁴³Thomas McKenney to James Barbour, February 14, 1826, ASP:IA, II, 659-661.

⁴⁴William Smith to William Astor, March 3, 1830, Fredrick Merk, editor, Fur Trade and Empire: George Simpson's Journal, 1824-1825, (Cambridge, 1931), pp. 320-321.

⁴⁵Andrew Hughes to William Clark, October 31, 1831, Senate Documents, 22nd Congress, 1st Session, No. 90 (Serial Set No. 213), pp. 23-24.

When Congress proposed tighter restrictions in 1832, the fur traders bitterly opposed the measure. Astor complained to William Ashley that the British competition had forced the Americans to use alcohol. If total prohibition were effected, then the American trade would be ruined wherever the British were active.⁴⁶ But Ashley decided to support the measure, as did Secretary Cass, another frequent patron of the trade.⁴⁷

In July, Congress passed the bill, which provided for absolute prohibition of alcohol. The measure was included in a law dealing with general administration of Indian affairs.⁴⁸ The government then renewed its efforts for more effective enforcement, and the American Fur Company became increasingly aware of the tighter control. The next year, William B. Astor asked Cass to press for negotiations with the British government over prohibiting liquor from the Hudson's Bay Company's trade, but to no avail.⁴⁹

Another company representative, Kenneth McKenzie, went all the way to Washington from the upper Missouri to request permission to use liquor against the British. He also feared

⁴⁶Porter, Astor, II, 611.

⁴⁷Berry, Majority of Scoundrels, pp. 302-303.

⁴⁸Among other things, the measure created the position of Commissioner of Indian Affairs to serve under the Secretary of War as director of the Indian Bureau. United States Statutes at Large, IV, 564.

⁴⁹Porter, Astor, II, 813.

to face the opposition of Sublette and Campbell without using liquor. When his request was refused, McKenzie returned to the upper Missouri and constructed a still. Upon learning of this violation, the government nearly revoked the company's license to trade, but agreed to let the matter drop after receiving promises that the concern would comply with the law.⁵⁰ By the time the dispute was over, the Company's reputation was badly damaged, and in 1834 the directors refused to renew McKenzie's contract.

When Astor sold out the same year, the most active decade in the history of the far western fur trade came to a close. Left almost entirely to themselves, the traders had penetrated the Far West, braved a variety of dangers, and finally secured the trade of the area. Since the Atkinson expedition in 1825, the government had not made a single aggressive effort to support this commerce. During this time, the opposition from the British and the troubles with the Indians continued. The traders had to resort to their own methods (mostly the use of alcohol) to attempt to secure the Indian's trade and alliance. The pleas of Benton, and the testimony of many experienced traders and officials that government action was necessary, went almost completely unheeded. Commenting on the Americans' re-entry into the far western trade during the 1820's, Joshua Pilcher stated

⁵⁰Chittended, Fur Trade, I, 355-362.

that the trappers developed their commerce not with government support, but only "by the application of additional means, and a more judicious organization of their business."⁵¹

The legislation which had any thing at all to do with the trade, became so involved in other issues that the problems of the trade seemed almost incidental and insignificant. The adjustment of duties on furs represented very little economic benefit to the trade, and could not be considered at all as important government patronage of the fur companies. And as Pilcher stated, the mounted infantry could not hope to benefit the trappers in the remote mountain regions. The scarcity of debates on this plan testifies that Congress had little interest in giving military support to the trade.

By passing laws prohibiting liquor, Congress actually attempted to restrain the traders in spite of the threats that the trade would collapse. The government hoped to extend its influence in the West by protecting the Indians and not the trade. In fact, it would protect the Indians from the trade. The generally lax enforcement of the liquor prohibition measures was not due to government indifference. Rather, it reflected the difficulties of policing the western territories and, in addition, the influence that the traders had on a few government officials stationed on the frontier.

⁵¹Report of Joshua Pilcher to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, November 25, 1838, Senate Documents, 25th Congress, 3rd Session, No. 1 (Serial Set No. 338), p. 500.

Having developed without government support, the fur trade began to decline by 1834, for reasons also completely unrelated to any government activity. Fashion changes in Europe and the United States, not government action or inaction, were to ruin the trade. The trappers, confronted with diminishing profits, began to abandon the mountains and seek other opportunities.

CHAPTER IV

THE FINAL YEARS: DECLINE AND INDIFFERENCE

1834-1846

John Jacob Astor's withdrawal from the American Fur Company in 1834 evidenced the beginning of the recession of the fur trade. By the mid-1840's, the American trade throughout the Northwest had been reduced to minimal significance. The value of beaver pelts dropped to as low as a third of its earlier height, whereas buffalo robes had become the most important commodity, making up an increasingly large percentage of the annual trade.¹

The decreasing demand for beaver fur was the major reason for the trade's decline, but the absence of Astor's vigorous support and interest was also a factor. Without his financial backing, the American Fur Company² had immediately sought to remove its greatest competition from the Missouri by securing the agreement with Sublette and Campbell. The

¹John E. Sunder, The Fur Trade on the Upper Missouri, 1840-1865 (Norman, 1965), pp. 16-17.

²Although Ramsay Crook's firm, which purchased Astor's interests around the Great Lakes, had the legal title of the American Fur Company, the name continued to be applied also to the operations of Pratte and Chouteau, Astor's successors in the West.

company's subsequent violation of the compact did them little good, as the fur trade in the intermountain area dwindled very rapidly and by the early 1840's was practically non-existent. The trappers shifted their operations to either along the forks of the Platte River, or south and west into the Mexican territory, or north along the upper Missouri. The trade in the latter area continued to be dominated by the American Fur Company. The most powerful competition came from the Union Fur Company, which, with ample financial support, traded on the upper river after 1840. The company's frequent use of liquor created considerable trouble, and resulted in its withdrawing from the trade in 1845.

During the period of decline, the national government made no effort to promote or encourage the fur traders. It continued the policies which it had previously established. The same year that Astor retired, Congress passed a comprehensive new Indian trade law. The act dealt with all aspects of the trade, but produced few changes as it was mostly a codification and amendment of earlier measures. It reduced the western trader's license term from seven to three years, and reaffirmed the law excluding foreigners from the trade. The act also granted agents increased power to deal with violators of the liquor law, and forbade distilleries in Indian country.³ To further improve the handling of frontier

³U. S. Statutes at Large, IV, 729-735.

problems, Congress rearranged the administration of Indian affairs within the War Department on the same day that it passed the trade law. This measure established two Indian agents for the unorganized western territories, and confirmed the agency for the upper Missouri. It also stated that, under penalty of \$5,000 fine, no employee of the Indian Bureau was to have any private interest in the trade.⁴ The government again sought to pacify the Indians, promote their friendship, and protect them from debauchery by the liquor traffic. These policies do not reflect a purely humanitarian purpose, as peaceful and friendly Indians would benefit national interests in the West.

Despite the apparent intent to improve control of the trade activities, the government's surveillance was very erratic and generally ineffective. It was indicative of the indifference to the far western trade. Likewise, the government showed little interest in the Upper Missouri Agency. William Fulkerson, subagent for the Mandans and the tribes farther up the river, resigned his post in 1838 after the smallpox plague had occurred the previous year. Due to the conditions in the area, the superintendent in St. Louis did not appoint a replacement until four years later.⁵ Moreover,

⁴Ibid., pp. 735-738.

⁵Annie Heloise Abel, editor, Chardon's Journal at Fort Clark, 1834-1839 (Pierre, South Dakota, 1932), p. xl; Sunder, Upper Missouri, p. 48.

the government had little opportunity to help the Indians during the plague, the stricken tribes being scattered throughout the remote regions of the upper river. The vaccines sent into the area arrived too late. Estimates of the Blackfoot losses ran as high as two-thirds of the tribe, but the Missouri trade continued.⁶

Frequently, officials overseeing the Missouri trade maintained very close ties with the private traders, particularly with the American Fur Company. In 1839, two years after William Clark's retirement, Joshua Pilcher became superintendent at St. Louis. Since the collapse of his own trading operations in the late 1820's, Pilcher had for a while been associated with the American Fur Company. During his two-year tenure as superintendent, he fully cooperated with the company's trade strategy. When the Whigs forced Pilcher out of office, he was replaced by David Dawson Mitchell, another of the company's former associates.⁷

During Mitchell's administration, the government responded to pleas of the American Fur Company, and renewed its efforts to end the liquor trade. The problem had never completely disappeared in the 1830's, and the company was one of the worst violators. But when its rival, the Union Fur Company, began to trade with increasingly large quantities of alcohol,

⁶Lewis, Blackfoot, p. 25.

⁷Sunder, Upper Missouri, pp. 27-31.

the older concern urged the government to appoint a sub-agent to halt the liquor traffic. Thus, in 1842, President Tyler named Andrew Drips to the position vacated by William Fulkerson four years earlier. Drips had to resign from the American Fur Company before he could accept the offer.⁸ He then cooperated with his former employers, even to the extent of warning them when he planned to inspect their posts so they could hide the liquor.⁹ Other traders evaded Drips' inspections, but not as successfully. His activities along the Missouri and the Yellowstone forced the Union Fur Company out of the trade in 1845.¹⁰

By allowing any liquor trade at all, Drips had helped defeat the government's purpose for the prohibition. The violations which he permitted were designed to advance the goals of his former company. He was finally dismissed by the Indian Office in 1846. The government made similarly poor choices in its appointment of other agents for the upper Missouri. In his journals, the fur trader Charles Larpenteur gave a brief character sketch of the agents who served during the declining period of the river trade. Almost without exception, he denounced them as worthless or drunkards.¹¹

⁸Abel, Chardon's Journal, pp. xli-xlii.

⁹Elliot Coues, editor, Forty Years a Fur Trader on the Upper Missouri, the Personal Narrative of Charles Larpenteur, 1833-1872 (New York, 1898), II, 416-417.

¹⁰Sunder, Upper Missouri, pp. 80-81.

¹¹Coues, Forty Years, II, 412-418.

As the fur trade was diminishing, the government began to send military expeditions to the West. Three important explorations were led by John C. Frémont between 1842 and 1847. Frémont's father-in-law, Senator Thomas Benton helped promote the ventures, but his interest was now centered on settling the Far West and not on the fur trade. Frémont described the purpose of his first assignment as an effort to determine the best routes for immigrants going to South Pass, and to study the possibility of locating posts along the way.¹² Nor did the last two expeditions concern the fur trade. Benton encouraged the second expedition in order to complete the "survey across the continent."¹³ Frémont's third venture into the mountains was designed to explore much of the Mexican territories in the Southwest.¹⁴

The official government explorations and the westward immigration did benefit, however, from the experiences of the fur traders. The trappers had a better knowledge of the Far West than any other white men, and many of them left the trade to work as guides for the renewed westward movement. The Henry Dodge expedition, which traveled along the South Platte and the Arkansas rivers in 1835, was led by an Indian

¹²John C. Frémont, Memoirs of My Life (Chicago, 1887), p. 69.

¹³Benton, View, II, 560.

¹⁴Frémont, Memoirs, pp. 422-425.

trader referred to as Captain Gantt.¹⁵ Christopher (Kit) Carson, the most famous western scout of all, left his trapping operations to lead Fremont on each of his explorations. Another trapper, Thomas Fitzpatrick, aided Fremont on his second trip into the West.¹⁶ Fitzpatrick guided other military expeditions as well as immigrant trains through the Rocky Mountains. Jim Bridger, one of Fitzpatrick's associates in the fur trade, built a post in present-day southwestern Wyoming, which served the Oregon and California pioneers for many years.

Although the services which these and other trappers rendered the westward movement were important, they do not represent any far-reaching government attitude or policy. These scouting activities do evidence the fact that the trade no longer attracted some of the most capable trappers. In many areas it had almost completely ended, while the government had done nothing to save it. Indeed, with the world fur markets weak, there was little that could be done other than to subsidize the industry. Expensive protection measures were an even less attractive idea when the trade was declining than when it was flourishing. Congress did not seriously consider

¹⁵Journal of the march of a detachment of dragoons, under the command of Colonel Henry Dodge, during the summer of 1835, ASP:NA, VI, 130.

¹⁶Fremont, Memoirs, p. 167.

protecting the trappers. The trade was obviously not important enough to warrant the expenditure of the government's time and money.

CHAPTER V

THE ROLE OF THE AMERICAN FUR TRADE IN THE OREGON QUESTION, 1818-1846

During the approximate quarter of a century following the joint occupation agreement of 1818, the American fur trade re-entering the Oregon country faced an outstanding problem that it did not encounter east of the Divide. Whereas the British were excluded from the competition in the territories of the Louisiana Purchase, they had equal rights with the Americans in Oregon. With the beginning of the Hudson's Bay Company's more aggressive operations in 1824, the British took full advantage of their rights and were well represented throughout the territory. The powerful and efficient company soon imposed its influence on everyone who entered Oregon. Until the Northwest boundary was settled, in 1846, American expansionists had the opportunity to encourage the fur trappers as a means to counter the British.

With the exception of Ashley and the men who purchased his interests, the Americans were not very successful against the monopolistic Hudson's Bay Company. Following its merger with the North West Company in 1821, the newly enlarged British firm appointed George Simpson as administrative head,

and John McLoughlin as chief factor over the Oregon trade. According to their orders, they conducted their company's trapping operations with one major objective. Believing that the Columbia would be the western part of the final boundary, the British hoped first to trap out the region to the southeast (the Snake River area) and thus discourage the Americans not only there, but in all of Oregon.¹ In addition to making profits in furs, they would have occupied the area and then would have "something to give up on the South [of the Columbia]" as a consolation to the United States when the boundary agreement was reached.²

To implement the company's plans, Simpson abandoned Fort George in 1824 and moved the headquarters upriver to Fort Vancouver, near the mouth of the Willamette. Other posts were constructed to the east along the Columbia and its tributaries. In addition, the company conducted annual expeditions into eastern Oregon to trap and to secure the furs of the Indians before they could trade them to the opposition. The American competition occurred mostly in the intermountain area west of the Divide, and farther down the Snake River. The trade and trapping were hotly contested, but no incident

¹Governor and Committee to the chief factors of the Columbia Department, July 25, 1825, Merk, *Empire*, pp. 252-253; Governor and Committee to George Simpson, March 12, 1827, *ibid.*, pp. 286-287.

²Governor and Committee to George Simpson, January 16, 1828, *ibid.*, p. 294.

serious enough to affect international relations occurred. Moreover, chief factor McLoughlin hospitably received most of the Americans who ventured as far west as Fort Vancouver. On one occasion he gave refuge to Jedediah Smith, who had lost his furs and most of his men to the Umquah Indians along the Coast. Hoping to prevent similar disasters to his own men, McLoughlin recaptured the furs, and purchased them from Smith.³

In the early 1830's, new American opposition appeared in Oregon. Nathaniel Wyeth, of Boston, headed an expedition to the lower Columbia, where he planned to base extensive trading and fishing operations. However, the wreck of his supply ship forced him to return to Boston and begin anew. On his second trip west, Wyeth established Fort Hall on the upper Snake River, but his trade with the Indians and trappers failed due to the competition of the Hudson's Bay Company which finally bought him out in 1837.⁴ During the same period, Captain Benjamin L. E. Bonneville, another ambitious American, made an attempt to compete with the British Company. Before going to Oregon, Bonneville received a leave of absence from the Army, with the understanding that he was to report on the Indians and the

³Francis D. Haines, Jr., "The Relations of the Hudson's Bay Company with the American Fur Traders in the Pacific Northwest," The Pacific Northwest Quarterly, XL (October, 1949), 283-288.

⁴Phillips, Fur Trade, II, 461-464.

geography of the West.⁵ Although his trade operations failed, he did make a brief report to his commanding officers. In it he described not only the Indians and the western terrain, but also the Hudson's Bay Company's strength and influence in Oregon. He was very anxious to see the British company expelled, and thus pointed out the vulnerability of some of their outposts.⁶ While searching for more fur country, Bonneville's associates made important explorations to the Pacific Coast. This provided him with information for maps of the Northwest, which were the most significant contributions of his venture.⁷

As a well organized monopoly with support of the British government, the Hudson's Bay Company dominated all of the Oregon trade except in that part of the intermountain area west of the Divide where Ashley's men concentrated. With their high quality trade goods, the company gained considerable prestige among the Indians. This led to many accusations by Congressmen that they had instigated the numerous Indian attacks on American trappers. But even such a knowledgeable trader as William Ashley was not absolutely sure that the

⁵Benjamin Bonneville to Lewis Cass, September 30, 1835, Annie Heloise Abel, editor, "Letters of General B. L. E. Bonneville," The Washington Historical Quarterly, XVIII (July, 1927), 221.

⁶Benjamin Bonneville to Alexander Macomb, July 29, 1833, ibid., pp. 210-219.

⁷Chittenden, Fur Trade, II, 429-430.

British were guilty. When writing to Senator Benton about the Hudson's Bay Company's involvement, Ashley could only say that he was "unavoidably led to the belief," and "it appears that" they had encouraged the trouble.⁸ A more correct opinion came from Joshua Pilcher, who had made numerous contacts with the British in Oregon. Pilcher stated that he had seen "nothing to justify the opinion that they excited the Indians to kill and rob our citizens."⁹

By the mid-1830's, the British activities and the depressed fur markets had combined to drive most of the American trappers from Oregon. The company plan had succeeded thus far; American interest declined except for the missionaries who were just beginning to come to the Columbia. But with these small groups of immigrants, a new type of competition took the place of the fur trade. The Hudson's Bay Company would soon find itself outnumbered by the American pioneer farmers.

In the meantime, the United States Congress had continually debated the issue of protecting national interests in Oregon. Representative John Floyd and Senator Benton led the expansionist blocks; and, as early as December, 1820,

⁸William Ashley to Thomas Benton, January 11, 1829, Morgan, William H. Ashley, p. 184.

⁹Joshua Pilcher to John Eaton, no date given, Senate Documents, 21st Congress, 2nd Session, No. 39 (Serial Set No. 203), p. 17.

Floyd made his first resolution to establish a fort on the lower Columbia. The committee appointed to study his proposals presented a lengthy report and a bill to occupy lands on the river and prepare for settlement of the area. The report stated that two small posts (the other one to be located on the headwaters of the Missouri) would be sufficient to protect the fur trade in Oregon.¹⁰ But the bill did not include a provision for the additional post, and, although it would also benefit American traders, the fort on the lower Columbia was planned primarily to encourage settlement. The bill authorized the distribution of land to the settlers, and the administration of justice in the area.¹¹ In the report, the committee even expressed hope that the men sent to the post could take their families.¹² The provisions of the bill which directly related to the fur trade involved extending the licensing regulations, liquor laws, and other governmental controls into the territory.¹³ The trade, when developed, would come under the same restrictions and supervision as currently existed east of the Divide. The committee did not intend for the traders to endanger Indian relations by their unrestrained opposition to the British.

¹⁰Annals of Congress, 16th Congress, 2nd Session, p. 954.

¹¹Ibid., p. 958.

¹²Ibid., p. 956.

¹³Ibid., pp. 958-959.

The report referred to the trade in two basic respects, as a source of wealth which the Americans ought to enjoy instead of the British, and as a potential means of securing the Indian's friendship and allegiance to the United States.¹⁴ When Floyd made his resolutions, the American fur traders had not operated in Oregon since the North West Company forced them out in 1813. To aid the government in its expansion into Oregon, the trade would first have to be re-established in the area. But the House refused to even consider Floyd's measures, and thus withheld any encouragement for either the fur trade or the pioneer farmers.¹⁵

After presenting a similar resolution which the next session of Congress also rejected, Floyd tried again in December, 1822. The debates which followed his third proposal to occupy the Columbia revealed the various Congressional attitudes toward the Oregon country. As chief proponent of the measures, Floyd delivered a major address on the history of Oregon and its future as a commercial center. The Virginia Representative again suggested not only occupying the Columbia, but also occasionally sending troops into the area to display the strength of the United States. This would not be expensive, as he believed that a trek to the lower Columbia would be "easy, safe, and

¹⁴Ibid., p. 957.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 959.

expeditious."¹⁶ Floyd foresaw that the greatest economic gain from the occupation of Oregon would be the opening of trade with China.¹⁷ He gave more emphasis to the fur trade than any other of several commercial enterprises which would develop in the territory and become involved in the Oriental commerce. In discussing the fur trade, his greatest interest by far lay in its potential as an immediate source of wealth for the United States, and not as a means of securing American claims to Oregon, or winning the Indian's friendship.¹⁸ Contrary to the opinions of many of his contemporaries, Floyd believed that the settlers, who would come to Oregon after the occupation, would not want to separate from the Union. Thus, to further secure the territory, he appealed to the farmers to move West with their "plough . . . the great benefactor of mankind."¹⁹

The establishment of a fort near the Pacific Coast promised other advantages. Robert Wright, of Maryland, not only wanted to protect the fur trade, but to promote fishing and whaling activities.²⁰ Francis Baylies, of Massachusetts, gave primary consideration to the advancement of the Pacific

¹⁶Ibid., 17th Congress, 2nd Session, p. 407.

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 401-405.

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 398-400, 406-407.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 408-409.

²⁰Ibid., p. 412.

whaling industry, but also hoped to see the lumbering industry and the seal trade develop.²¹

Floyd's resolutions met stiff opposition, however, from such men as George Tucker, of Virginia, who declared that settlements on the Pacific Coast would separate from the Union. He was against "inviting a settlement which . . . must, in the nature of things, be lost to this nation."²² Another congressman believed that military protection would be of no value to the commercial interests, and would actually harm the fur trade by creating Indian resentment.²³

Thus, the Oregon question of the early 1820's was more complex than the problem of expansion within the bounds of the Louisiana Purchase. The areas east of the Divide, as well as the mountain regions of eastern Oregon, had but one immediate commercial potential, the fur trade. But the lower Columbia River valley and the Oregon coast had additional possibilities which the expansionists believed could be quickly exploited. Accordingly, the debates reveal only a slight interest in encouraging farmers to move to the area. The emphasis was on industry and commerce.

Despite the predictions of great rewards for occupying Oregon, the House refused to pass Floyd's bill until two

²¹Ibid., pp. 413-416.

²²Ibid., pp. 424.

²³Ibid., pp. 594-595.

years later, on December 23, 1824.²⁴ Significantly, this was just over two weeks after President Monroe had delivered his last annual message, in which he proposed establishing a post near the mouth of the Columbia. The President had stated that:

Our commerce and fisheries on that sea and along the coast . . . are increasing. It is thought that a military post, to which our ships of war might resort, would afford protection to every interest, and have a tendency to conciliate the tribes to the northwest. . . . It is thought also that by the establishment of such a post the intercourse between our Western States and Territories and the Pacific and our trade with the tribes residing in the interior on each side of the Rocky Mountains would be essentially promoted.²⁵

Before establishing the fort, Monroe wanted to send a ship to explore the area and choose the best location. The President was thinking in terms of coastal operations; no post was to be built in the interior mountain area. He considered the sea and coastal trade just as important, if not more so, than the interior fur trade.

In the meantime, Thomas Benton had been trying to obtain Senate approval to "take and retain possession of the territories of the United States, on the Northwest coast of America."²⁶ Congress virtually ignored his proposals until

²⁴Register of Debates, 18th Congress, 2nd Session, p. 59.

²⁵Richardson, Messages and Papers, II, 262.

²⁶Register of Debates, 17th Congress, 2nd Session, p. 235.

after President Monroe supported the plan. The Senate debates, which followed in the winter of 1825, resembled the arguments in the House. Again, there were varied economic interests on the Northwest Coast. Benton, in his major address, predicted that a fort on the lower Columbia would protect the Oregon fur trade, bring the Indians under American influence, and become an important sea port, for whaling and Oriental trade. In addition, transcontinental trade would develop along the Missouri and Columbia rivers, but the "greatest advantage of all" was to populate Oregon with Americans and not with foreigners.²⁷ However, at this time, Benton did not believe that Oregon would remain a part of the Union. The United States should extend only to the Rocky Mountains where "the statue of the fabled god, Terminus, should be raised upon its highest peak, never to be thrown down."²⁸ Therefore, according to Benton, the fur trade was but one of several enterprises which, when established in Oregon, would be of immediate benefit to American citizens. After Oregon had formed a separate nation, its commerce would be of advantage to both countries.

In enumerating the bases of the American title to Oregon, Benton cited five events, including the Astorians' fur

²⁷Ibid., 18th Congress, 2nd Session, pp. 709-711.

²⁸Ibid., p. 712.

trading ventures.²⁹ He denounced the British claims as a mere "naked pretention,"³⁰ but his opponents' support of British rights to Oregon presented the major obstacle to Senate passage of the bill. Senator Dickerson, of New Jersey, typified the opposing view by stating that the United States should not use military force in a territory jointly occupied with England. Furthermore, the nation had extended far enough west, and there were plenty of vacant lands for Americans east of the Rocky Mountains.³¹ A majority of the Senators agreed with Dickerson, and on March 1, 1825, they tabled the bill.³²

By the time the Senate killed the hopes of Benton and Floyd, the Americans were once more in the Oregon trade. Ashley's men had been in the intermountain area (including the mountain regions of southeastern Oregon) for about fifteen months. They were experiencing the first of Ashley's two most successful hunting seasons, and in the summer they would attend the first rendezvous. But, only eighteen days after the Senate's action, George Simpson signaled the intensification of the Hudson's Bay Company's activities in Oregon

²⁹The others were Gray's discovery of the Columbia, the Louisiana Purchase, the Lewis and Clark expedition, and the treaty with Spain in 1819. *Ibid.*, p. 705.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 703.

³¹*Ibid.*, pp. 690-692.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 713.

when he formally "baptized" Fort Vancouver by "breaking a bottle of Rum on the Flag Staff."³³ The contest in Oregon had begun without the direct involvement of the United States government.

Also by 1825, the United States and Great Britain had held the first futile negotiations to end the joint occupation agreement. The American Minister to England, Richard Rush, proposed that English claims be removed to north of the fifty-first parallel, a suggestion which the British considered "wholly inadmissable."³⁴ The fur trade became involved only when Rush based the American title to Oregon on the activities of the Astorians. He also referred to the accomplishments of Robert Gray and Lewis and Clark, as well as the rights which the United States acquired from Spain in 1819.³⁵ But nothing came of these assertions, and several years passed before a new understanding was reached.

With the ten year joint occupation agreement nearing its end, the British, in 1826, initiated more negotiations over the Oregon boundary. Aside from being alarmed at the

³³George Simpson's Journal, March 19, 1825, Merk, Empire, p. 124.

³⁴Protocol of the Twentieth Conference of the American and British Plenipotentiaries, June 29, 1824, Richard Rush, Memoranda of a Residence at the Court of London, Comprising Incidents Official and Personal, from 1819 to 1825, p. 629.

³⁵Richard Rush to John Adams, August 12, 1824, ibid., pp. 594-597.

possibility of American military occupation, Great Britain was anxious to guarantee the Hudson's Bay Company continued access to the Snake River country.³⁶ According to Albert Gallatin, the new Minister to England, the United States officials had become more certain than ever that Oregon would naturally be populated by "agricultural emigrants" from America. If the British tried to settle Oregon, they would have to use "artificial means," as they were much farther away, and were not faced with a "progressive increase of population," as the United States was.³⁷ Believing the territory would eventually be aligned with their nation, the Americans were thus more willing to leave Oregon open to both countries for a while. This confidence stems from factors completely unrelated to the fur trade. The manner in which the Americans operated the far western fur trade left no permanent settlements at all. The trappers lived a completely mobile life, and could not be counted on to make any substantial and permanent increase in the Oregon population. The American diplomats therefore based their hopes on the farmers, not the fur traders.

Nevertheless, the activities of Astor's men were once again cited by the diplomats as a substantiation of American

³⁶Merk, Gallatin and Oregon, pp. 4, 7-8.

³⁷"The Oregon Question," Adams, Writings of Gallatin, III, 532.

rights in Oregon.³⁸ But Gallatin warned against over emphasis of the claims to the area around Astoria. He cautioned the Secretary of State, Henry Clay, that

the settlement and restitution of Astoria may be forcibly urged as strengthening the claim of the United States to the whole territory; but . . . it would be dangerous to adduce those incidents, as giving a stronger claim to the absolute sovereignty over that spot than on any other part of the territory. As there can be no higher title or right than that of such sovereignty, the argument could not be pressed without acknowledging that the right of the United States to the residue of the territory was something less than one of absolute sovereignty.³⁹

The claims to Oregon did not, however, play a major role in the boundary negotiations, as American rights to at least a part of the territory were already recognized. The most persistent dispute involved the question of guaranteed access to the Columbia River and to Puget Sound.⁴⁰ The fur trade

³⁸An example of the use of the fort at Astoria as a confirmation of American claims is found in: Protocol of the Seventh Conference of American and British Plenipotentiaries, December 19, 1826, ASP:FR, VI, 669-670.

³⁹Albert Gallatin to Henry Clay, August 10, 1827, ibid., p. 695.

⁴⁰Puget Sound and the lower Columbia were the only deep water harbors between San Francisco Bay and the forty-ninth parallel. A dangerous sand bar across the mouth of the Columbia made the river the less desirable of the two ports. Nevertheless, the Columbia was particularly important to the Hudson's Bay Company's interior fur trade. In the negotiations, the British refused the Americans' offer of the forty-ninth parallel to the Pacific, with guaranteed navigation rights to the Columbia. The Americans would not accept the British proposal of the forty-ninth parallel to the Columbia, and thence along the river to the Pacific, with a cession of land around Puget Sound. Merk, Gallatin and Oregon, pp. 69-73.

was important only as one of the commercial pursuits which would supposedly need to use the Columbia. The activities of William Ashley and his successors in eastern Oregon were given little consideration, if any. One reason for this was doubtlessly the fact that the American trade which crossed the Divide into Oregon always remained based in St. Louis, and not in territories jointly occupied with Great Britain. The Americans made frequent contacts with the British in the Snake River country, but they never established permanent rival headquarters in Oregon.

The negotiators failed to reach a final boundary settlement, and thus agreed to continue joint occupation indefinitely. They further decided that either nation would give a year's notice when it wished to end the agreement.⁴¹ Albert Gallatin later expressed his belief that the convention had left the American traders at a disadvantage in facing the giant British company in Oregon. He stated that the Hudson's Bay Company had "exclusive possession of the fur-trade." Moreover, Gallatin said that:

This could not be prevented otherwise than by resorting to actual force; the United States [was] not then either ready or disposed to run the risks of a war for that object; and it was thought more eligible that the British traders should remain on the territory of the

⁴¹U. S. Statutes at Large, VII, 360.

United States by virtue of a compact and with their consent than in defiance of their authority.⁴²

During the next few years, the anti-expansionists used this pacifistic attitude to defeat more measures calling for the occupation of the Columbia. In December, 1828, Floyd introduced a new bill to establish a post in Oregon. Again the fur trade was named as one of several commercial pursuits which would benefit from such action. In speaking of the trade, Floyd once more emphasized its economic aspects and not its possible influence with the Indians.⁴³ His concern was still focused more on immediate profits than on the long range benefits for expansion through Indian alliances and friendship. The debates over the occupation of Oregon concerned a variety of subjects, such as possible violations of the joint occupation agreement, the distance and money involved in military movements, the belief that Oregon would separate from the Union, the definition of Fort Vancouver as a military base or a trading post, the alleged aggressions of the Hudson's Bay Company, and the numerous economic possibilities.⁴⁴

Specifically regarding the fur trade, the opposition was typified by the attitude of Congressman Mitchell, of Tennessee,

⁴²"The Oregon Question," Adams, Writings of Gallatin, III, 517.

⁴³Register of Debates, 20th Congress, 2nd Session, pp. 125-126, 147-150.

⁴⁴Ibid., pp. 134-141, 173-175, 188-189.

who declared that "if a company of hunters want to establish themselves far beyond our limits for the sake of getting furs, let them do it, but tax not your Government to aid them in their schemes."⁴⁵ Important opposition came from Edward Bates, of Missouri, who believed that "one or two little forts" in Oregon were a waste of time and money.⁴⁶ Bates also predicted that a post on the mouth of the Columbia might divert inland fur trade traffic to the Pacific and not down the Missouri.⁴⁷ This caused Floyd to claim that Bates was sacrificing the interests of the nation for those of St. Louis.⁴⁸ But, regardless of Floyd's efforts, the House defeated his bill in early January, 1829.⁴⁹

In the Senate, the expansionists made no immediate attempts to protect American interests in Oregon. Thomas Benton voiced his disapproval of the situation by voting against the renewal of joint occupation, and calling for continued negotiations to reach a final boundary settlement.⁵⁰ The investigations of the state of the fur trade which Benton sponsored during the next few years, frequently related

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 137.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 152.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 129.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 148.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 192.

⁵⁰Benton, Views, I, 111.

directly to the conditions in Oregon. The complaints about the Hudson's Bay Company tariff advantages voiced in the report of February, 1829, involved the trade both east and west of the Divide.⁵¹ The same report also told of Black-foot depredations in Oregon, which William Ashley blamed on the British.⁵² Ashley also advised the committee of the Hudson's Bay Company's plan to deplete the fur supply in the area southeast of the Columbia.⁵³ He was convinced that, without government protection, the Oregon trade would soon collapse. In another letter to Benton (which the Senator did not include in the report), Ashley expressed his concern for those who wished to emigrate to Oregon. He was against their going, as they had "not the least conception of the misery they would lead their families to by such an act."⁵⁴ The conditions on the far western frontier did not, however, inspire any Congressional action.

Two years later, in answer to a Senate request, President Jackson presented a report from experienced traders on the

⁵¹One of several examples of the complaints concerning the effect of high tariffs on the Oregon trade is found in C. C. Cambreleng to Thomas Benton, January 12, 1829, Senate Documents, 20th Congress, 2nd Session, No. 67 (Serial Set No. 181), p. 16.

⁵²William Ashley to Thomas Benton, January 20, 1829, Ibid., pp. 13-14.

⁵³William Ashley to Thomas Benton, November 12, 1827, ibid., p. 11.

⁵⁴William Ashley to Thomas Benton, January 11, 1829, Morgan, William H. Ashley, p. 185.

British activities in Oregon. In the communication, Joshua Pilcher acknowledged that the Hudson's Bay Company had virtual control of the commerce west of the Rocky Mountains. He described the American trade as "laboring under serious difficulties." Rather than military action, Pilcher suggested the government enact more favorable tariff laws, and terminate the joint occupation agreement.⁵⁵ Three of the most experienced trappers in the West, Jedediah Smith, David Jackson, and William Sublette, also reported on the Oregon trade. Like Ashley, the men were aware of the Hudson's Bay Company's plans to trap out the Snake River area. They denounced the joint occupation agreement as having given the British their opportunity to trap country which was certain to become a part of the United States. The trappers commented upon McLoughlin's "kind and hospitable" treatment of Jedediah Smith after his robbery by the Umquah Indians.⁵⁶ They also related Smith's observation of the company's other pursuits at Fort Vancouver. The British farmed, raised cattle, and had saw mills, grist mills, gunsmiths, blacksmiths, and other activities of a more permanent nature than the fur trade.⁵⁷

⁵⁵Joshua Pilcher to John Eaton, no date given, Senate Documents, 21st Congress, 2nd Session, No. 39 (Serial Set No. 203), p. 17.

⁵⁶Jedediah Smith, David Jackson, and William Sublette to John Eaton, October 29, 1830, ibid., p. 23.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 22.

After the Senate received the last report, they did not give the Oregon trade any consideration until 1837, when Lewis Linn, of Missouri, began to promote American interest on the Pacific Coast. By that time many of the trappers had already left the mountains. Nathaniel Wyeth's sale of Fort Hall in the same year marks the approximate end of serious competition between the Hudson's Bay Company and the American fur traders. A second phase in the Oregon dispute was already underway, as national interest in the territory began to shift strongly to immigration and colonization.

Principal forerunners of the great immigrant flood of the 1840's were the missionaries who went to Oregon partially in response to the request of the Flathead Indians for teachers of the Christian gospel. Traveling to Oregon with Wyeth's second expedition in 1834, the Methodists, Jason and Daniel Lee, established their party in the Willamette Valley. Within a few years, the Presbyterians and Catholics followed, and, almost without exception, were well received by McLoughlin at Fort Vancouver. These missionary activities helped create interest in Oregon, as did the work of Hall Jackson Kelley.

Kelley, a Massachusetts teacher, who considered himself to be a virtual messiah for the Oregon country, had zealously sought to colonize the territory since the mid-1820's. By 1831, he had formed the American Society for Encouraging the

Settlement of the Oregon Country.⁵⁸ Kelley's attempts to colonize Oregon failed to arouse immediate interest, yet he continually petitioned Congress, and his circulars and pamphlets were widely read. Aside from missionaries, pioneers did not emigrate to Oregon in considerable numbers for several years. Beginning in 1842, large emigrant trains annually traveled to the lower Columbia River and surrounding area. Their presence in the area dominated the interests of the national government in the final years of joint occupation.

Anticipating the movement to the Pacific Coast, Lewis Linn, in 1838, introduced in the Senate a new resolution for the occupation of Oregon. Linn's proposed bill included establishing a fort on the lower Columbia and sending troops into the area. The establishment not only would protect American interests, but also would serve as a port of entry. As a means of control, the territory was to be placed under federal commercial regulations.⁵⁹ Although briefly discussed at times, the measures were not seriously debated until 1842. The Senate delayed consideration of the Oregon problem so that it would not interfere with settlement of another entanglement with Great Britain, the dispute over the northeastern frontier.

⁵⁸Fred Wilber Powell, editor, Hall J. Kelley on Oregon, (Princeton, 1932), pp. xii, 267.

⁵⁹The Congressional Globe, 25th Congress, 2nd Session pp. 168-169.

After the Webster-Ashburton treaty had determined the Maine-Canada boundary, Linn reintroduced his proposals, with an additional provision for a series of forts from "some point on the Missouri river into the best pass for entering the valley of the [Columbia]." The posts were planned as an aid both to emigrant trains and to the fur trade. The measure further provided for the establishment of two Indian agencies in Oregon. Emphasizing the interest in colonization, the last three sections of the bill dealt with the administration of justice in the area.⁶⁰

In the debates which followed, the Senate discussed a variety of related topics, including American rights to grant land to settlers and to extend jurisdiction into Oregon, the possibility that the British had violated the treaty of joint occupation, and whether or not American military occupation was itself a violation of the agreement and would thus precipitate war.⁶¹ The fur trade was also involved, once again as an argument for supporting national claims to Oregon. It was generally recognized as having ended west of the Divide, a fact which brought mixed reactions. Senator Benton deplored the failure of the government to protect the trappers from the Hudson's Bay Company, and

⁶⁰Ibid., 27th Congress, 2nd Session, Appendix, pp. 736-737.

⁶¹Ibid., 27th Congress, 3rd Session, pp. 133-134, 153-154, 193, 200; Benton, View, II, 479-482.

declared that "ruin has overtaken" even the most powerful American companies in the West.⁶² Contrariwise, Senator McDuffie, of South Carolina, stated that:

It is not proper to hold out such inducements to our citizens to engage in these adventurous pursuits. There are no advantages to be derived from them. The advantages of the fur trade have been highly extolled; but I have seen no results but the enormous wealth of John Jacob Astor, and one or two others, to justify the commendation.⁶³

Another opponent predicted that the decline of the Oregon fur trade would benefit the United States, as the British would soon be without any "permanent interest" in the area.⁶⁴ Significantly, there was little mention of the trade in any other respect than as an American enterprise which had failed to succeed in Oregon. Congressmen emphasized it as an example of how the Hudson's Bay Company had controlled the territory, and did not promote it as a future means of countering the British.

Instead of the fur trade, immigration was recognized as the best method of expansion. Even Senator Benton proposed that the guns and weapons of the pioneer farmers would be the nation's most "effective negotiator[s]."⁶⁵ Another

⁶²The Congressional Globe, 27th Congress, 3rd Session, p. 78.

⁶³Ibid., p. 200.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 212.

⁶⁵Benton, View, II, 482.

Senator who supported the protection bill expressed confidence in those who would go west and establish American claims by "living on the soil."⁶⁶ On the other hand, John Calhoun believed that the force of the American population, which was increasing at a rate of more than "three per cent. compound annually," would not need government support to win Oregon to the United States.⁶⁷ When the Oregon bill was voted upon in February, 1843, the Senate supported the measure by a very narrow margin.⁶⁸

In the meantime, the House had given only slight consideration to similar protection measures for Oregon. The initial resolutions were made in 1838 by Caleb Cushing, of Massachusetts. However, the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, to which the bill was referred, opposed it on the basis that military occupation violated our agreement with Great Britain. He recognized that the Hudson's Bay Company had dominated the Oregon fur trade, but declared that the British had acted fully within their rights. The House did not approve the bill, and refused to give it consideration for several years. Shortly after the Senate voted favorably on the measure, the House Foreign Affairs Committee,

⁶⁶The Congressional Globe, 27th Congress, 3rd Session, p. 221.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 472.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 240.

which had again been appointed to study the proposals, killed the bill by recommending its rejection.⁶⁹

Before the joint occupation agreement ended, Congress made other similarly unsuccessful attempts to intervene directly in Oregon. It continued to concentrate its interests more on colonization than on the fur trade. The expansionists soon directed their proposals toward the establishment of a territorial government, but to no avail.

Thus, for over two decades, the government had failed to offer any encouragement to the fur trade, or any other proposed venture in Oregon. In writing of the territorial dispute, Albert Gallatin observed that it was a "remarkable fact . . . that Congress has actually done nothing" to protect Americans in the area; and, because of this, the fur trade "remained engrossed by the Hudson's Bay Company" throughout the period of joint occupation.⁷⁰ But the expansionists had not ignored the situation. Even before the American trappers re-entered Oregon, Floyd and Benton futilely sought to send troops to the Columbia and to construct a fort. Beginning in 1824, the mountain men were active west of the Divide for a little more than a decade, and the government still refused to give its support. It persisted in this

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 297.

⁷⁰"The Oregon Question," Adams, Writings of Gallatin, III, 522.

policy until after the trade declined. At different times, both houses of Congress had voted for protection measures, but in each case, the other branch had rejected the plans.

The interest in the trade was often only indirectly related to expansion, with immediate monetary gain being the chief concern. Furthermore, during the debates of the 1820's, the trade was but one of many potentially valuable industries in Oregon, and thus was not always given primary consideration. After the trappers had begun to leave the mountains, the final debates on protection mostly involved the settlers. The American diplomats, and other officials, often referred to the activities of Astor's men as a substantiation of title to Oregon, but claims to the area were virtually taken for granted. The joint occupation agreement even helped validate the rights of both nations to the territory.

Emigration, and not the fur trade, became the outstanding factor in American interest in Oregon. Beginning with Floyd's earliest proposals, the government recognized the potential of the settlers for countering the British. When the joint occupation agreement was renewed in 1827, the diplomats were confident of the future influence of emigration. The final settlement of the Oregon boundary closely followed the first large migrations of the 1840's. The fur trade was not directly involved, as, since 1818, the British had never

seriously claimed ownership of the Snake River country, where the contest for the furs occurred. The territorial dispute centered on the area north of the Columbia River, where no important American trading companies had ventured. A year before the boundary was established, the Hudson's Bay Company moved its headquarters north to Vancouver Island. The move away from the Columbia was not only indicative of the fact that the company had begun to fear for its safety among the many new American residents, but also signified the river's decline as an important center of fur trading activities.⁷¹ Indeed, the Oregon trade had virtually ended, and the territory was being permanently settled by the pioneer farmers.

⁷¹Galbraith, The Hudson's Bay Company, pp. 222-224.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The history of the far western fur trade spans an era of approximately four decades, beginning after the return of the Lewis and Clark expedition in 1806. Throughout this period, the American traders encountered many frustrations, usually stemming from the opposition of the British and Indians. This hostile combination thwarted the early attempts of Lisa, Astor, and others to establish operations in the mountains and on the Columbia River. After the mid-1820's, when the western trade finally developed in spite of the resistance, the Indians continued to endanger the lives of the trappers. In addition, the Americans' greed pitted themselves against one another. The opposition which they encountered from the Hudson's Bay Company varied in intensity on either side of the Continental Divide. The government excluded all foreigners from the trade to the east of the Divide, but the British maintained their contacts with many of the tribes in the area. In Oregon, the Americans faced the full brunt of the Company's monopolistic and efficient organization. After the trade reached its greatest period of activity in the early 1830's, a final frustration, the

drop in the world fur markets, helped bring the mountain commerce to an end. Then the pioneer movement to Oregon began to dominate the interest in the Northwest.

Regardless of the problems it faced, the fur trade never received any substantial encouragement from the government. Yet the trappers were the nation's most important representatives in the Far West. Their contacts with the British and Indians (both of whom wanted to halt American expansion) had made the trade a potential instrument for the government's frontier policy. To take advantage of this opportunity, the government could have supported the trade and helped to make it a stable and influential force. The chief advocates of such a policy invariably proposed to extend military protection into the mountain areas. They also backed trade and tariff laws to aid the trappers in their competition against the British. However, regarding the government's response to the problems of the western traders, one overriding factor existed: the lack of a common basic goal. The government principally wanted to see its sovereignty and influence extended to the Pacific Coast. East of the Divide this meant that it had to check the control of the British over Indians already living in United States' territories. Across the mountains, the government desired to acquire full title to Oregon, as well as to win the Indians' loyalty. The western fur trade, on the other hand,

was a private industry. The traders directed all of their energies toward securing profits in any possible way, regardless of the Federal laws or the welfare of the Indians. The aborigines could not be wooed and exploited at the same time.

The government and the traders did, nevertheless, have a common enemy, the British. Both doubtlessly benefited from the law of 1816 which forbade the British to trap in territories east of the Rocky Mountains. And, if the presence of the American trappers in the Northwest did not serve to extend the government's influence into the area, it at least helped to diminish, in some degree, the British authority among the Indians. But over-all, the threat of the British competition along the upper Missouri or in Oregon was not sufficient to arouse a majority of Congressmen to action.

Instead of cooperating, government officials and trade personnel became antagonistic, primarily over their different Indian policies. Desiring the friendship of the tribes, Congress opposed the traders who, involved in a rivalry among themselves and with the British, sought to subjugate and take advantage of the Indians. Liquor became the most effective means of securing the trappers' objectives. But, for both humanitarian and nationalistic purposes, the government endeavored to protect the Indians from debauchery and exploitation. The factory system and earlier restrictive

laws had already set a precedent for such action before the mountain trade was reactivated in the 1820's. After the factory system was terminated, the location and liquor laws constituted the government's major attempt to restrain the traders. But, in the Far West, strict enforcement of the measures proved to be virtually impossible due to the vastness of the area. In addition, the company clerks and the itinerant, semi-savage mountain men were not easy to discipline. The liquor law was only partially successful on the upper Missouri, and not at all effective in the other western trade areas. Similarly, the remoteness of the West made the location law impractical, and thus it was not used. The indifference and corruption of many officials on the frontier further impeded enforcement of these measures, thus leaving the Indians at the mercy of a bitter and uncontrolled commercial rivalry.

The vastness of the western territories also discouraged attempts to take action against the British and the more hostile Indians. Time and distance figured in the government's refusal to aid Astor's operations on the Pacific Coast. Later, the same difficulties, in addition to the problem of expense, caused Congress to withdraw its support of the first Yellowstone expedition. When protection of the Oregon territory was debated in Congress, the opposition repeated these arguments to defeat the proposals.

Consequently, Colonel Leavenworth's indecisive battle with the Arikaras, in 1823, became the only aggressive military action taken in defense of the western fur trade. As an immediate reaction by the forces from nearby Council Bluffs, the campaign did not reflect any government intent to invade the Far West. Indeed, the Atkinson expedition, which came two years later, was a friendly attempt to secure treaties and represented a compromise method for intervening in the western trade. Following this, however, the government refused to send expeditions or to establish forts for protection of the trade, proposals which the more zealous expansionists continued to demand.

During the height of the fur trade, and its subsequent decline, Congress' only significant action was to codify the Indian trade laws, hoping, in vain, to eliminate the liquor traffic. Meanwhile, in Oregon, the Hudson's Bay Company succeeded in its plan to drive out the American traders. As most of them were gone by the late 1830's, the trappers had proved to be an ineffective instrument of extending national influence across the Rocky Mountains. The Oregon pioneers assumed this task in the following decade.

The actions of the far western fur traders, which eventually served the national interest, did not result from government policies. Astor's venture in Oregon, one of several substantiations for the United States' claim to the

territory, was a completely private endeavor, despite his efforts to obtain government subsidy. When the mountain men explored the Far West and laid the groundwork for future settlement, they did it as private citizens and only incidental to their personal search for fortune. Finally, any American counterinfluence to the British in the Northwest resulted from trapping activities which were generally a direct violation of Federal laws. Concentrating its energies on futile attempts to improve Indian relations, Congress refused to support the fur traders, even when they were confronted with the British threat. Instead, Congress sought to restrain the trade. The trappers desired protection and not restriction. To the extent that the fur traders and trappers acted as an instrument of national expansion, it was in spite of, rather than because of, government support for them and their activities.

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