

Fort Union Trading Post

FORT UNION'S TRADE HOUSE



Trade negotiations with important chiefs often took place in the Clerk's Office – Rudolph F. Kurz, 1851

CONSTRUCTION

The trade house consists of three rooms: The **Reception Room**, the **Trade Shop**, and the **Clerk's Office**. The Trade House was most likely the first structure built by the men of the **American Fur Company** after their arrival at the confluence region in 1828. As the Trade House would be the center of the trading process, it was important to have it operational as soon as possible. It is perhaps for this reason that the Trade House differs in style of construction from the rest of the fort. The rough-hewn logs and the sod roof most definitely stand out from the rest of the fort. Since the house was so well suited to its role, it retained the same basic configuration for the majority of the 39 years of the post's existence.

THE TRADE HOUSE

The Reception Room was the first room entered and was easily the most important of the three rooms. It was in the Reception Room where Indian chiefs met with the traders to discuss the terms of the trade, where stories were told, and small feasts were held. The room was sparsely furnished, with only one bench for sitting, but decorated with many curios from both cultures.

The Trade Shop was a room used to show fur company wares. It

stocked more than 200 different items ranging from metal knives to tin cups to brass rings. Items of the Trade Shop generally fell into one of two categories: laborsaving or ornamental.

The Clerk's Office was located in the third room of the Trade House. The room was used by clerks to track the paper work involved in running the fort, such as inventories of trade goods. Also, the room was occasionally used as a meeting place between the **bourgeois** and important Indian chiefs.

TRADE NEGOTIATIONS

When a band of Indians (usually **Assiniboine** but also **Crow**, **Cree**

and **Blackfeet**) arrived to trade, the chief and his head men were usually brought into the Reception Room to meet with a trader, one or two engagés (laborers), and, if necessary, an interpreter. Upon their arrival the Indians found a fire blazing in the huge fireplace and coffee and buffalo stew or corn mush boiling in large kettles. After everyone was seated, bowls of steaming food were distributed, along with cups of sweetened coffee.

After the meal, pipes were brought forth, with the trader offering tobacco so that everyone could fill his pipe bowl. After the smoke, the trader stood and made a speech. In his remarks the trader



Fur trade negotiations could take many hours and involve several translators.

The Trading Store

emphasized a central theme: friendship and peace. The chief had probably been bringing his band to Fort Union for years, and he and the trader may have become good friends. The men of the fort commonly married Indian women, so they may have been related. When the trader finished his speech the chief spoke in his turn, repeating many of the same things that the trader had said. He also told how his people survived the winter, and described any recent hardships.

Gifts changed hands after the speech making. The trader might give the chief some black powder, coffee, sugar, tobacco, beads, or maybe even a musket. In exchange, the chief might present the trader with a bow and arrows in a skin quiver, a rawhide parfleche (storage bag), or a beaded and quilled pipe bag.

Finally, the two men got down to the matter of trade negotiation. To do so before this moment would have been rude. At a sign or word from the chief, one of his followers spread out a buffalo robe and some other furs for the trader to examine. These were represented as typical of the type and quality of furs brought to Fort Union. The trader examined the furs—especially the buffalo robe—with great diligence, paying careful attention to the quality of fur and tanning.

While the trader examined the skins, the chief and his men talked about the furs. They told the trader how the men had scouted many long days for the herds of buffalo, how they lost good ponies in the hunt, or how the women worked tirelessly to skin the animals and tan the hides.

TRADE GOODS

After the trader examined the skins, he ordered an engagé to retrieve a few items from the Trade Shop. These would be some of the newest items to arrive on the summer steamboats. As the chief and his men examined the goods, the trader praised them. He might brag that the new wool blankets were much better than those of the previous year, or assure the Indians that the bottom of the tin cup would not fall off after steaming hot coffee was poured into it. Once both parties had examined each other's wares, serious negotiations began. The chief conferred with his men, asking them what they thought of the new trade goods.



The trader, in turn, conferred with the clerks.

When this was concluded, the trader and the shrewdest negotiator among the Indians—who may or may not have been the chief—began dickering over the value of the skins and goods. This process could last for hours.

Once everyone was pleased with the values set on the robes and trade goods, the trade began. The chief and his men traded first, acquiring all that they desired before returning to camp. There, the chief announced to everyone that trading could now commence. On this news, the people made their way to the fort to trade. The band then visited old friends and family in the fort, feasted and relaxed.

After a week or so, the entire band, having acquired all they needed or wanted, broke camp one morning and moved off through the breaks. After a few parting salutations, the band disappeared until next year.

THE TRADE HOUSE TODAY

Just as the Trade House of old was Fort Union's focal point, today's Trade House is the center of the modern Historic Site. The Trade House is the only building at Fort Union completely refurnished to the appearance of 1851, thanks largely to the sketches and the journal of Rudolph Kurz, a Swiss artist in the employ of the American Fur Company from 1851-1852. Also, the Trade House is fully restocked, based on the inventories of 1851; it functions today much as it did in the mid-nineteenth century.