

The Romance of the Fur Traders

The Rise of the Nor'-Westers and their Effective Opposition to the Hudson's Bay Company with Whom They Ultimately Form a Merger—By D. C. Harvey



Descent of the Fraser.

ARTICLE II.

PRIOR to the conquest of Canada by the British, the French had carried on an irregular trade in furs almost to the foot of the Rockies, and had established a chain of forts from Lake Superior to the Saskatchewan, with tributary posts on Lake Manitoba and the Assiniboine. During the Seven Years' War these forts had been neglected and once more the Indians had to carry all their furs to Hudson Bay. In the early days of British rule the overland trade was neglected, partly through ignorance of the Western country and partly because of the immense difficulties to be overcome in the long journey from Montreal to the Saskatchewan—a distance of nearly 4,000 miles, obstructed by 200 rapids and 130 portages, all of which were a source of danger to both life and property, calculated to multiply the commercial risk and the cost of transportation.

But in spite of natural obstacles the fur trade by the French route revived, being attempted at first by individuals, then by small groups, and finally by the North-West Company, the most highly organized and efficient commercial body that North America had yet produced.

The Forerunners of the Nor'-Westers

The first of these individual adventurers was Alexander Henry, who spent the years 1760-66 on the Great Lakes, and opened up the fur trade as far as Kaministiquia on the western end of Lake Superior. Then in 1769, Thomas Curry, more venturesome than Henry, followed the route of the French traders as far as Fort Bourbon, which had been erected in 1739 by Francois Verendrye, at Cedar Lake on the Lower Saskatchewan. His profits from the expedition were so great that he "was satisfied never again to return to the Indian country." Curry was followed by James Findlay, who went up the Saskatchewan to the farthest point reached by the French, and he too was able to retire after a single venture.

The remarkable success of these pioneers led to a sort of boom, and traders from Montreal spread over the entire district hitherto known to the French. Excitement rose to fever pitch and dark deeds were done in the name of competition, with obvious injury to business and disrepute among the Indians to whom rival traders misrepresented each other. It required only a decade of this species of warfare to convince the traders that it was suicidal and that they should join forces for the greater rivalry which was to ensue when the "English company" had awakened from its hundred sleepy winters on the Bay.

The Adventurers Pool Their Resources

This awakening was soon to come, for in 1772, Joseph Frobisher, an Englishman from Montreal, struck north of the route followed by the Scotch Curry and Findlay and took steps to intercept the Indians on their way to Hudson Bay by building a post on Sturgeon Lake, a connecting link between the Saskatchewan and Churchill Rivers, thus commanding the approaches from the North-west and the

West. He and his brother returned to this region in successive years and their achievements led others to follow, until finally in 1778 it was decided by several of these traders to pool their resources—an act on their part which was prophetic of the North-west Company formed some five years later. They entrusted their joint stock to Peter Pond, who pushed beyond the fort at Sturgeon Lake and built a new one at Elk River, about 40 miles south of Lake Athabasca. From this centre he carried on a thriving trade, as the Indians were glad to escape the long perilous journey to the Bay, even at the price of inferior goods.

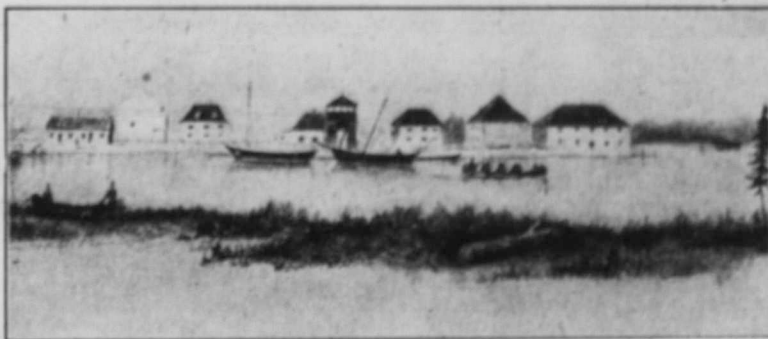
Unfortunately, in 1780, an Indian begging for fire-water was given an overdose of laudanum instead, and when he could not be roused from sleep a row ensued in which one trader and several coureurs de bois were killed, while the others were glad to leave their goods behind and escape with their lives.

About the same time the traders of the Assiniboine Valley had antagonized the Indians to such an extent that they were saved from destruction only by an attack of small-pox, which put an end to all trade for a time and sadly reduced the number of Indians as well.

In the following year Pond quarrelled with his colleague and killed him, while at the same time his clerk unwittingly carried small-pox to the Athabaskan Indians, thus destroying another source of trade until the malady had slowly abated.

Formation of the North-West Company

The leisure thus afforded the traders



Fort William, Near the Site of the Present City of that Name.

for reflection enabled them to see the advantages of co-operation over unrestrained competition and as a result the North-west Company was organized, in 1783. The new company was really a union of nine smaller companies, the stock being divided into 16 shares of merchandise, seven of the older companies providing two shares each and the others one each. The management of the entire stock was put in the hands of Benjamin and Joseph Frobisher, and Simon McTavish.

When the shareholders of the new company met their "winter partners" or agents in the Indian country, at Grand Portage (the half-way house situated

about 40 miles south-west of the later Fort William), all the winter partners were satisfied with the arrangements except Peter Pond. He persuaded Peter Pangman to return to Canada, and at Montreal they induced McLeod and Gregory to join them in a rival enterprise. But, almost immediately after Pond had instigated the trouble, he deserted to the North-west Company and was sent by them back to Athabasca. Then, in 1786, he murdered an agent of the McLeod-Gregory Company, which he had been instrumental in forming, and the horror produced by this second outrage in the wilderness caused the two rivals to unite in the following year. With this union of all Canadian traders, the North-west Company entered upon 11 years of unparalleled expansion until dissension again broke out with the usual disaster to profits and disregard of human life.

The Growth of the Company

The stock, which was now increased to 20 shares, was divided between the partners in Montreal, who imported the goods from England, and the winter partners, who bartered them with the Indians. Provision was made for the disposal or transfer of shares in such a way that opportunities should frequently arise for clerks to become partners. In this way every clerk and agent felt himself interested in the success of the company with the result that in 11 years from the union of 1787 the volume of business was trebled—the output for 1798 being 4,600 otter, 5,500 fox, 106,000 beaver and 183,800 skins of all varieties from the elk to the mink. At the same time the



Callicum and Maquinna, Chiefs of Nootka Sound.

burden and were navigated by from four to six men. But by far the larger number of employees worked on the western part of the journey.

The canoe men were French-Canadian or Indian and were a hardy, happy lot. They were generally able to support themselves en route by gun or hook, and were so used to labor that they have been known to carry two packages of 90 pounds each over Grand Portage and back, a distance of 18 miles, in six hours. They were equally ready to eat or fight or sing and by their aid the Nor'-Westers were able to eclipse their rivals at the Bay in spite of their shorter route and more strategic position.

Unfortunately the banner-year of the North-west Company saw its re-organization and the formation of a new company, which disturbed both harmony and profits for a number of years. When the stock was increased to 46 shares, in 1798, a number of old members openly opposed Simon McTavish, the autocratic old manager, who had been nicknamed the "Marquis," and formed a new company, which was first known as "Forsyth, Richardson & Co." In imitation of the North-west Company, which marked its bales with the simple letters N.W., it sometimes called itself the X.Y. Company. After Sir Alexander Mackenzie made his famous voyages to the Arctic and Pacific he was made head of the firm and the organization was then known as "Sir Alexander Mackenzie & Co.," but the important consideration was not so much the name as the character of the new rivals. Never was competition more fierce than that which was waged between the parent and its offspring, and rum never flowed so freely to the demoralization of Indian and trader alike. Fortunately the struggle lasted only seven years. On the death of Simon McTavish in 1804, union was effected, and henceforth the North-west Company's rivals are found not in the Canadas, but in the English on Hudson Bay and the Americans on the Pacific.

The Fur Trade of the Pacific

The valuable fur trade of the Pacific was not discovered early by the British, owing to the search for the north-west passage from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The Hudson's Bay Company, of the western sea was Captain Cook, who had rounded Cape Horn in search for the north-west passage from the Pacific to the Atlantic. He landed in Nootka Sound, March, 1778, and found the Indians willing to trade in furs of many varieties, but in human hands and skulls as well. He established friendly relations with these Indians by the exchange of gifts and expressed the belief that any Englishman who should follow in his wake would get a valuable supply of furs. He himself was a discoverer rather than a trader, but the information which he had gathered was soon exploited by men with an eye to profit only.

The pioneer trader was Captain Hanna, who was sent to Nootka Sound in 1780

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Cree Indians Travelling.

From a Painting by Paul Kane.