



Trade and Change on the Columbia Plateau 1750-1840

Columbia Magazine, Winter 1996-97: Vol. 10, No. 4

By Laura Peers

Early Europeans saw the Columbia Plateau as a walled fortress, isolated and virtually impossible to penetrate through the Rocky Mountain and Cascade ranges that formed its outer defenses. Fur traders and missionaries saw it as a last frontier, virgin and unspoiled. But this was an outsider's view. To the native people of the region, the Plateau was the center of the world, linked to the four corners of the continent by well-worn paths and a dense social and economic network. In fact, the Plateau was a crossroads for trade, one that became increasingly busy between 1750 and 1850. During this pivotal century, the quickening pace of trade became an uncontrolled torrent, a flash flood of new goods, new ideas and new diseases, an explosion of change, sometimes beneficial and sometimes deadly.

By the late prehistoric era there were two major trade centers on the Plateau: at The Dalles, on the middle Columbia River, and at Kettle Falls, several hundred miles away on the upper Columbia. Members of tribes from across the Plateau and from the West Coast to the Missouri River converged on these sites every year. An astonishing quantity and variety of goods were exchanged at these sites, including dried fish from the Columbia; baskets, woven bags and wild hemp for fishnets from the Plateau region; shells, whale and seal oil and bone from the West Coast; pipestone, bison robes and feather headdresses from the Plains; and nuts and roots from as far away as California. Once traded, many of these goods were exchanged again by Nez Perce, Gros Ventre, Crow, and Shoshone middlemen at centers that included the Shoshone Rendezvous in the central Plains and the Mandan-Hidatsa villages on the upper Missouri. The Plateau was thus a regional center of an extensive trading network through which trade goods readily moved around the entire continent.

The Euro-American Influence

AFTER EUROPEANS founded settlements in the Southwest and established trade relations with tribes on the West Coast and northeastern plains, small quantities of European trade goods also flowed through this tribal network. Glass beads, small pieces of woven cloth, and metal goods such as axes, kettles and jewelry came into Indian hands from Russian traders on the coast, Spanish in the Southwest, and British, Canadian and American companies to the north and east. The rarity and novelty of these goods made them highly prized commodities.

Most importantly, horses from the Spanish settlements in the Southwest were introduced into this network by the Shoshone. When Lewis and Clark arrived on the eastern edge of the Plateau in 1805, the Shoshone told them that it was possible to travel to Indian and Spanish trade sites in the Southwest in just ten days. They had certainly made the trek often enough to know. By the mid 1700s, eastern Plateau people, including the Salish (known historically as the Flathead) and Nez Perce, had large herds of horses acquired from the Shoshone, and fur traders arriving on the Plateau in the decade after Lewis and Clark saw horses

with Spanish brands. For Indian peoples of the Plateau, as well as of the Plains, horses proved to be one of the two most important goods obtained from Europeans. By the time Jesuit missionaries arrived in 1841, it was clear, as Father Mengarini noted, that horses meant "wealth and life" for Plateau people.

The acquisition of horses was not entirely beneficial. The desire for horses, and the use of theft to obtain them, caused increased warfare. The large herds of fine horses owned by the Nez Perce and Salish made them the target of raids by their traditional enemies, the more numerous Blackfeet. Not only did trade lead to warfare on the edge of the Plateau, it gave the Blackfeet an extra advantage over the Salish. Being closer to British (Hudson's Bay Company and North West Company) traders on the Saskatchewan River and to American traders along the Missouri, the Blackfeet obtained firearms by the mid-1700s to harass the Salish as well as to prevent traders from crossing the Rockies to supply Plateau tribes.

The pressure of Blackfeet raids against Plateau tribes was such that many Pend Orielle bands fled the northern part of their homeland south to the Bitterroot Valley. In April 1842 Father De Smet found the valley above Flathead Lake abandoned by the Pend Orielle. The effects of epidemic disease, beginning in the 1780s, when small-pox killed as many as half of the Salish, may also have made the Salish easier prey for their more numerous Blackfeet enemies. Surprisingly, trade occurred even between these enemies. There were formal procedures for establishing a truce for purposes of trade, underscoring the importance and pervasiveness of trade among Indian tribes during these decades.

By the 1790s the Salish had managed to obtain a few firearms through intertribal trade and used them to defend themselves against the Blackfeet. In the first decade of the 19th century the Salish participated more directly in this trade network to obtain firearms, even journeying with the Crow to the great trade fair at the Mandan villages. Salish people were seen there with a Crow party by trader Alexander Henry the Younger in 1806. By 1810 traders working for the Montreal-based North West Company had managed to slip around the Blackfeet and began supplying arms to the Plateau tribes directly.

The role of disease in the complex process of change sparked by trade cannot be underestimated. Along with the horse, the most important "trade good" obtained by Indian people from Europeans was epidemic disease, especially influenza, smallpox and measles.

With no immunities to these diseases, Indian peoples suffered mortality rates of up to 98 percent in repeated waves of epidemics that swept across North America between 1780 and 1870. Mortality varied from community to community: one village might be nearly wiped out, while another that was off hunting and remained isolated until the epidemic burned itself out might not have suffered any deaths. Two major smallpox epidemics that swept the Plateau, the first in the early 1780s and the second in 1800, may have reduced Indian populations overall by at least half. A Coeur d' Alene tradition recorded by De Smet illustrates how closely Plateau peoples linked smallpox and the growing European trade:

...the first white man they saw in their country wore a calico shirt, spotted all over with black and white, which to them appeared like the smallpox [they] imagined that the spotted shirt was the great master of that alarming disease, the smallpox, that if they could obtain possession of these, and pay them divine honors, their nations would never afterwards be visited by that dreadful scourge.

The Coeur d' Alene traded to obtain the shirt, and then made it part of a medicine bundle. If they hoped to obtain control over the epidemics in this manner, they were disappointed: epidemics recurred in periodic waves throughout the 19th century. Smallpox struck again in 1825; an unknown, deadly fever persisted from 1829-32; there were repeated bouts of influenza throughout the 1830s; a measles epidemic hit in 1847 and yet another smallpox epidemic in 1852-53.

Indirect trade thus wrought considerable changes in Plateau life. The pace of both trade and change continued to accelerate with the arrival of European fur traders in the region after 1800. European trade influences came from all four directions onto the Plateau in this era. The continued vitality of older intertribal trade networks ensured that Spanish influences from the Southwest continued to be felt. From the north, the Montreal-based North West Company pushed past the Blackfoot cordon and established posts on the Plateau by 1809. Arriving both from the Pacific coast and overland after 1810, the Pacific Fur Company established several short-lived forts that laid the foundation for future efforts. From the east, American firms based in St. Louis sent "brigades" of men to trap out the valuable beaver from the Rocky Mountain region, and the British-based Hudson's Bay Company took over the North West Company's operations after 1821.

Rise and Fall of the Fur Trade

FROM 1808 UNTIL the late 1840s, the Plateau fur trade escalated. For the Indians in whose territories this European struggle for furs took place, the trade brought a wealth of new goods, foreign peoples and strange ideas.

The first European traders to arrive directly on the Plateau were North West Company men led by explorer-trader David Thompson, who had cautiously inched his way around the hostile Blackfeet. Just a few years after Lewis and Clark's party passed through the region and introduced the idea of direct trade with Euro-Americans, Thompson built Saleesh House (known later as Flathead Fort) among the Salish in 1809, followed by Kullyspel House, Fort Nez Perce, and Spokane House in succeeding years. The North West Company's rival, the Hudson's Bay Company, had in 1805 been forced by the Blackfeet to retreat north.

On the Plateau, the North West Company was challenged only by the American Pacific Fur Company, which from its base at Fort Astoria penetrated inland and built forts Spokane and Okanogan between 1810 and 1813. These posts were short-lived, but they introduced direct trade to several of the Plateau tribes and thus assisted in laying the foundation for the development of the Plateau fur trade. After the 1821 merger of the North West Company and Hudson's Bay Company, the latter company began supplying all of the northern and western Plateau tribes.

At these early establishments European trade goods were exchanged for furs trapped by local tribesmen. However, traders found that many of the Plateau tribes refused to trap on the scale desired by the trading companies; being self-sufficient apart from their desire for guns and prestige goods, they had no need to become full-time trappers. This lack of initiative left a gap that was quickly filled by others. By 1810 eastern Woodlands Indians from the Great Lakes region, Iroquois, Cree and Ojibwa (Chippewa), who had migrated onto the margins of the northern Plains to take advantage of fur trade competition there, heard rumors that the beaver were "as numerous as blades of grass" in the Columbia District. Some of these people left their new homes along the Saskatchewan and Assiniboine Rivers to journey to the Plateau, accompanied by dozens of *métis*, the children of marriages between fur traders and native people.

These foreigners were encouraged, and later hired, by trading companies to trap the streams of the Plateau. Some of the newcomers, known as "free trappers," declined employment with specific trading companies, simply trading their furs to the highest bidder. One of these men is shown on horseback, gun in hand, wearing embroidered moccasins, fringed leggings, and decorated sash and pouch, in Nicolas Point's sketch "Free Hunter".

Just as this system of hiring non-local native trappers was developing at North West Company and Hudson's Bay Company posts, it was being used with a vengeance by American firms working their way up the Missouri River toward the Plateau. Between 1806 and 1826 St. Louis-based trading companies employed dozens of Hawaiian, black, Iroquois, Shawnee, Delaware, Cree, and Ojibwa trappers to work the upper

Missouri. Many of these belonged to tribes that had been displaced from their eastern homelands by American settlement; their participation in the western fur trade brought Indian cultural influences together from across the continent on a scale far larger than the earlier intertribal trade.

Although forced back to the middle Missouri several times by the Blackfeet, and always in danger of being attacked, the Americans finally made it into the Rockies in the early 1820s. The first Rocky Mountain Fur Company brigade, recruited by William Ashley in St. Louis, trapped in the Rockies in 1822-23. By the mid 1820s, then, the Plateau fur trade was truly an international venture involving Iroquois, Cree, Nipissing, Abenaki, Ojibwa, Orkneymen, Hawaiians, French-Canadians, métis, Scots, English, American, and the Indian and métis families of these men.

The use of organized, imported labor to harvest furs met with mixed reactions on the Plateau. The sheer numbers of foreigners were impressive: by 1821 Iroquois comprised one-third of all fur-trade employees in the Hudson's Bay Company's Columbia District, and there were some 600 American trappers and traders in the region in the late 1820s. The fact that the foreign trappers competed with local Indian populations for furs and game was always a source of some conflict. Hostilities between local tribes and foreign trappers occurred regularly between 1810 and 1840. On the other hand, examples of peaceful co-residence and of intermarriage between foreign males and local women are more numerous than examples of assault. Most of the new husbands and their mixed families blended well into Salish society. The major impact of such marriages was greater access to wealth in Euro-American goods for the family with a "foreign" relative.

The heyday of American trade in the Rockies lasted from 1824 to 1840. During these years a series of short-lived partnerships and small companies was formed by experienced American trappers, such as the partnership of Smith, Jackson & Sublette and the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. Competition from larger firms with more capital, the American Fur Company and the Hudson's Bay Company, finally ended the viability of such small enterprises, and the rendezvous system waned by mid century. Not all the imported trappers and "mountain men" left the region as the trade wound down. Some signed on with the major companies; others drifted into mining; many simply remained in their trapping territories, home to them by then, and lived as free traders with their Indian wives and families.

Effects of the Trade on Plateau Indians

THE ADDITION OF European goods to the Indian trade and the arrival of European fur traders on the Plateau profoundly affected the lives of tribal people. Horses, guns and epidemic disease provoked immediate and obvious transformations, but there were many other catalysts for change. The importation of new objects, crafts, artistic styles and motifs, and, most importantly, ideas from other Indian tribes and from non-Indian trappers and traders stimulated experimentation. These influences, together with the devastating effects of epidemic disease, made the early 19th century an unsettling but exciting period for Plateau tribes.

From an aesthetic standpoint, European trade goods were quickly incorporated into Plateau clothing, ornamentation and personal artifacts. In the process, these items often acquired uses and meanings different from their original European contexts. Indian women clearly found the new materials exciting and challenging. In fact, the introduction of European trade goods launched a period of unprecedented cultural creativity in which the goods did not so much disturb Plateau societies as elaborate existing forms.

North West Company trade tokens, for example, originally used to indicate the amount of credit an Indian hunter had at the trading post, were pierced and strung like a decorative necklace of shell or clay beads by the family of a Plateau chief. Similarly, imported fabrics and manufactured ornaments could embellish existing features or be used to reproduce decorations in a new medium. For instance, Plateau women continued to cut shirts, dresses, and leggings from the same pattern whether the garments were made from

leather or cloth. Traditional geometric painted designs reappeared in a solid field of beads, triangles of red wool cloth replaced painted designs at the neck opening of men's shirts, and tiny squares or circles of cloth surrounded by beads replaced shell ornaments on women's long, fringed hide dresses.

Other changes caused by trade goods had deeper ramifications. The alterations in tribal leadership patterns, set in motion by the introduction of the earliest European goods and accelerated by the incorporation and spread of the horse, were readily and deliberately manipulated by fur traders. In seeking to ensure the "loyalty and the furs" of Indian bands in a competitive environment, traders appointed "trading chiefs" who were favored with presents and special outfits as marks of the trader's favor. Such "trading chiefs" were not always the leaders recognized by band members. A trader might take advantage of intraband rivalries and appoint several "chiefs" for his own purposes. Or he might appoint a younger man anxious to acquire social status before his time.

The position of "trading chief" meant access to wealth. However, the "trading chief" was in effect a position subordinate to and dependent upon the trader rather than one acquired by being highly regarded within the band for competence and good judgment. Wealth did not necessarily bring influence; leadership within the band was still largely based on personal ability. Still, trading chiefs and established leaders alike began to wear the new signs of status and wealth, including chiefs coats (modeled after European military coats) and gentlemen's top hats with plumes.

Hats seem to have become especially popular among Plateau men. It is possible that these men viewed European hats as new forms of headdresses, which in tribal society were generally worn only by men in positions of authority. Widely available through trade, hats carried the cachet of the traditional headdress—they advertised to all that the wearer was an important man—but they were far more easily obtained and had no ritual contexts or rules associated with them. Foreign Indians who arrived as fur trade employees often wore hats. The influence of such men and their seemingly unlimited credit at the trading posts may have also increased the association of hats with power and authority.

Commercially manufactured Scottish caps achieved great popularity in the 1840s and 1850s. Point's sketches of Plateau men and Gustavus Sohon's portraits of Salish leaders frequently show men wearing such caps, a telling comment on the absorption and integration of new goods and values into Plateau life during these decades.

Articles of clothing and decorative artifacts made by Indians from across the continent were also brought to the plateau by fur trappers and traders. American traders, with their decades of experience on the middle and upper Missouri, arrived on the Plateau wearing European-style clothing made and decorated by Dakota, Yanktonai and other Plains Indian women. Robert Campbell's trousers and dress coat "of European cut but made of finely-dressed leather and decorated with quill-wrapped fringes" was standard wear for influential traders on the western Plains, many of whom took Indian wives. This stunning outfit was likely made by a Blackfeet woman.

Most men, Indian and non-Indian, wore shot pouches and powder-horn straps with beaded or quilled decorations such as the one collected by American artist and naturalist John James Audubon on his 1843 expedition. Through intermarriage with local tribes, foreign fur trade personnel provided a host of such goods and decorative influences to Plateau tribes. One foreign style that proved especially popular was the floral beadwork patterns favored by Ojibwa and other eastern Woodlands Algonquian-speakers as well as by métis. Plateau women admired the highly-decorated pouches with floral designs and eventually copied them.

Ideological Implications of Trade

NEW IDEAS, as well as horses and horse gear, were brought to the Plateau from the Spanish mission centers of California and the Southwest by Shoshone middlemen traders. Ritual practices and behaviors observed among Franciscan missionary priests, including formal group prayer, chanting or singing hymns, the ringing of bells to call people together for worship, and the use of whips as penance or punishment for sins, all made their way to the Plateau long before missionaries did and were noted by the earliest fur traders between 1805 and the 1820s.

These developments occurred simultaneously with the growth in status and wealth of the chief's position, so that chiefs assumed responsibility for whipping wrong-doers and in some cases for leading "congregations" whose early worship services were modeled after what was seen at missions. Lacking familiarity with Christian beliefs, plateau people merely added Christian forms to their own beliefs and religious knowledge.

Information about Christianity became more readily available to Plateau people in the 1820s and 1830s. One source was the Hudson's Bay Company traders who held formal worship and instruction services. Another was Spokane Garry, a Spokane man who had been sent to an Anglican mission school at Red River (present-day Winnipeg) by the Hudson's Bay Company and then returned to instruct his people. These ideological innovations were later reinforced by the presence of missionized Iroquois, French-Canadians, and other fur trade personnel who married into Plateau tribes and taught their families essential concepts and practices of Christianity. The Iroquois, who were said to sing hymns more often than paddle songs when canoeing, first introduced Catholic hymns and prayers to the Salish and Nez Perce.

That elements of Christianity were so fascinating to Plateau people was no accident. The cumulative effects of the smallpox epidemics, of increased war-fare triggered by the horse and gun trade, of changes in social and political organization, and of other, subtler alterations in Plateau life caused by the advent of competitive European trade, all this bred uncertainty and insecurity about the continued efficacy of the supernatural powers that had protected their forefathers. The many material and ideological innovations introduced to the Plateau through trade made the region a fertile seedbed for ideas about the nature and causes of destructive change and about the spiritual powers that seemed to protect the foreigners who came to the Plateau.

By the early 19th century Plateau people were bringing their dead to non-Indian fur traders in the hope that the newcomers would be able to bring the dead back to life. In this "age of death" brought on by epidemic disease, Plateau people practiced "Christian" behavior in the hope that new and powerful super-natural beings would help them restore order and vitality to their world. Prophets appearing among the Plateau tribes foretold the arrival of strange white men with a powerful book who would bring a new religion and change their lives forever. Propelled by the forces of change introduced by trade, the search on the Plateau for supernatural assistance led to an appeal to an imported God.

Laura Peers was research and curatorial associate for the Sacred Encounters exhibition. She is author of a number of publications on Native American history and is currently a post-doctoral fellow in the Department of History at the University of Winnipeg.

AUTHOR'S NOTE Thanks to William Swagerty of the Department of History, University of Idaho, for sharing his research findings on the development of trade on the Columbia Plateau.

MLA Citation:

Peers, Laura. "Trade & Change: On the Columbia Plateau, 1750-1840." *Columbia Magazine*. 10.4 (Winter 1996-1997): 6-12. Date accessed
<http://columbia.washingtonhistory.org/anthology/earliestsettlers/tradeAndChange.aspx>.