

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN - EAU CLAIRE

FORT FOLLE AVOINE AND THE NORTHWEST FUR TRADE: 1802-1805

BY MATT SCHULT

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

HISTORY 489: RESEARCH SEMINAR

DR. JOHNNY TRUTOR

DR. RICHARD ST. GERMAINE

FALL 2011

EAU CLAIRE, WI

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Abstract

Fort Folle Avoine was a fur trading area located in northwestern Wisconsin. A branch off of the fur trade based in Montreal, the trade that occurred around the Folle Avoine area was unique in several ways. In the early 1800s, this area contained two competing fur trading companies within considerably short distance from one another. After breaking from the North West Company (NWC), the XY Company (XYC) instigated the unique competition that would ensue. Several journals from clerks and traders in these two companies overlapped not only during the period of 1802-1805, but also in the vicinity of the Folle Avoine area. These journals demonstrate paradoxes among common fur trading characteristics. The side-by-side competition along with contradictions in American Indian involvement and views of traders has allowed the fur trade around Folle Avoine to be analyzed unlike any other area of the time.

Introduction

Throughout the history of colonial America, historians have looked at the effects of the fur trade through various means. These have included the fashion rage in Europe, the curtailing of Native beliefs and culture, expansion into North America and motives by Europeans, and the destruction of the natural environment.¹ The Folle Avoine region, however, was unique for several reasons.

Geographically, it took place right in the back yard of northwestern Wisconsin.² In this relatively small amount of space, two separate fur trading companies, the North West Company (NWC) and the XY Company (XYC), set up shop within fairly close coordinates.³ Unheard of at the time, however, was that the two competing companies often discussed and worked with one another. At times, they went to trade together, yet other instances showed them sabotaging one another.

Native American involvement had a large impact as well. The debate has always been as to what type of impact. Many argue that both the European and the American Indian needed one another in order to obtain adequate supplies of good, furs, and provisions.⁴ Yet examination of the primary journals of traders Michel Curot, George Nelson, and John Sayer in the Folle Avoine area around 1800 reveals that the roles the natives played, whether as middlemen or wives, were obscure and not always praised to say the least. In the same way, historians have looked at traders “like comic-book heroes with their Herculean strength, while singing, laughing, and

¹ Harold A. Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada: an Introduction to Canadian Economic History* (Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division, 1999), vi-xiii.

² See Appendix A.

³ Douglas A. Birk. ed., *John Sayer's Snake River Journal, 1804-1805: A Fur Trade Diary from East Central Minnesota* (Minneapolis, MN: Institute for Minnesota Archaeology, 1989), 10.

⁴ Arthur J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade: Their Role As Trappers, Hunters, and Middlemen in the Lands Southwest of Hudson Bay, 1660-1870* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), xxxiii.

leaping over waterfalls.”⁵ Often, that may have been the picture of men who were to work in nature and with the American Indians of the Great Lakes. Hardly the case, however, was it where these men took pride in what they did on a daily basis. They lived the simple life, indeed. Fort Folle Avoine featured an unusual competition in the North American fur trade during the fur trading period of 1802-1805, exemplified by questionable American Indian involvement and the striking personalities of the traders.

⁵ Carolyn Podruchny, *Making the Voyageur World: Travelers and Traders in the North American Fur Trade* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 2.

America around 1800

In order to analyze the fur trade around the early 1800s, it is appropriate to step back and examine broader America at the time to determine how the fur trade fit in. Only around twenty-five years old, America was still largely uninfluenced by heavy industry, but was instead mainly a rural society. Many would argue that there was little to no chance that the young United States of then would end up the industrious and imperialistic state it became only years later. Instead, the United States at the turn of the nineteenth century had few settlements, and those that existed were located mostly on the coast for commerce with other nations. The land was covered with vast amounts of “desolate and dreary forest” and “no arts, a principal literature, a cancerous disease of negro slavery.”⁶ These attributes, especially slavery and a lack of art, were argued by historians such as Henry Adams as mostly characterizing America around 1800.

The slave trade in America has always been under scrutiny of scholars such as Adams and is unfortunately most often associated with the early history of the nation. Here, however, it was unique that a young United States and its association with slavery allowed an industry as unique as the fur trade to thrive during this period. Those in America had “greed for wealth, lust for power, yearning for the blank void of savage freedom such as Indians and wolves delighted in.”⁷ American society and economy were still in their beginnings and shared an unknown future at the time. With a constitution so young and a population comprised of new Americans, European traders, and American Indians, the freedom that these Native peoples still possessed had an incredible impact on this new country with a business like the fur trade.

⁶ Henry Adams, *The United States in 1800* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1955), 111.

⁷ *Ibid*, 128.

Thomas Jefferson played a significant role in attempting to understand and develop his nation. His role greatly enhanced knowledge of America, while dealing with the impact of these American Indians and their fur trade on the development of his young country. Jefferson commissioned the expeditions of Lewis and Clark to achieve knowledge of his nation. The two explorers contributed artifacts and resources in various areas, such as maps of unknown rivers and mountains as well as specimens of plants and animals.⁸ Expeditions such as these were received well by Jefferson as they highlighted the diversity of resources and layout of the vast lands in America.

Though there were countless travels by explorers such as Lewis and Clark, theirs remained widespread due to the extent of knowledge they brought back with them. Ultimately, information brought back to Jefferson about fur trade activity was important in understanding the fur trading period. When they traveled around 1805, they recorded that “successful business interests were built on trading with Indian partners.”⁹ Thus, it was becoming more widely known that the fur trade was occurring in various parts of the nation, and the American Indians held an important role in these happenings. The expeditions of Lewis and Clark showed that much of the nation was still looking to understand various occurrences in America, while other parts were thriving from these activities in the fur trade.

Around the same time that Jefferson sent out Lewis and Clark, his policy of assimilating Native Americans was also rising to the surface. Relating back to Adams, want and need for more land and resources was still very much a characteristic of young America. The United States sought lands that American Indians held onto east of the Mississippi. Jefferson widely

⁸ Kris Fresonke and Mark Spence, eds., *Lewis & Clark: Legacies, Memories, and New Perspectives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 37.

⁹ *Ibid*, 270.

held beliefs that Natives could adopt farming practices, but when this process ultimately failed, he developed plans for moving them west of the Mississippi. Whether removal would be sufficient or be met with resistance, Jefferson held the ideal that Native peoples would either “just fade away or would be driven away” by the expanding United States.¹⁰ The findings of Lewis and Clark, along with the process of acquiring Louisiana, worked into the goals of Jefferson.

As the expeditions of Lewis and Clark detail, the territory of Louisiana was Jefferson’s ideal living space for tribes he would force to move from their eastern lands. West of the Mississippi, the area of Louisiana was organized for Natives to move into while American settlers would settle in their former homelands and Jefferson would “begin exercising America’s newly acquired Discovery powers over the Indian Nations of the Louisiana Territory.”¹¹ As plans for relocation and removal characterized much of America around this time, trade still thrived in the unique, mostly untouched northwest. It was there that Europeans came to deal and there that Folle Avoine operated on a basis very much unlike the young America that was unfolding around them.

¹⁰ Robert J. Miller, *Native America, Discovered and Conquered: Thomas Jefferson, Lewis & Clark, and Manifest Destiny* (Lincoln: Bison Books, 2008), 91.

¹¹Ibid, 104.

The Formation of the Folle Avoine Trade

In understanding popular America at the time, considerably young and still developing, the North American fur trade offered its own unique, traditional experience centered on the actions of European comrades. Dating back to the early 1600s, Europeans arrived in America looking to expand this new business. Holland and France were the leaders in initiating these trades, with England close behind. Holland eventually dissolved out, however. In 1697, France and England attempted to keep the other from the generous region of the Hudson Bay. Each country looked to win the area which was long challenged by the two, with the English eventually winning.¹² It was a traditional battle involving the two rival countries in North America to discover land and ultimately, to hold onto it over time. The minor land confrontations that ensued showed the richness of the land revolving around Lake Superior that was home to many resources important for the fur trade such as the pelts of the beaver.¹³

Efforts in the late 1660s by Radisson and Groseilliers proved this Lake Superior region was an ideal setting for fur trading. The two men, both French, have historically been characterized in the ranks of Lewis and Clark. After first exploring the upper parts of the Mississippi under French leadership in search of beaver, the two eventually switched allegiances to the British side after French authorities failed to inform them they needed a license to acquire furs in the Lake Superior region.¹⁴ The British were glad to have them. In fact, due to their countless efforts, good communication, and knowledge of the Lake Superior area, they would help the British become the predecessors to fur trading in the area well before 1800.

¹² Grace Lee Nute, *Caesars of the Wilderness: Medard Chouart, Sieur Des Groseilliers and Pierre Esprit Radisson, 1618-1710* (New York: Arno Press, 1977), 126.

¹³ See Appendix B.

¹⁴ Nute, *Caesars of the Wilderness*, 109.

Nelson, a French trader, noted the absence of beaver pelts and fur in the area due to trading efforts by groups such as Radisson and Groseilliers. In the early years of 1800, records from Nelson “found only with one beaver as this animal is almost exterminated.”¹⁵ Trading primarily near Folle Avoine, he noted that the beaver was difficult to find even in the height of the trade in the early 1800s. This was a result of the spots that Radisson and Groseilliers located in the 1660s that were instantly funded in order to retrieve beaver pelts. With maps and stories from American Indians and sights seen by the two of them, the explorers “realized that the great fur center of the North American continent lay west and northwest of Lake Superior.”¹⁶ Obvious as it was to Radisson and Groseilliers at that time, it became even more relevant from what was to be established in the areas they described, namely in the Folle Avoine region.

The trade by the NWC and XYC revolved around these early British and French attempts to establish a presence in the Montreal area. Though the British ended up making their mark originally through the Hudson Bay Company (HBC), it was the French who laid key strategies in the area first. Unlike the French, the HBC failed to establish posts near inland Lake Superior and establish close relations with the American Indians in this area.¹⁷ These relations were accompanied by an easy transition to travel among lands with access to waterways such as the Hudson Bay and St. Lawrence. The French used knowledge of the inland and skillfully developed themselves socially with the locals.

After 1763, and the loss of France in the French and Indian War, the British retained a hold on the majority of trade in Montreal. Even so, the two world powers still jockeyed for

¹⁵ Laura Peers and Theresa Schenck, editors., *My First Years in the Fur Trade: The Journals of George Nelson, 1802-1804* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2002), 192.

¹⁶ Nute, *Caesars of the Wilderness*, 72.

¹⁷ Jacques Deseve, *Voices from Our Past: Telling the Folle Avoine Story* (Danbury, WI: Burnett County Historical Society, 2009), 3.

position in the North American fur trade. Though the competition would continue for years, it is important to understand that the British now controlled the areas around Folle Avoine.¹⁸ Thus, though the English took over previous French areas and ideas, they would retain many of the French as clerks and traders due to their previous successful relations with American Indians and knowledge of the area.

Often, American Indians played various roles within these French methods. While many of the men traded the furs they trapped, the woman often intermarried and were interpreters between the cultures. When trading with the French, the Natives played a role that encouraged competition between traders. “Having a material relationship with both traders might ensure the long-term supply of the trade goods these people valued. Receiving gifts from two traders instead of only one might be more profitable in the long run.”¹⁹ In this way, the American Indians not only promoted their own interests in the trade, but also encouraged competition. This competition would be a unique aspect of the Folle Avoine fur trade. The combination of these French and Native American methods in the area, along with the domination and acquisition of land by England, established a foundation for the competition that was about to ensue at Folle Avoine.

The NWC, along with its founder, Simon McTavish, would flourish in the North American fur trade, but not without a few clashes along the way. Since British officials were able to take over French forts, yet keep successful transitions running, there was much prosperity for the company for some time. It was not until the late 1790s that several dissatisfied and frustrated merchants of the NWC broke off to form their own company and rival the very organization that

¹⁸ Wayne Edson Stevens, *The Northwest Fur Trade, 1763-1800* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1928), 18.

¹⁹ Bruce M. White, “Give Us a Little Milk: The Social and Cultural Meaning of Gift Giving in the Lake Superior Fur Trade,” (*Minnesota History Magazine* 48, no. 2 1982), 240.

had employed them. From the period of 1789-1804, the new company known as the XY Company would rise to the surface and create a paradox in fur trade history.²⁰ Though many historians would claim that the HBC gave the NWC their stiffest competition, the Folle Avoine area solidified that this offshoot of the NWC itself provided enough competition for the Northwestern Company to handle throughout these five years at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Though working for a prosperous company, McTavish's iron fist and cruelty caused Alexander Mackenzie to start the XYC. A prolific explorer in North America and shareholder in the original NWC, Mackenzie yearned to work with McTavish and unite their companies several times after the break of the NWC and XYC in 1798.²¹ Both men, however, seemed to contain a hostility for the other that continued for several years. When considering the fur trade, the hostility that was the basis for these two similar companies collided in such a small area and span of time that had not been seen before.

²⁰ Grace Lee Nute, *The Voyageur's Highway: Minnesota's Border Lake Land* (St. Paul, MN.: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2002), 8.

²¹ Peers and Schenck, 212, 213.

NWC and XYC Competition

The unique competition that ensued was rather complex, but showed that the rivalry between the companies was not merely the sole aspect of the trade. The two companies shared an abnormal relationship. In understanding what ensued around the Folle Avoine region, both sides of the trade must be analyzed.

Fortunately, both clerk Michel Curot and junior clerk George Nelson could lend their insights to the XYC while John Sayer was temporarily a trader for the NWC and also left several journal entries. The three men not only represented the two companies in the Great Lakes region, but also occupied the areas at precisely the same time from 1802 to 1805.²² Before embarking on what the clerks experienced daily or how they viewed their competition, the fur trade as a system had to be momentarily analyzed. While McTavish and McKenzie were bourgeois who had complete control of the companies, the rest of the men were termed crews, or engagés and laboring crews. The former, the crews, consisted of clerks, guides, interpreters and Curot, Nelson, and Sayer themselves, men who were literate enough to write daily observations.²³ Thus, the fur trade and the many facets that are known today can mostly be attributed to the thoughts and ideas of these clerks that were left in journals they left from the time period.

One of the most prominent aspects to examine when looking at the relationship of the two companies was the living conditions of the men. Most notably were the structures that the men lived in and their proximity to one another. Neither Nelson nor Curot were blind to this fact. Nelson noted it early in his writings, “The establishment of the N.W.C. tho’ there was nothing

²² Michel Curot, *A Wisconsin Fur Trader's Journal, 1803-1804*, Reuben Gold Thwaites editor (Wisconsin Historical Collections, vol. XX: 396-472, 1911), Introduction.

²³ Birk, 8.

superfluous or unnecessary... Our [XY] company, had a few buildings, a few hundred yards to the East of the N.W.C. below the hill; but were busy building a very fine 'fort' upon the hill."²⁴

Though vague, as are most of his descriptions, Curot also lent some voice in describing the odd relationship between the foundation of the two posts. Early into his accounts in August of 1803, Curot stated several circumstances where he distinguished the difference of the companies, merely by the name of the post. On one occasion, one of his men "did not wish to work at the house" nevertheless Curot "could persuade him to commence to work at the house."²⁵ What is significant here is the mention of the 'house' that he wanted his men to work at throughout his journal. When comparing the NWC, there is a distinct difference in naming structures. Little over a month later, Curot mentions the arrival of John Sayer into the Folle Avoine region, the clerk aforementioned of the NWC. Curot noted, "Mr. Sayer arrived at the fort in his canoe with only his baggage, his wife, two children."²⁶ Taking note that Sayer attended his 'fort,' Curot made this clear, yet simple distinction from his 'house.' In the same way, remember that Nelson also observed the NWC as they built their 'fort' upon the hill not far away from their XYZ structure, or 'house' as became customary to differentiate between the companies. By making this clear distinction, there is a small, yet noticeable example of the competition between the companies.

Adding to the competition were several clear attempts by the companies, with the majority coming from the NWC, to limit and discourage the other from trading in the Folle Avoine area. As would be expected from a competition of two rival companies, especially when one separated from the other, there was on more than one occasion a time where the NWC would

²⁴ Peers and Schenck, 42.

²⁵ Curot, 6.

²⁶ Ibid, 10.

deliberately try to hinder the XYC. Nelson even noted that when attempting to better the opposition, “no means were too trivial, nor method too base.”²⁷ Most of the methods used by the NWC in opposition to the XYC were rather simplistic in nature.

The vast majority of instances dealt with NWC men limiting the provisions of XYC men through coercing of the Native Americans to not trade with the latter. On more than one occasion, it was evident that Curot was convinced that Sayer was deliberately out to get him. In early February of 1804, Curot complained that his “neighbor Sayer did his best to hinder the Indians from giving me provisions.”²⁸ Though this strategy proved successful to Sayer, it could hardly be recognized as overly planned, as Sayer “could see what provisions I had left to give them” and “gave them what satisfied them.”²⁹

Since the two camps were indeed so close to one another, the competition was collaborative in a sense that Curot almost invited Sayer to see his weaknesses and use them against him. In fact, Sayer merely pleased the Native Americans involved. “Sayer had given him a chief’s capot and big keg, saying to him to turn away the Indians, and hinder them from paying me their credits.” Sayer would ultimately reward the Ojibwe for neglecting to trade with Curot.³⁰ While all of these maneuvers worked until their full effect would be decided in the future, but it was apparent that Curot was both paranoid of his opposition as well as unsure to the strategy it took to be successful in the trade. By merely noting what Sayer was doing with frustration, Curot accomplished little but to make the NWC appear as the company who would capitalize where they could.

²⁷ Richard M.D. Bardon and Grace Lee Nute editors., *A Winter in the St. Croix Valley: George Nelson’s Reminiscences, 1802-03* (Minnesota Historical Society, 1948), 144.

²⁸ Curot, 23.

²⁹ Ibid, 23.

³⁰ Ibid, 12.

Nelson also witnessed much of the same circumstances regarding Indians and their intent to trade solely with the NWC. Absent one day trading away from the houses, an Indian “had killed a couple of bears & a few beavers – he was gone off to the NW People for rum.”³¹ In this specific instance, it was difficult to determine if Nelson and the XYZ men missed out on a trading opportunity due their absence or if the Indian merely stopped by, but had planned on trading with the NWC all along. In interpreting the source, it appeared that though Nelson and his men were gone, someone from the XYZ had to have been present to account for Indians that were to come with goods and made sure to tell Nelson. Nevertheless, the NWC provided the Indian with the provisions he coveted, and the XYZ witnessed another situation where the Indians turned to the NWC for goods.

The noticeable policies employed by the NWC may not have been complex in nature, but their effect was prominent in the journals of the men who were on the losing end. With the winter and competition, the results of limiting the trade and provisions of the XYZ became rather prominent both at the beginning and end of the winter and trading season. Barely in the Folle Avoine area for a month, the effects of the opposition were felt by Curot and were evident once again in his frustrations. In the middle November of 1803, Curot “believed that Monsieur [Sayer] does all he can to starve me with my men; he tries to debauch the Indians.”³² If the XYZ were merely limited on supplies, but could attain more at the time, Sayer and the NWC would not have been such a bother to him. Since Curot did indeed seem to be starving, however, it was worth making note at the time.

³¹ Peers and Schenck, 143.

³² Curot, 13.

Similarly, Nelson had the same experience considering limited food quantities in February of 1804. After arriving back at the house, “the NWPeople arrive here very late with full Bellies whereas Sansregret & I have not - & will not perhaps so soon.”³³ Though there was no mention of tactics against the XYC in this particular instance, Nelson not only stated that he had no food recently, but had a somber tone in that it would not be likely that he or his men would have any significant amount of food in the near future. By relaying such a doubtful note on this day, it epitomizes the successfulness of the NWC and the desperateness of the XYC.

Though the two companies held an unusual competition to be discussed later, cut-throat tactics were obviously needed to survive. Among these tactics, companies practiced sabotaging cargoes, confusing credits with the Indians, pressing Indians to trade one way, and knowing what it took to attain their portion of the trade.³⁴ Both Nelson and especially Curot were aware of such plans, but neither could prevent them from happening or recover easily from them. Thus, their awareness of such plans proved it obvious that there was another type of relationship present in the trade that would eventually bring the two companies together.

There is clear evidence that some type of rivalry was indeed present in the early years of 1800 in Folle Avoine as several sources point to various tactics and effects of the opposition. What makes the relationship of the NWC and XYC so unique, however, was its ultimate joining of forces after only a few years of competition.³⁵ Before the two companies banded together, there were further instances where it appears that the NWC and XYC respected one another to a certain extent, even when not working together in trade.

³³ Peers and Schenck, 149.

³⁴ Birk, 10.

³⁵ Nute, *The Voyageur's Highway: Minnesota's Border Lake Land*, 8.

Both Nelson and Curot were continuously and almost subconsciously aware of the status and activities of the NWC men. In reading a string of several days, the mention of the NWC by XYC was extremely prevalent even in the simplest cases. On one occasion after engaging in trading activities, Nelson noted, “The NWPeople remain with me all night –”³⁶ Similarly, on a routine voyage circa the Yellow River and the fort of Sayer, the XYC camped around a lake before Nelson wrote, “We passed the N.W. people at their encampment. They had some deer meat hanging upon the trees.”³⁷ Though indefinite in details, the XY clerk made these recordings of the opposition for some unknown reason. The clerks and junior clerks were in fact required (in whatever legible writing they could) to relate aspects of the fur trade. Nelson, especially, was expected to note transactions of furs and goods, the quality of labor by the men, and anything out of the ordinary to show to McKenzie and other bourgeois.³⁸ Thus, merely noticing the competition that was already located nearby would not qualify under any of these circumstances. Nonetheless, Nelson noted the numerous instances where he either met with or saw the NWC.

Most importantly, however, was the fact that these two opposing companies did indeed look out for each other and collaborate at various times. When two men were supposedly going to kill Nelson and his men, “Laprairie, the master at the N.W.C. also warned us” and called out to the men, “touch them if you dare & I will shoot you like dogs.”³⁹ This particular instance demonstrated the respect and protection the opposition had for the other despite the obvious cut-throat tactics that were employed throughout the trade.

Additionally, Curot echoed Nelson in his similar dull, yet descriptive observations. Almost daily, Curot makes mention of a specific or group of NWC men. In two consecutive

³⁶ Peers and Schenck, 136.

³⁷ Ibid. 55.

³⁸ Ibid, 19.

³⁹ Ibid, 63.

days, he talked of La Prairie, a NWC clerk under Sayer, arriving back in the NWC fort and also of Sayer himself who “arrived at the fort in his canoe with only his baggage, his wife, two children, a black man, and another man.”⁴⁰ Again, nothing of these observations appeared to be of anything too significant on a daily basis. Even more clearly, though, was to note that Curot looked to be watching the NWC almost too close. His daily observations of jotting down who arrived at the NWC seemed dull, but again showed his want to note their movements.

While Nelson received advice on his safety, Curot actually worked with Sayer at points. When requesting to use the beaver press of the NWC, Sayer told Curot “if your men will help work the press, you may have the use of it.”⁴¹ Though not fully engaging in work together, but instead helping one another for a tool, Sayer allowed Curot and his men to use the press, thus showing that competition was not consistently so intense. Like Nelson in his experience around Folle Avoine, Curot related the same idea that even though the competition was looming, these two companies still shared an interesting bond.

Still, attributing to the uniqueness of this competition was the vast paranoia and perceived attacks of the feared Sioux Indians in the Folle Avoine region. Rightly so, both clerks and their men had reason to believe that Sioux were in the area at various times. The region around Folle Avoine was very much a “contested zone” where boundaries were made between the Ojibwe and Sioux, traditional enemies.⁴² Thus, the Ojibwe and, in turn, the traders had to be on alert for

⁴⁰ Curot, 10.

⁴¹ Ibid, 32.

⁴²William W. Warren and Theresa M. Schenck, *History of the Ojibway people* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2009.), 233.

Sioux approaching their areas.⁴³ Consequently, these distresses over possible Sioux in the region caused the two companies to quietly agree on a strategy as early as 1802.

Since the Sioux were generally believed to come in the spring, the XYC “had several proposals from the N.W. to build nearer to them, so that we might assist each other in case of being attacked,” noted Nelson.⁴⁴ Both Nelson and Curot had a few key entries that focused on the Sioux encroaching in their area. Most often, the occurrences made the men sound paranoid compared to what might have actually happened in the area. Initially, when two men under Curot did not return from trading as expected, it was “believed that the Sioux had killed Smith and Boisvert.”⁴⁵ In fact, Curot learned that the men had extended their stay overnight and returned the next day. Similarly, while out hunting, Nelson and another hunter “found and fell upon quite a strange camp & very near a camp of several lodges by far too numerous to remain here any longer with safety.”⁴⁶ Nelson and the hunter almost instantly supposed the print to be that of a Sioux, though without any clear clarification. Thus, fear of both Curot and Nelson made them suspect much more than was present at the time, though they had no concrete evidence for who was near or what could have occurred at the time.

In several instances, the fear of the Sioux ended with the two competing companies coming together for some time. At one point, while making and collecting nets for fishing, two traders with Curot spotted four men walking towards them in the distance. The event spiraled into Sayer locking himself in his fort, Curot preparing guns in case of attack, and ultimately, Curot finding no footprints in the snow the next morning.⁴⁷ The men, staying up most of the

⁴³ Birk, 11.

⁴⁴ Bardon and Nute, 152.

⁴⁵ Curot, 6.

⁴⁶ Peers and Schenck, 140.

⁴⁷ Curot, 25.

night to protect their house, allowed this event to increase their fear and paranoia of the Sioux. Not only did the men fishing fail to recognize the approaching figures, but the suspected fear ended quickly. In the end, the two companies lodged together momentarily in response to that night, “Mr. Sayer gave me his house in which I lived along with the pack.”⁴⁸ As a result of many such events, Nelson noted, “In the last days of February we received frequently news of the Scioux in our neighborhood... We accordingly pulled down our house & built up a shed in the N.W. fort.”⁴⁹

Thus, the Sioux contributed to the discreet friendship that took place among the competition. When examining the situation, it was important to remember that Curot often complained of Sayer trying to starve and sabotage him and Nelson often contained jealousy of the NWC men, who appeared to be full while Nelson had little food. Yet the problem of the Sioux showed these two opposing companies coming together in times of crisis.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 26.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 72.

American Indians

The NWC and the XYC provided the Folle Avoine area with a competition that was unheard of at the time. In the same way, the two clerks from the XYC related that their interactions with Native Americans in the area were not always comprised of friendly coexistence. The fur trade has served to epitomize the interactions between traders and American Indians as beneficial, except for minor exceptions.

Many historians such as Patty Loew labeled the fur trading period as a time where the French and Native Americans formed a 'Middle Ground,' wherein cultures blended together.⁵⁰ There was no doubt that the French were able to absorb into American Indian culture and enhance their trading empire. Many traders encouraged relations in order that French men "adopted Native foods, medicines, dress, and customs."⁵¹ In this way, the French appealed to the Indians in ways that the British could and would not do at the time. Because of this appeal, the assimilation of French men into Indian culture had a significant impact on their ability to increase trade negotiations during the fur trade. Their close living led the two groups to experience the unique lives of each other daily and eventually lead to the 'Middle Ground' that many historians analyze to this day.

Though historians such as Loew argue that peaceful negotiations that took place, it was clear that this was not the case in the Folle Avoine region. Both clerks from the XYC related throughout their experiences that run-ins with the Native Americans were often far from diplomatic. On occasion, the clerks recorded the actual violence that took place along with the confusion of the native inhabitants of the land. In some cases, assimilation may not have helped

⁵⁰ Patty Loew, *Indian Nations of Wisconsin: Histories of Endurance and Renewal* (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2001), 15.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 14.

during the fur trade. It can be argued that constantly following commands to share their game and gatherings, the Ojibwe started to pursue their own interests, most often adhering to contexts of their own culture.⁵² In these cases, American Indians felt it important to promote their culture while surviving instead of constantly supplying the traders with their goods. Due to this promotion of self-interests, the argument that occurred at Folle Avoine can be explained more easily.

On the first of November in 1803, having disagreed with an Indian about trading, Curot stated, "I had much trouble with this Indian. I received several blows of his fist, one especially that made my upper lip swell up."⁵³ From this instance, it can be noted that it was trading talks that caused the scuffle between the two men. When the two cultures were creating the 'Middle Ground,' it included adapting to the culture of one another. In the case of the American Indians, many goods, such as metal, were coveted greatly. Therefore, Indians became very dependent on obtaining these materials.

Nelson also noted circumstances where the actions of the Indians were confusing to him. Upon one trip, "the Indians had killed a bear, & eat it while we were carrying their things on."⁵⁴ Showing that they were displeased with this decision, the traders became part of a "Scuffle" in which they defended themselves against the Indians. Nelson considered the Indians inconsiderate as they lived together and kept each other content and alive, but the Natives were "still so blind that we could not understand."⁵⁵ Nelson and his men failed to comprehend why the Indians acted in such a way. Just as Curot struggled to agree during trading talks and terms, Nelson was

⁵² White, 229.

⁵³ Curot, 10.

⁵⁴ Peers and Schenck, 147.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 147.

discouraged and frustrated as to how the culture of the Indian worked.-These instances with Curot and Nelson reveal that the ‘Middle Ground’ was not always the solution.

The Folle Avoine area was subject to much trading that revolved around alcohol. Historians have noted the significance of alcohol in Native communities. Loew argued that American Indians had become dependent on alcohol, but this dependency was universal at the time.⁵⁶ The Natives were not introduced to alcohol until Europeans, the French especially, introduced it into the fur trade. Unfortunately, this dependency led to ill perceptions of the Indians by the traders and created negative primary attitudes. Curot noted three straight days in late January of 1804 that “the Indians drank day and night.”⁵⁷ Cases such as this became common in the notes of Curot where Natives traded goods for rum or high wines almost daily. When the Indians obtained this wine, they drank it rather quickly and for long periods as Curot detailed. Once, after the Indians got “their treat of rum,” Nelson experienced “the most racket & noise I ever seen or heard in my life.”⁵⁸

Alcohol had a complex role in the fur trade. While historians such as Loew would argue liquor was used to get Indians drunk, it was not usually the case. For the most part, “liquor was something that the Ojibway, like people of many cultures, times, and places, had a liking for” as can be seen in the journals of Nelson and Curot especially.⁵⁹ Historically, the use of liquor in the fur trade was especially prevalent in the early 1800s. With its common use, alcohol became known to Natives as a term similar to mother’s milk, signifying the want of the trader to gain the loyalty of the Ojibwe in the fur trade.⁶⁰ In particular, this mother’s milk was especially important

⁵⁶ Loew, 17.

⁵⁷ Curot, 21.

⁵⁸ Peers and Schenck, 111.

⁵⁹ White, 234.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 234.

to the competition and the gaining American Indian loyalty between the two companies at Folle Avoine.

Another area in which American Indians played a significant role in the fur trade is in mixed marriages and relations with the traders. The French put an effort into the fur trade that was unlike any of their rivals. They encouraged the men to live with and even take a Native woman into marriage. Historians have argued for decades that without women in the fur trade, success would not have been possible. It was widely believed that the bond between Indians and traders “helped to advance trade relations with a new tribe” and an Indian mate “could be an effective agent to the trader’s knowledge of Indian life.”⁶¹

Though notions such as traders learning to understand the Native life were accurate, the rifts that occurred between traders and wives tended to be more significant and numerous in journals than the benefits of Indian women becoming directly involved in the trade. While women could be interpreters and help build alliances, they also could end up in the middle of affairs between the NWC, XYC and the Indians, as well as those within the companies.⁶² Thus, it was clear that Indian wives were not always the key to success in the trade. Instead, several problems arose because of their involvement in a trade dominated by business.

The clerks had short patience for women when it came to the matters of the fur trade. Brunet, the interpreter for Nelson, had an Ojibwe wife that Nelson continually scorned in his journals. Most often, Brunet became preoccupied with his wife and neglected his trading duties. Nelson had a frustrated tone when Brunet was to live with the Indians for some time, calling him

⁶¹ Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870* (Winnipeg, MB: Watson and Dwyer Publishing, 1996), 4, 13.

⁶² Jennifer S.H Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006), 84.

too young and foolish.⁶³ His contempt for her never faded away as he termed her a “great a vixen & hussy” and continued “such influence has a woman upon her husband & every one else when stupid or foolish enough to listen to them.”⁶⁴ Clearly, there was animosity between the Ojibwe wife and Nelson. In most circumstances, it was due to Brunet going with his wife instead of staying behind in the house. Business was delayed and attitudes were rather negative.

Similarly, disagreement over a wife in the XYC led Curot and one of his men to see firsthand the negative effects of Indian involvement. Also early in November in 1803, Smith, a trader of Curot, got into an argument and received wounds as several Indians were jealous of his wife and alleged she “wished, as men have two wives, to have two husbands.”⁶⁵ Whether the Indians took his wife at this time was not exactly clear, as there was no mention of this incident immediately after it took place. Instead, two months later in early January of 1804, the XYC men encountered the same two Indians, one of whom was the wife of Smith. Seeing his wife, Smith was not “in any too good humor.” Likewise, other men became paranoid that their wives would desert them as well.⁶⁶ Two months had passed since Smith came across the Ojibwe wife who appeared to be rightfully his, but was instead with other men. Other men with Curot feared the same fate for their wives, exemplifying the preoccupation with women throughout the company.

While Curot and Nelson were set on their goals of the fur trade and what came along with it, Native wives played a large role in distracting men from the true objective. Thus, it was Native women, among other hostilities, that created a negative impact of the Indians on the fur trade of Folle Avoine.

⁶³ Peers and Schenck, 148.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 139, 140.

⁶⁵ Curot, 11.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 18.

The Fur Trader

The early 1800s congruent with the fur trade had created what many consider a noble profession for French men. At a time when ruggedness and a strong personality were the dominant traits, it was believed that French traders also possessed these characteristics. These men unmistakably carried out gruesome tasks on a daily basis.

Coined “magnificent river rats,” these men thrived in canoes on the river and woodsmen at the trading posts.⁶⁷ These men were to adapt to life, not only in order not only to participate in the fur trading business, but simply to survive the winter season. The men of the NWC and XYC made annual treks from Lake Superior to Forts Folle Avoine and then returned to Grand Portage after the wintering season to rendezvous with fellow company traders.⁶⁸ The trip itself took a significant amount of endurance before and after each trading season.

Likewise, traders were constantly moving in order to trade with the American Indians close by and acquire-food sources. The men were talkative, high in spirits, independent and could “beat all Indians at the race,” to live “better” than the Indians did in the woodlands themselves.⁶⁹

Thus, historians have set quite the precedent for the men that roamed the forests and carried out the fur trade. Not always engaged in trading affairs, but instead overseeing the trade and recording information, NWC and XYC men were not these rugged examples of the unique trader of the time. In many instances, the traders saw themselves as inadequate in dealing with other men and grew tired of the wintering season. This weariness caused issues with alcohol.

⁶⁷ Deseve, 13.

⁶⁸ Burnett County Historical Society, “The Fort,” Folle Avoine Historical Park. <http://theforts.org/> accessed September 16, 2011.

⁶⁹ Carolyn Podruchny, *Making the Voyageur World: Travelers and Traders in the North American Fur Trade* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 10, 11.

Fur trading was a tenuous process that carried over the long wintering season and had clear effects on those involved. Interestingly enough, the founder of the XYC himself, Sir Alexander McKenzie, was shown to have wearing effects of the fur trade. He showed “the price of deep physical exhaustion and of a serious mental depression that was largely the result of the primitive, isolated life he had.”⁷⁰ Travelers would drink alcohol to pass the time and prevent themselves from falling into loneliness or depression. Though McKenzie did not engage with this, one of his employers did, while another merely related that the trading season was a dreadful experience.

The NWC took drastic steps to reduce alcohol consumption by its employees and prevent the distractions that came along with it. Sayer signed papers that condemned drinking by employees, but he, himself, eventually became dependent on alcohol. After moving to Folle Avoine, he drank such high quantities that it was said he acquired the taste of high wines.⁷¹ Sayer took advantage of the system and his post as a trader for the NWC. Even more important, however, was that he stooped to such a low level. Regarded as honest, hardworking men, Sayer added a negative label to the popular notion of fur traders set by historians.

Men were not afraid to note their troubles throughout the trading season. Several days before Nelson would arrive back at Grand Portage for the rendezvous in 1804, he shared his true feelings of his experience of the fur trade. Having “passed a winter, long & tedious, full of trouble, displeasure & anxiety, often starving, seldom a full belly often (indeed I must say always),” Nelson urged that “young people (boys for I was but one then) to remain under

⁷⁰ James K. Smith, *Alexander Mackenzie, Explorer: the Hero Who Failed* (Buffalo: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1973), 117.

⁷¹ Birk, 32.

protection of proper people or their parents ‘till such times as they be really fit.’⁷² Clearly, with the success that the XYC may have had for a short amount of time, Nelson did not get the full experience of the strong, rough trader. While it may have been due to his young age (he was only in his teens when he joined the XYC), this summary of the fur trading season gave a thorough explanation of what traders endured. The fur trade was not a simple task, but a complex occupation that required many facets of the body and mind.

Nowhere was frustration more evident in the fur trade than with the relationships between the traders. Overlapping in not only the Folle Avoine area, but also in time, both Curot and Nelson experienced much of the same animosity within their circle of men, sometimes the same men. Interestingly enough, the men also work with the same man, Smith, in consecutive years and held a rather low regard for him.⁷³ Due to the fact that both clerks had the ability to write and it was their first years of the fur trade, they were given control over men older than themselves. Thus, less than a week after arriving at Folle Avoine, Curot and Smith already had their first fight over rations. Curot believed that Smith was trying “to pick a quarrel” with him, as Smith thought he could get away with extra food.⁷⁴ It was an ineffective attempt by an older trader to take advantage of a younger, more literate man.

No doubt in connection, Curot, noted the next spring his defeat by Smith and another man. With what appeared to be the most justified goals, Curot yearned for new men to work with in order that he “might perhaps succeed in getting done what I wish for the profit of the company. I cannot count on these men for anything, and I distrust them as I would my greatest

⁷² Peers and Schenck, 157.

⁷³ Deseve, 9.

⁷⁴ Curot, 2.

enemies.”⁷⁵ Curot seemed to possess the right of the objectives of the NWC and XYC. Though he was bogged down by the long season, he tried to exemplify the hardworking trader, but could not due to his lack of compromise with his men.

Nelson, likewise, experienced the same, if not greater, troubles with his men, but took the troubles upon him. He blamed himself and his lack of optimism for his men not listening. Similarly, he stated “I am doomed this year to experience almost every kind of trouble proceeding more from my own Childishness & irrissolution (irresolution?) than any other cause altho’ my men are turning from bad to worse every day.”⁷⁶ Here, Nelson went off on another outburst of aspects of life that would not cooperate with him. Unfortunately, his young age and the long wintering season affected his emotions.

Most significantly, Curot and Nelson both represented the paradox to what the French trader was intended to be. Where the canoe trips and woodlands were supposed to turn these men calloused, it was clear that these aspects instead transformed these men into individuals full of regrets and ill experiences.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 33.

⁷⁶ Peers and Schenck, 139, 151.

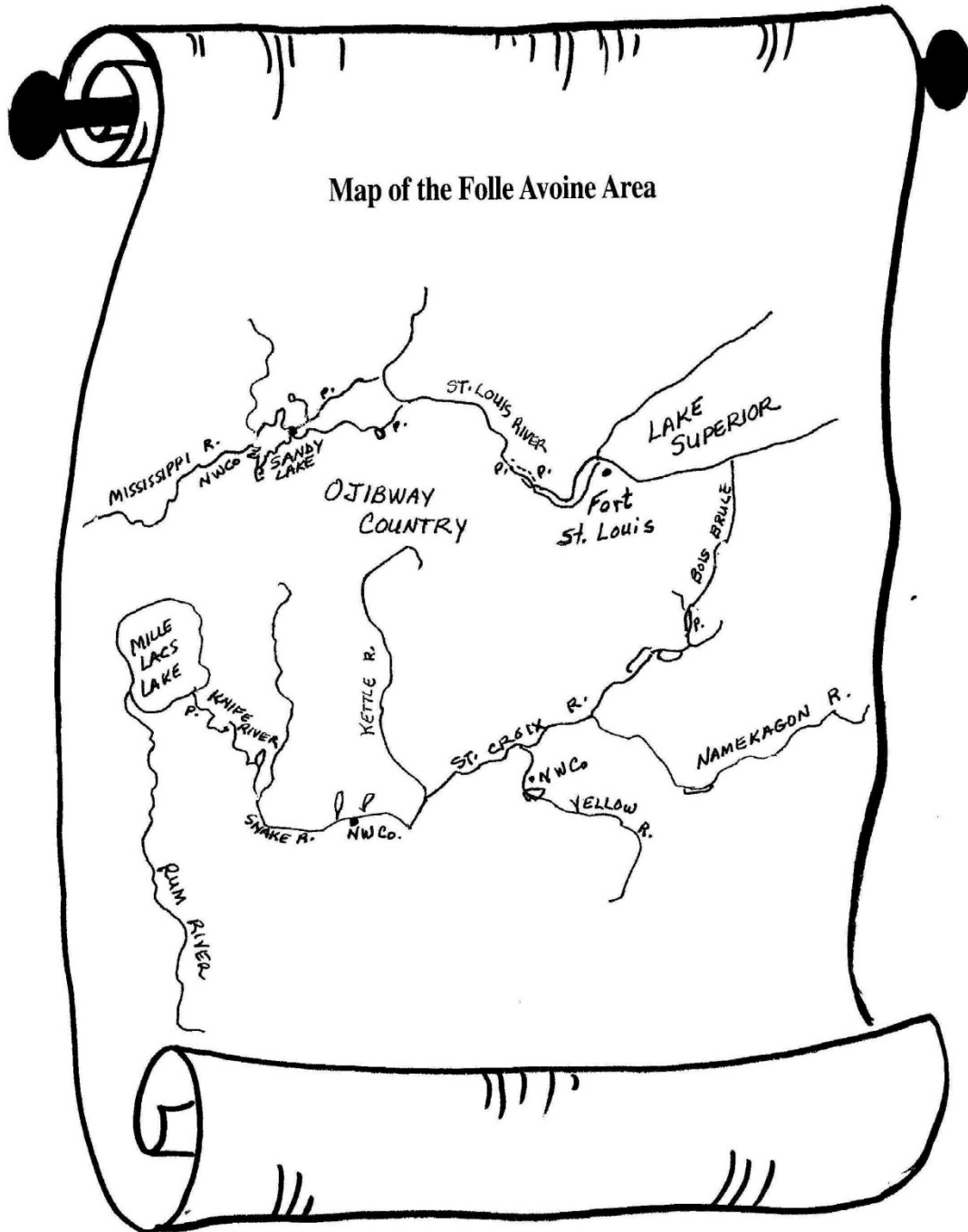
Conclusion

The fur trade was a series of remarkable occurrences when a young nation was still developing. Though changes were rapidly arising in the 1800s around America, the fur trade in the northwest kept its course. Historians have long argued what the fur trade was: a time where Europeans competed against each other, benefitting from American Indian involvement, and creating a hardworking trader. Fort Folle Avoine, however, has allowed contradiction to demonstrate its minor role in the large scope of the fur trade. These paradoxes were largely due to the primary sources of Curot, Nelson, and Sayer in their comparative time and space.

The posts of Folle Avoine hosted two companies that did compete with one another, but also worked together to create a complex relationship in a relative small area around Folle Avoine. These journals from Curot and Nelson also showed that American Indians were not always a key in the fur trade, but got in the way many times and the trader was not the fairy tale hero, but a deprived soul who had suffered from long winters and a unique trade in such an incredible area of Fort Folle Avoine.

Appendix A

An illustration of the Folle Avoine Area.⁷⁷



⁷⁷ Deseve, 6.

Appendix B

Typical look of a beaver pelt hat on a European.⁷⁸



Top Hats were made from
beaver pelts.

⁷⁸ Deseve, 1

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