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The Brothers Robidoux and the Opening of the American West

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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/35c343p6>

Journal

NEW MEXICO HISTORICAL REVIEW, 88(4)

ISSN

0028-6206

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Publication Date

2013

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The Brothers Robidoux and the Opening of the American West. By Robert J. Willoughby. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2012. xiii + 252 pp. 15 halftones, maps, chart, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 cloth, ISBN 978-0-8262-1991-6.)

The adventurous Robidoux brothers “epitomize the spirit of the American West,” glowingly concludes Robert Willoughby (p. 212). The brothers were given to gambling and excessive drinking; some were polygamous and en-gaged in other less than honorable activities. Nonetheless, their contributions to the opening of the American West far outweigh their failings, according to the author. They were explorers, guides, public servants, and town builders. As polyglots, they skillfully wielded multilingual skills and marriages to Indian and Mexican women to their advantage. As risktakers, they were engaged in various kinds of entrepreneurial activities besides fur trading. Self-described as a “merchant and a trader,” Joseph Robidoux III was a veteran of the lower Missouri fur trade and founder of St. Joseph, jumping-off point for the over-land trail (p. 21). He was the family patriarch, directing the far-flung activities of his five younger brothers: Francois, Isadore, Antoine, Louis, and Michel. In the mid-1820s Louis and Antoine expanded trade operations on the Santa Fe Trail, became naturalized Mexican citizens, and established fur-trading posts in the intermountain West. Louis ultimately moved to Southern California and became a major landowner. The other brothers centered their energies on a trading post in the vicinity of Scott’s Bluff at mid-century. In 1971 overland trails expert Merrell Mattes aptly identified the continental wanderings of the Robidoux brothers as a family affair.

This collective biography corrects the historical record. According to Mattes, Joseph Robidoux III’s biographer, the Robidoux family’s contributions to fur trade history have long been underappreciated. The most original part of the book is Willoughby’s insightful chapter on their father, Joseph Robidoux II. An early resident of St. Louis, he was a powerful role model: he adeptly straddled the law and national allegiances—as well as relations with multiple women—and was a tenacious and resourceful competitor in the late eighteenth-century fur trade. *The Brothers Robidoux* adds weight to Jay Gitlin’s recent argument in *The Bourgeois Frontier* (2010) about the

significance of St. Louis's entrepreneurial middling class to the history of the Trans-Mississippi West. Like the Chouteaus, the Robidouxes were venture capitalists. Unfortunately, Willoughby is the victim of his sparse sources. Though the book is reasonably well-researched, Willoughby is unable to elaborate on the brothers' individual personalities, changing fortunes, or family lives. This is frustrating for those who might expect more from the book's title. Other biographers are more precise and discriminating in sifting through the historical record and clearer in their interpretations. *The Brothers Robidoux* includes no new biographical information.

Willoughby's inclusion of many lengthy direct quotations from primary sources provides some compensation for his dearth of sources. Setting the brothers' activities against the well-known events of the Missouri fur trade as it expanded into the Rocky Mountains, the book is as much a synthesis of the fur trade as it is a collective biography. As such, it has a dated quality, reprising the actions of the era's reckless breed of men. The book also suffers from multiple typographic errors, inconsistencies in spelling, conjectures, and occasional misdirection.

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