“Liquor Has Been Their Undoing”
Liquor Trafficking and Alcohol Abuse in the Lower Missouri Fur Trade

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In his classic fictional work *Tom Sawyer*, Mark Twain created a character, Injun Joe, who has made an indelible imprint on American popular thought. Injun Joe personifies the archetypal “half-breed”: an outcast with a penchant for drunkenness and violence. In Twain’s day, the half-breed was an apt symbol to excite fear, for he was a person living on the margin of white society but uncontrolled by its conventions and therefore unpredictable. Twain’s Injun Joe mirrored the earlier characterization of Paul Wilhelm, Duke of Württemberg, who had traveled up the Missouri River in 1823: “Given to immoderate drinking,” he wrote, the “half-bloods are generally not regarded very highly, but their behavior rather than their color is the reason.” Württemberg viewed mixed-bloods as a species of frontier people who lived outside the moral restraints of society and were, therefore, dangerous both to Indians and whites. This stereotype of the drunken half-breed has persisted into the present day, in part because it does have some historical basis. As with any stereotype, however, it reveals a cryptic element of truth, while veiling a more complex reality. The stereotype distorts by generalizing, since biracial people were not a unified or uniform group in the past, any more than they are today.

Persons of mixed French and Indian ancestry—the métis—were an integral and sizable part of the fur trading communities that developed along waterways from the Old Northwest to the Missouri River in the eighteenth century. For the most part, the métis descended from French fur trappers and traders, who had married Indian women to form economic and political alliances with their tribes, or from unions between more sedentary French Creoles and Indian slaves or Catholicized Indians. Before the fur trade economy declined, the métis were far from a marginalized people. Individuals of varying ability, character, and cultural orientation, they blended into the populations of the racially—and ethnically—diverse communities on the fur trading frontier.

Well into the nineteenth century, biracial and bicultural persons made up a highly valued part of the labor force as interpreters, boatmen, hunters, and go-betweens in commercial transactions with the Indians. As Washington Irving (drawing on the notes of the Overland Astorian Wilson Price Hunt) observed about St. Louis in 1810: “The old French houses engaged in the Indian trade had gathered round them a train of dependents, mongrel Indians and mongrel Frenchmen, who had intermarried with Indians. These they employed in their various expeditions by land and water.”

After the War of 1812, the métis were marginalized within the span of one short generation due to the influx of Anglo-Americans into St. Louis and the concomitant changes in the area’s economic base and social milieu. However, the French fur trading families and their mixed-blood retainers did not passively accept their displacement; rather, they struggled to adapt to the new conditions while attempting to perpetuate a way of life whose foundation was the Indian trade. They expanded their trading and trapping activities into new areas in the West and continued to marry into Indian tribes to gain advantages and privileges. Yet peltry resources diminished along the lower Missouri River in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, and survival became more difficult for everyone dependent on the fur trade: Indian peoples, French Creoles, and mixed-bloods trying to ply their traditional trades as hunters, engagés (employees), and go-betweens.

Intense competition for an increasingly limited number of furs promoted the rise in alcohol trafficking among trappers, traders, and Indians. Humble, independent traders with little capital used small quantities of liquor to gain a meager profit by luring Indians to trade with them instead of the major outfits. Larger, better capitalized partnerships similarly found it necessary to use alcohol to keep their winter credits from being stolen by opportunistic rivals; these larger companies also reduced the high overhead on ventures deep into the Indian country by selling alcohol to their engagés. As Annie Heloise Abel observed long ago: “Contesting any and every advance up the Missouri” and each pretension to exclusive control of its peltry.

**Facing:** Fur Traders Descending the Missouri. *Oil on canvas, by George Caleb Bingham, ca. 1845. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Morris K. Jesup Fund, 1933 (33.61), © 1988 by the Metropolitan Museum of Art.*
the liquor trade, which reached epidemic proportions in the late 1830s. The saturation of the Missouri River Valley with alcohol was a tragic by-product of rapid economic, political, demographic, and cultural changes on the frontier for the interrelated French Creoles, French-Indian mixed-bloods, and the lower Missouri full-bloods.

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Fur trade operations up the Missouri River expanded dramatically from 1820 to 1840, and with this expansion, many persons relocated permanently to upriver trading-post communities. Fur traders—particularly Anglo-American fur trappers—are customarily thought of as having advanced into uncharted regions of the trans-Mississippi West motivated by "pull" factors—the restless spirit of adventure, the quest for freedom from social restraint, and the drive for material success. Equally important to the French Creole and métis movement westward up the Missouri River, however, were "push" factors, or unsettling conditions that spurred out-migration.

The War of 1812 brought a marked increase in racial prejudice to St. Louis. The fear of Indian attack during the war was a major catalyst for racial hostility towards both full- and mixed-bloods. Reports of Indian massacres appeared frequently in the Missouri Gazette, often accompanied by racist comments. In response, wealthy French-speaking families—the Prattes, Cerres, and Gratiots—who a generation before had fraternized with mixed-bloods, began anxiously cultivating reputations of gentility, "good breeding and good blood." Their new conservative attitude towards race mixing gained support with the arrival of refugee nobility from the French Revolution and plantation owners from the Santo Domingo rebellion. Stigmatized in this conservative climate, many members of formerly prominent mixed-blood lineages, who had historically occupied middle-rung positions because of their ties to Indian elites, resolved to move upriver where their kinship with Indians was an advantage rather than an embarrassment.

Another obvious impetus for the fur trade's rapid expansion on the Missouri River after 1812—fed by the out-migration of French Creoles and mixed-
bloods—was the declining social status of St. Louis’ French Creole families. As Anglo-Americans took over jobs as skilled artisans and merchants and moved into positions of civic leadership, even the sons of prominent families were unable to retain work that appropriately reflected their social status. For example, Auguste P. Chouteau (or A. P. Chouteau), eldest son of Pierre Chouteau, Sr., found himself in financial difficulty after an unsuccessful attempt at storekeeping. Many of the second-generation Robidoux, Chouteaus, and Papins chose to live in the Indian country rather than struggle for social and economic position in St. Louis.7

The humbler class of French Creoles and mixed-bloods also showed signs of economic and social distress. Common problems included loss of land holdings, indebtedness, tension with employers, family problems, alcoholism, and broken contracts. Those who owned land under the old Spanish grants had been allowed to retain their property under American rule, and some managed to capitalize on the rise in land values. Most, however, were unaccustomed to the burden of city and county taxes and surcharges for leveling and paving the streets. French surnames predominated in the Notices of lands being sold for taxes in the 1810s, 1820s, and 1830s.8

Although eking out a living in more sedentary occupations grew increasingly difficult, the opportunity still existed for seasonal employment in transportation and trade. Indeed, St. Louis was the hub of a vast commercial network. As late as 1828, when steamboats had absorbed most of the river traffic along the Mississippi, 110 keelboats arrived in St. Louis via the Missouri, and in 1830, the number totaled 91. Each keelboat taking cargo up the treacherous Missouri required twenty to forty boatmen. Well into the nineteenth century, the French Creole settlers in St. Charles and St. Louis continued to find seasonal employment as boatmen, trappers, and traders, just as they had in the previous century under Spanish rule. The availability of a large, youthful labor pool in the 1820s and 1830s was one of the important reasons fur trading activity expanded so rapidly on the lower Missouri in the second quarter of the nineteenth century.

Despite the demand for labor in transportation and trade, low wages and certain employer practices meant that engagés had a difficult time supporting their families. “The French spend the spring, summer and fall on the river, finding thus their only means of support,” wrote Father Peter Verhaegen to his superior in 1827. “During their absence, their wives almost perish of hunger and are often without decent dress, whilst the children are in a miserable state. When the voyageurs return, a mass of debts contracted during their absence has to be paid.”9

The fur traders deliberately kept their engagés in a state of debt peonage. At the commencement of a journey, an engagé received a suit of clothing and his equipment, for which he owed a sizable percentage of his wages; once he entered Indian country, any goods that he might need or want—particularly liquor—were greatly marked up from St. Louis prices. His life was physically difficult and, in the case of the wintering engagé, lonely, occasionally dangerous, and often boring and tedious. In the remote posts in the Indian country there was little to do but drink, and alcohol consumption was so heavy that an engagé rarely returned from a voyage with much to show for his efforts. Weighed under by debts, he was thereby obligated to give his services to the same trader for the next season.
View of the American Fur Company Post at Fond Du Lac (Minnesota). Hand-colored lithograph, ca. 1827. This post was typical of the establishments of the fur trading outfits of the upper Mississippi basin that traded with the Iowas and the Sac and Fox. From Thomas L. McKinney, Sketches of A Tour of the Lakes (Baltimore, 1827). Missouri Historical Society Photograph and Print Collection.

Evidence of this system of debt peonage is found in the St. Louis newspapers, which every week, along with notices of land sales for taxes, reported the names of jailed persons—including numerous French-Indian mixed-bloods—who planned to apply for dispensation under the territory’s insolvent debtor act of 1807, which would absolve them from their past debts and allow them to begin anew. In a letter to the Missouri Gazette in July 1809, the prominent trader James Clamorgan criticized the insolvent debtor bill for disrupting longstanding fur trading practices. Under the Spanish administration, he wrote, two-thirds of an engage’s wages had been devoted to paying any previous debts to his employer. As long as he remained in debt, he owed his employer his labor. The new law released the engage from the cycle of indebtedness and enabled him to negotiate a fairer price for his services. Clamorgan complained that this would lead to abuses. The work of the boatmen, daily laborers, and hunters had “always been considered... as part of the profits” which “of right belong[ed] to his creditors.”

Deprived of their former means of securing cheap labor by this new law, traders increasingly relied on liberal distribution of alcohol to attract and maintain engagés. An excellent example of this practice comes from the journals of John Bradbury and Henry M. Brackenridge, who witnessed the rivalry between the Missouri Company and the Overland Astorians, an expedition to the Columbia River financed by John Jacob Astor’s American Fur Company. In 1810, the Missouri Company, whose principal partners were Joshua Pilcher and Manuel Lisa, engaged Pierre Dorion, Jr., a mixed-blood Yankton, as an interpreter for the Missouri Company. In their employ, Dorion wintered at Fort Mandan, where he drank the company’s overpriced, watered-down liquor. Late
that year or early the next, Dorion returned to St. Louis where Wilson Price Hunt hired him for the Overland Astorian expedition. Lisa protested that Dorion was indebted to him for the liquor he had consumed at Fort Mandan and was not free to engage himself to anyone else. In order to take the valuable interpreter with them, the Astorians slipped out of the city secretly. Lisa's boats pursued the brigade up the Missouri and managed to overtake them. Lisa invited Dorion for a drink, tried to persuade him to return to his employ, then threatened him when he refused. In the ensuing fracas, Lisa ran for his pistols and might have injured Dorion if Bradbury and Brackenridge had not interceded. Dorion continued with the Hunt party, only to lose his life in that ill-fated venture to the Oregon country.12

Traders such as Lisa thus actively encouraged alcohol abuse among mixed-blood intermediaries and other Creole employees to reduce labor costs and retain valuable employees. Tavern owners, merchants, and distillery operators also eagerly sought to profit from the engagés' and voyageurs' taste for liquor. Excessive drinking was habitual, highly ritualized, and part of the fabric of social life. After a trip, boatmen rarely tarried at the docks when they arrived in St. Louis, but climbed the steep roadway from the river to the nearby taverns where they enjoyed a convivial social atmosphere as well as liquid refreshment. Run by old Creole trading families and catering to French-Canadians, Creoles, and mixed-bloods, these taverns became places where engagés were recruited for voyages, with drunken binges both before and after long trips a standard practice. Tavern-keepers kept men drinking late into the night before a voyage, knowing that the expedition leader would have to pay the bill to retrieve his crew for the morning’s departure.13

The strain of excessive drinking and indebtedness bred numerous legal and social problems, according to newspapers and missionary accounts. Some engagés, reacting with hostility towards employers, deserted from trading voyages, taking company property with them. Wives abandoned their husbands, husbands abandoned wives, and the long absences of men on voyages left families in want and children without adequate parental control.14 Mother Philippine Duchesne was shocked at the license and alcohol abuse among the people of St. Charles when she arrived there in the late 1810s. In practically all of the villages, she reported in 1819, "every household has its drunkards."15 And at one time, she reported, the streets were filled with "girls scantily clad, holding a bottle of whiskey in one hand and a man in the other, dancing every day of the year and never doing any work."16

Duchesne and other Catholic missionaries viewed the problems in the Creole communities as the result of the men's itinerant occupation: "The men who go up the Missouri and the Mississippi for five or six hundred leagues to trade for furs and skins with the Indians bring back loose morals, a passion for gain, and savage ways," Mother Duchesne wrote in March 1820.17 A few years later Father Verhaegen doubted that spiritual progress was possible in such communities: "For if, according to the old saw, occasion makes the thief, here navigation makes the devil."18

The classic account of the Duke of Württemberg's 1823 voyage bears ample testimony to Creole discontents and the ill-effects of encouraging the habitual use of alcohol among engagés (of whom mixed-bloods constituted a significant

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number). This voyage of scientific discovery was arranged by the French Fur Company of St. Louis, which operated from 1822 to 1826 (also known as Pratte and Company or Pratte, Chouteau, and Company, for its principal partners). 19 The company was composed of wealthy persons of French ancestry—Bartholomew Berthold, Pierre Chouteau, Jr., Jean Pierre Cabanné, and Bernard Pratte—who had pooled their resources to challenge Lisa and Pilcher's Missouri Company.

The German aristocrat's trip experienced repeated delays owing to the drunken debauches of his insolent and disobedient crew as his boat toiled up the Missouri from St. Louis to Fort Recovery. Uncontrolled by the patrone Dutremble, some crew members deserted, taking company property with them. After four blacks replaced the deserters, progress resumed but was agonizingly slow. The boatmen gambled with their daily whiskey rations, then begged for more. Württemberg extracted a promise of good behavior in return for an extra liquor ration, but to no avail. The boatmen obtained more alcohol at the settlements of Franklin, Jefferson City, and Liberty. When they spotted several kegs of whiskey floating in the debris along the river—a windfall from a boat wreck—more drunken binges ensued. Once drunk, the boatmen became quarrelsome and violent. One mixed-blood suffered a stab wound in a drunken melee, and Württemberg described another as alcoholic, useless, and diseased. 20 Württemberg was not the only traveler to experience difficulty with an inebriated and troublesome crew. Three years earlier, David Meriwether of the federal government's abortive Yellowstone expedition had had a similar experience traveling up the Missouri: the crew was near mutiny; they drank, played cards, and flirted with disaster by setting a candle on a keg of gunpowder. 21

Whatever the complex causes for their proneness to drink and violence—opportunity, habit, the harshness of their lives, the physical inability to process alcohol, lack of institutional controls to curb excesses, or paternal role models who purveyed liquor to Indians and drank heavily themselves—the mixed-bloods set a bad example for full-blood Indians. "They may be regarded as one of the main causes of the decay of the Indians," asserted Württemberg. 22

Sharing the nobleman's judgment of the pernicious influence of mixed-bloods was Joshua Pilcher, a Missouri Fur Company trader. He testified in 1824 before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs that no white or half-breed raised among whites should be allowed to reside in Indian Country. 23

While Württemberg's and Pilcher's disapproval may have partially sprung from a concern for the well-being of full-blood Indians, it undoubtedly was heightened by the recognition that mixed-bloods enjoyed considerable power as intermediaries to promote their own interests at the expense of those whom they were supposed to be serving as go-betweens. 24 Württemberg's unpleasant experiences with the French-Iowa mixed-blood interpreter, Louis Dorion, illustrates the opportunity guides had to use their positions for their own advantage. Dorion, his half-brother, Pierre, Jr., and other siblings were highly sought-after go-betweens because of their knowledge of many Siouan and Caddoan dialects. They were also heavy drinkers. 25 When Württemberg met Louis Dorion, the mixed-blood was of mature age (in his forties or fifties) and serving as the interpreter at Fort Atkinson. There he had acquired a reputation for double-dealing. 26 While working for a party of mule traders, he had privately alerted the Otoes that his employers carried whiskey, which they intended to offer as payment for Pawnee mules. The motives for Dorion's action are unclear: he may simply have wanted to force the traders' hospitality to satisfy his own craving for liquor, or he may have wanted to ingratiate himself with the Otoes to further some personal financial ambition, as Württemberg intimated. At any rate, Dorion succeeded in stirring up trouble between the Otoes and the mule traders. The Otoes continually pestered the traders with demands for drink and accused them of showing favoritism towards the Pawnee. By arousing these jealousies, Dorion threatened the progress of the party and magnified his own power as an intermediary. Only the timely intercession of another interpreter, wrote Württemberg, prevented the "malicious projects of the half-blood." 27

As the foregoing examples attest—and the journals of early nineteenth-century fur traders on the Missouri River corroborate—alcohol was in abundant, even overabundant, supply; the expedi-
tion leader, or the bourgeois, used it rather cynically to reduce labor costs, to monopolize the labor of bilingual intermediaries, and to gain entrepreneurial advantages against competitors. Such practices had corrupted the work force, among whom alcoholism had reached alarming levels by the early 1820s. Fur trade employees, in turn, set a bad example for full-blood Indians.

The corrosive effect of habitual and excessive drinking on the Indian peoples of the lower Missouri River became increasingly apparent by the 1820s. Though alcohol was a contraband item in the Indian trade, both the fur traders and the government legally brought large quantities of liquor upriver ostensibly for consumption by non-Indians at the posts and garrisons. The full-bloods had little difficulty obtaining the coveted item from traders or through mixed-blood intermediaries in the early years of the nineteenth century. The Otoes, Missouris, Iowas, and particularly the Omahas were "much addicted" to alcohol, or so observed Edwin James, who accompanied Stephen Long to the Rocky Mountains in 1820. Indian subagent John Dougherty explained to James that initially gifts of whiskey had served exclusively as ceremonial preludes to trade or treaty negotiations, but the Indians had learned that the steep competition between traders gave them leverage in acquiring the desired commodity; if whiskey was not proffered by one trader, they merely had to threaten to take their peltries elsewhere.

**Top:** Fort Atkinson. Photograph of a drawing. This fort was the Indian agency for the tribes near Council Bluffs, where fur trading companies established many posts. Missouri Historical Society Photograph and Print Collection.

**Bottom:** Pipe with Indian holding keg on his knees. Catlinite with lead inlay. Plains Indian cultures produced a number of artifacts, such as this pipe, which demonstrated the pervasiveness of the liquor trade. Santee Sioux, ca. 1838. American Museum of Natural History.
Pipe showing a chief offering liquor to a follower. Catline with lead inlay. Liquor distribution could be used to enhance personal honor. Santee Sioux, pre-1841. Catalogue No. 2622, Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution.

Highly competitive trade conditions along the lower Missouri River precluded the possibility of effectively enforcing the ban on liquor, and nowhere was this more graphically illustrated than in the vicinity of Council Bluffs, which by the late 1830s had acquired the invidious distinction of being the “Whiskey Capitol of the West.” By 1823, the year of Württemberg’s visit, many people, stimulated by both push and pull factors, had migrated there from the St. Louis area in search of employment. With the increased population many new channels opened for the distribution of alcohol.

Positioned favorably for trading activity, Council Bluffs occupied a site on the west side of the Missouri. Here the traders enjoyed a central location for trading with the Platte River Pawnee, the Oto-Missouris on the Platte River to the south, the Omahas, then residing on Omaha Creek to the north, and the itinerant Iowa and Sac and Fox bands, who hunted on the rivers flowing into the Missouri from the east. For decades, until the nineteenth century brought the establishment of more permanent posts, French traders had kept wintering posts in this vicinity. After the War of 1812, Manuel Lisa built Fort Lisa two miles north of Boyer Creek for the Missouri Fur Company. His principal competitor, the French Fur Company, erected its Otoe post six miles below his fort; Joseph Robidoux served as bourgeois here until his partner, Jean Pierre Cabanné, replaced him in the fall of 1823. Many temporary and semi-permanent trading stations sprang up near Council Bluffs, for it was a focal point of activity. The government established Fort Atkinson nearby as well as an Indian agency for the Otoe, Omaha, and Pawnee at Bellevue below Council Bluffs. The bourgeois of each post married into the families of Indian elites as an expedient way of securing the trade loyalties of local tribes, and around each of these posts congregated fluid populations of mixed-bloods, St. Louis Creoles, and French-Canadians, along with their Indian mates and children.30

Competition for local resources by St. Louis–based companies was already keen by 1820; employees’ and local tribespeoples’ taste for spirituous liquors was also well-established. As economic pressure intensified in the 1820s, when the momentum of the Sac, Fox, and Iowa hunting patterns carried the American Fur Company’s Illinois outfit westward, the problem of alcohol abuse intensified. As the Sacs, Foxes and Iowas steadily and aggressively encroached on lands used by the Otoe, Missouri, Omaha, Kansas, and Yanktons, Mississippi traders such as mixed-blood Maurice Blondeau also moved westward to collect the peltries due them for goods the American Fur Company had advanced to the Sac and Fox, and Iowas on credit.31 With new tribes moving into the territory to hunt and new traders challenging established outfits for trading rights, the fur trade on the lower Missouri in the vicinity of Council Bluffs saw fierce competition throughout the 1820s and early 1830s.32 French traders jockeyed for entrepreneurial advantage by continually shifting partnerships, trafficking in alcohol, and marrying into Indian groups.

Desperate to recoup his own personal fortune, Jean Pierre Cabanné vowed to produce a profit for the French Fur Company when he arrived at his post near Council Bluffs in late 1823. His post was supposed to engross the Otoe and Omaha beaver trade and serve as an outfitting station and warehouse for the upriver posts. With these objectives in mind, Cabanné entered negotiations for an arrangement with Pilcher’s Missouri Fur Company not to usurp each other’s trade. Cabanné’s competitors at the
bluffs included the Missouri Fur Company’s Lucien Fontenelle, who was married to the daughter of Big Elk (the Omaha head chief), and Andrew Dripps, who later also married an Otoe woman.\textsuperscript{33} The truce did not hold, and Fontenelle and Cabanné soon exchanged accusations of duplicity.

Despite its superior capitalization and the kin connections of its chief traders, the French Fur Company’s Otoe posts ran at a loss—save the exceptional year 1828—and the Nebraska and Iowa trade was never secure. In his correspondence, the proud Cabanné expressed bafflement and frustration over his unspectacular returns. He complained of competitors trafficking in alcohol. He was understaffed, he said,

\textbf{Below:} Bellevue Agency, Post of Major Dougherty. Watercolor on paper, by Karl Bodmer, 1833. The variety of Indians and traders Bodmer shows in this depiction of John Dougherty’s Indian agency at Bellevue, close to Council Bluffs and south of present-day Omaha, gives a flavor of everyday life on the fur frontier. Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha.

\textbf{Above:} Map of the Western Territory, 1835. Note the tribal boundaries marked on this map. Missouri Historical Society Library.
Captain Walker or A Bourgeois and His Squaw. Watercolor on paper, by Alfred Jacob Miller, ca. 1837. Owners of fur trading companies, known as the bourgeois, frequently married Indian women to cement alliances with trading partners. Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha.

and the high wages of those engagés who did work for him cut into profits. He blamed clerks for being inexperienced, careless, or incompetent and lamented the loss of furs through incorrect packing, weather damage, and boat accidents. He also blamed poor hunts and over-extended credit for his losses. All of these complaints point not only to the growing scarcity of valuable peltries, but also to the serious difficulties Cabanné had in managing his labor force effectively. A number of Creoles and mixed-bloods were ambitiously engaged in independent action. Thus, those interpreters working for Cabanné had to be tolerated, even if "drunken" or "lazy," for fear that they would defect or influence the Indians, by means of "whiskey and lying," to take their peltries to an opposition company.

Using the twin practices of liquor trafficking and intermarriage with Indian bands, entrepreneurs with little
capital had turned the trade to their advantage. The most serious challenge for the Iowa and Nebraska trade came from the old fur trading families accustomed to high-ranking positions in the trade hierarchy. Prominent among these rivals were two former employees of the French Fur Company, Joseph Robidoux and Jean Baptiste Roy. Like many other clerks and wintering traders, Robidoux and Roy found that they could best advance their careers by trading alcohol and creating a highly successful opposition, forcing the Chouteau interests to rehire them at desirable positions and salaries.36

Cabanné hated Joseph Robidoux, whom he vilified in his correspondence. Ultimately, however, even Cabanné admitted that a settlement was necessary between the French Fur Company and Robidoux.37 What the French Fur Company, under the leadership of Pratte, Chouteau, and Cabanné, wished to avoid at all costs was the unification of the opposition, that is, Pilcher’s Missouri Fur Company, the Robidoux brothers, and Etienne Provost, a wide-ranging independent trapper.

Pierre Chouteau, Jr., and his associates needed to strengthen their position at Council Bluffs and saw three ways of doing so: they could use liquor in the trade, offer better quality and cheaper merchandise, or absorb competitors through mergers. The French Fur Company appeared to resist the temptation to distribute liquor in favor of the latter two options during the 1820s, though whether this reflected a wise and honorable business practice, simple expediency, or fear of prosecution is unclear. The practice of selling whiskey to boatmen and wintering engagés as a means of reducing labor costs could lead to some undesirable consequences, as the French Fur Company partners were well aware. Drunkenness often ran counter to the owner’s interests: under the influence of alcohol crews deserted or became rebellious or ineffectual, traders got the worst of the deals with Indians, and frolics turned into violent episodes. In 1829, at the mouth of the Kaw, an intoxicated keelboat pilot, Baptiste Datchurut (an interpreter and free black who had married an Indian woman) sunk an entire cargo of valuable Chouteau furs.38 Thus, despite his partner Cabanné’s repeated protestations that the opposition companies were gain-

In 1826, Ramsay Crooks, John Jacob Astor’s right-hand man, effected a long-desired merger, and the American Fur Company absorbed the French Fur Company (Pratte, Chouteau, and Cabanné). Reaction to this news in St. Louis was swift. Robidoux, who was not given a position in the reorganized company, joined his brother Michel, Jean Baptiste Roy, and Roy’s brother Louis in opposition to the American Fur Company in Nebraska. Outmaneuvered by the Roy-Robidoux partnership during the next two years,40 Cabanné decided to extend a great deal of merchandise to the Otoes, Mahas, and Iowas to obtain their peltries, though he feared that he might be falling into a trap laid by Robidoux, who would offer whiskey to the Indians receiving these goods on credit and abscond with the peltries promised the American Fur Company. Cabanné admitted to Chouteau that he was taking a great risk but reasoned that not giving credits would destroy the company. To combat the Roy-Robidoux competition by distributing drink as they did was abhorrent: “I confess, I would have felt humiliated to see myself on the same level as men already sullied and stained in public opinion,” wrote Cabanné.41

Still, the American Fur Company’s stand against using liquor and Robidoux’s triumph in the winter trade frustrated Cabanné. Although the American Fur Company also had a good season, Cabanné unleashed a chain of invective against Robidoux, calling him “truly wicked, cunning, cheating and a rogue.” Cabanné’s indignation reached its peak when Robidoux audaciously offered to sell his rich harvest in opossum and beaver—which Cabanné considered the AFC’s by right—to the American Fur Company at St. Louis prices. The choice, as Cabanné saw it, was to face another rough year of competition or to give Robidoux the Otoe and Iowa trade as a way of keeping him from interfering in the American Fur Company’s trade with other tribes.42 Facing the prospect of diminishing returns for their efforts, Roy and Robidoux arrived at a financial settlement with Cabanné in the fall of 1828. Robidoux received $3,500 for his outfit and a guaranteed salary of $1,000 annu-
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The Steamboat Yellow Stone. Watercolor on paper, by Karl Bodmer, 1833. Liquor carried by the Yellow Stone on one of its Missouri River trips was confiscated after a tip from a rival fur trading firm, much to the embarrassment of the American Fur Company. Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha.

ally for two years. "If Robidoux keeps his promises," Cabanné wrote in relief to Pierre Chouteau, Jr., there "will be no competition for two years." The next year, the American Fur Company's Otoe post paid Robidoux $7,041.83 for his unused merchandise, which included, significantly, twenty-seven gallons of whiskey and gin.  

Cabanné's sense of security over controlling his rivals was short-lived. Competition quickly arose from another source when P. D. Papin organized a new group known simply as the French Company. "If it were not for that miserable whiskey, the luck of our disloyal former clerks would be reduced to very little," Cabanné bitterly remarked to Chouteau in 1829.

The pattern repeated itself again and again on the Missouri River. Defecting clerks with Indian kin connections competed with the dominant American Fur Company in order to force it to come to terms with them. And they made up for their lesser capital and poorer quality goods by using liquor to take peltries promised the AFC. Though officially adopting a policy against the use of spirituous liquors under Ramsay Crooks' strong and effective leadership, certain frustrated individual American Fur Company traders also eventually succumbed to the practice. Traders within the American Fur Company even competed with each other for peltries using alcohol. In the late 1820s, for example, Cabanné, at the Otoe establishment, and D. D. Mitchell, at the Iowa post in the Blacksnake Hills, exchanged accusations of stealing each other's trade and selling liquor to the Indians.

In the 1830s the depletion of peltry resources promised to bring an end to the liquor trade, as the economic base for the trade could no longer support the competing companies. Intertribal warfare also interfered with the fur trade on the lower Missouri. In one instance, the Sac-Fox leader Keokuk held a council on the Elkhorn River in early 1828 with the Otoes, threatening to kill any Otoes or Omahas who hunted on the eastern side of the Missouri, which he claimed...
belonged to the Sacs, Foxes, and Iowas. In the winter of 1828-29, war erupted between the Omahas and the Iowas and between the Yanktons and the Sacs, precipitated by the joining of Iowa and Sac bands to hunt for beaver on land along the Republican River belonging to one of the Pawnee divisions. The following fall, hostilities broke out between the Sacs and Pawnees. Around that time, Indian agent John F. Hamtramck noted the rise in the spirit of militarism among the Missouri tribes: “Every sense, Song, and discourse, with them, is evidently intended, and calculated to root more deeply in the bosom of their youths the love of that Sanguinary life.”

Ironically, however, when the government—at the insistence of American Fur Company traders—attempted to restore peace among the Mississippi and Missouri tribes in Iowa and Nebraska, they provided further financial incentives to the liquor traffickers. The 1830 Treaty of Prairie du Chien, like an earlier 1825 treaty, was intended to restore peace among tribes by settling boundary disputes in the contested western Iowa game reserves, where several tribes hunted but did not maintain permanent residence. The tribes ceding hunting rights were given annuities, and the government put into effect its plan to move emigrant tribes from east of the Mississippi River into the ceded area. The annuities temporarily gave those Indians party to the Prairie du Chien treaty a sense of security, but the situation far from warranted it; the payments were insufficient to prevent starvation given the depleted game and the diminished ranges to which the tribes were restricted, especially once emigrant tribes from the east settled in the area and began hunting as well.

The timing of the annuity payments to the tribes around Council Bluffs spelled catastrophe for yet another reason: during the previous ten years an infrastructure for the supply and distribution of alcohol had been steadily evolving. The free-flowing alcohol and easy money (with profits running from 200 to 400 percent) were too seductive for most people to resist—from the competing company bourgeois with capital to the discontented clerks and engagés, the underemployed and dislocated Creoles, and the bilingual and biracial intermediaries—especially in the face of a collapsing fur trade economy. More or less addicted to alcohol themselves, they readily took

Joseph Robidoux (1783-1868). Carte de visite, ca. 1860. Robidoux, also the founder of St. Joseph, Missouri, was a prominent figure in the trading wars waged among St. Louis-based fur companies. Missouri Historical Society Photograph and Print Collection.
In 1844, the mixed-blood interpreter Jeffrey Dorion accompanied fourteen members of the Iowa tribe on a tour of Europe. In this lithograph Dorion is shown standing behind one of the Iowas, a medicine man known as "The Doctor," translating the Indian's address to a London audience. Engraving by George Catlin, 1844. From Catlin's Notes on Eight Years' Travels and Residence in Europe, with His North American Indian Collection, 3d ed. (London, 1848), vol. 2. Missouri Historical Society Library.

their places in the multi-linked chain that led from distillery owners to full-bloods. Tougher laws against selling liquor went largely unheeded, and the emigrant and indigenous tribespeople in the vicinity of Council Bluffs had little problem acquiring liquor, which was brewed in Missouri just across the border from Indian Territory and smuggled upriver on steamboats or smaller vessels.51

The licensed traders, Creole engagés, and mixed-bloods who had a right to travel and reside in the Indian country formed components in the alcohol distribution network. In the mid-1830s, Indian agent John Dougherty of Fort Leavenworth, who was well-versed on conditions in his district, claimed that three-fourths of the traders were smuggling whiskey.52 Jean Baptiste Roy and his mixed-blood Iowa son, Jean Baptiste, for example, were among the scores of traders and biracial middlemen engaged in the lucrative liquor traffic that caused such trouble for the American Fur Company. In 1834, the senior Roy had a license to trade with the Iowas and Sacs of Missouri, as well as the Otoes, Omahas, and Pawnees. He put up a $2,000 bond, stated his capital as $3,732.84, employed six men, and continued to use whiskey to gain the advantage. "Whiskey he always has in abundance," wrote Joseph Robidoux, who had returned to the trade and taken over his old Blacksnake Hills post for the American Fur Company.53 Roy was drunk, in January 1834, when he entered Robidoux's establishment and tried to thrash its employees. In response, Robidoux gloated over the damage that Roy's three-day binge was causing to his health. Although Roy's fortunes, if not his health, did suffer decline, he was still a formidable challenge to the American Fur Company's trade in the winter of 1835-36.54

An anecdote related by Joseph Robidoux's son, Julius, illustrates how Roy's trade harmed the Indians during the 1830s by contributing to their alcohol abuse. Julius recalled that in 1836 he attended a big war dance of three hundred Otoe and Iowa Indians at Roy's trading post, a mile and a half from St. Joseph. As the Indians danced frantically, inebriated with liquor supplied by Roy, Francis Tayon (Roy's brother-in-law and the father of mixed-blood progeny) ordered his own nose cut off.55 Samuel Allis, a Protestant missionary to the Iowa, confirmed Roy's reputation for heavy drinking and supplying Indians with alcohol. Sometimes Roy, his Indian wife, and Otoe to whom he had given liquor would become so intoxicated that they would "pitch and roll on the bed and floor, howling like demons from the bottomless pit. This was a despicable way of procuring the Indian's trade, the missionary thought.56 Similarly, Robidoux came into criticism from missionaries, both Protestant and Catholic, who visited his establishment. They disapproved of what they considered his moral laxity and debasement, which included polygamous arrangements and gambling as well as heavy drinking. Ramsay Crooks, who tried to maintain high moral standards for the American Fur Company, repeatedly expressed his annoyance with both Roy and Robidoux in the late 1830s.57

Jeffrey Dorion, an "impudent" half black, half Otoe interpreter, also plagued the American Fur Company with his opposition. Raised among the Iowa (he was related to trader François Dorion, no
relation to the Pierre Dorion lineage), Dorion had spent time in St. Louis, where he converted to Catholicism. By the 1830s, he was employed by the U.S. government as an interpreter and had married the niece of White Cloud, the Iowa chief. In 1834 he and two other bi-
racial cohorts set out with a supply of liquor to acquire peltries already promised to the American Fur Company, which had extended credit to the bands along the Grand and Rivière aux Chats.

"Several times [Dorion] has been in danger of being killed by the drunken Indians and several of our men have been struck because they had no whiskey to sell them," Robidoux reported. Dorion, however, plied the Indians with alcohol and "profit[ed] by it . . . sell[ing] them 8 to 900 piastres worth payable by their annuities." Dorion also exploited his governmental position, aggrandizing himself by claiming he could make whomever he wanted chief. His mixed-blood relatives, Jean Baptiste and François Dorion, also sold liquor, contributing to the woes of the American Fur Company and the general deterioration of the Indians.

These incidents were not exceptional. Mixed-bloods were repeatedly caught trading liquor to tribes in the vicinity of Council Bluffs in the late 1820s and the 1830s. In one instance, when a party that included Marcus Whitman encamped at Robidoux's post in May 1835, they found a "half breed Otto [Otoe] waiting with whiskey to carry to his tribe."

An 1832 event at Cabanné's post exposed the American Fur Company's hypocrisy in secretly relying on mixed-bloods to do the dirty work of carrying contraband liquor to full-bloods. After a new federal statute passed Congress, banning all spirituous liquors from the Indian country including any intended for company employees, the American Fur Company was embarrassed by the confiscation of a large quantity of alcohol from its steamboat, the Yellow Stone. Angry when soon after this incident a rival trader Narcisse Leclerc, succeeded in slipping past Fort Leavenworth with a cargo of alcohol to be used in the Indian trade, Cabanné decided to stop Leclerc himself. Unable to buy Leclerc out, Cabanné authorized his clerk Peter Sarpy to organize a number of mixed-blood mercenaries to attack Leclerc's barges. In the assault Leclerc lost a great deal of property, including his alcohol, which the raiders confiscated and presumably consumed.

Peter Sarpy (1805-1865). Photograph of painting. Sarpy was married to an Indian woman, Nicomi. Originally a clerk, he later rose to become bourgeois of the American Fur Company's Bellevue post. Missouri Historical Society Photograph and Print Collection.

The mixed-bloods were not mistaken for full-bloods as intended, however, and Cabanné was punished by banishment from the Indian country. Leclerc's partner subsequently charged the American Fur Company with abusing the law and importing thousands of gallons of liquor into the Indian country. This incident is but one example of a political game played by most Missouri River traders of the era: they tried to gather proof of liquor trafficking by their chief competitors to get them banished from the Indian country, while hypocritically trading in alcohol themselves through mixed-blood intermediaries. In this case it backfired, much to the chagrin of the American Fur Company.
"Liquor Has Been Their Undoing"

**Top:** Fort Pierre. *Photograph of a drawing.* Located at present-day Pierre, South Dakota, this fort—named for Pierre Chouteau, Jr.—was a western outpost of the Chouteau interests. Missouri Historical Society Photograph and Print Collection.

**Left:** Jean Baptiste Sarpy (1798-1857). *Oil on canvas.* Chouteau’s cousin and Cabanne’s son-in-law, Sarpy became one of Chouteau’s partners in the fur trade. Missouri Historical Society Art Collection.
By the early 1830s growing numbers of Creoles and mixed-bloods were living along the Missouri River between the mouth of the Kaw and Fort Pierre. Agent Dougherty at Fort Leavenworth reported to Lewis Cass on November 19, 1831, that the fur companies were “trading with a number of halfbreeds who abide in the country and live by hunting and trapping.” The Jesuits noted that in the late 1830s some thirty families of French-Indian mixed-bloods had settled near Council Bluffs. Living a marginal existence, often in association with their French-Creole relations who settled at river mouths along the Missouri, these French-Indians were, according to travelers’ and missionaries’ reports, usually in a state of intoxication. Habituated to the use of liquor and driven to do what they could to acquire it, these impoverished and debauched mixed-bloods served as a conduit for whiskey to the full-bloods, hiring themselves out to whoever would pay for their services.

Just as employers exploited the Creoles’ and mixed-bloods’ weakness for liquor, so too did biracial and bicultural middlemen manipulate the Indians’ taste for spirits. Intoxicants contributed to the steady demoralization of the Indian tribes along the lower Missouri in the 1830s, retarding the development of agriculture and perpetuating intertribal warfare and intratribal feuding. Weakened by warfare, despair, alcohol abuse, and malnutrition, the Missouri River Indians had little resistance to disease. Between 1830 and 1835, the Otoes, for example, were reduced in numbers by a third; and by 1855, they had lost another third of their population. Conditions in the vicinity of Council Bluffs became so bad in the 1830s that at the Otoe and Omaha agency at Bellevue forty-seven deaths occurred in one winter.

In response to American Fur Company requests for help controlling the liquor traffic, the government stationed two hundred dragoons in Council Bluffs. The dragoons, however, were unable to protect the Indians against the violent acts they committed against one another while intoxicated. Chief Ietan of the Otoes, who had been a heavy drinker for several years, was murdered in 1837 by a fellow tribesman in a drunken brawl over one of Ietan’s young wives. In another incident, Meumbane (the daughter of Omaha head chief Big Elk and wife of trader Lucien Fontenelle) seized a chance to revenge the death of her kin-

folk at the hands of the Iowa and plied a visiting Iowa chief with liquor; when he was too drunk to defend himself, she murdered him. The Reverend William Hamilton wrote of the Iowa: “It was a common thing for them to continue their drunken sprees for days together, or till they had killed some of their own number, when they would swear off, as it was called, for a certain number of days. . . . They had in their drunken sprees murdered about sixty of their own number.”

When the emigrant Potawotomi tribe arrived at Council Bluffs in the late 1830s, the cycle of profiteering, debauchery, and human misery went into its final round. Jesuit missionaries compiled a record of the terrible conditions. Felix Verrydt wrote from Council Bluffs on July 4, 1841: “Liquor is brought in here with whole cargos, which reduces our Indians to extreme poverty.” Both men and women shamelessly “wallowed themselves in the mud” in their drunkenness. The same year, Subagent Stephen Cooper, deflecting the accusation that his interpreter sold liquor to the full-bloods, wrote to Joshua Pilcher blaming Joseph Robidoux, Baptiste Roy, and Jean Baptiste Sarpy for bringing alcohol upriver. Cooper targeted the mixed-bloods and “intruders” (whites married to Indian women) for cooperating with the traders in carrying on the liquor traffic.

While occupying a conspicuous and shameful place in the liquor trade as middlemen, persons of biracial ancestry did not bear the sole, or perhaps even primary, responsibility for its evil consequences. Mixed-bloods were joined by a host of Euro-American fur traders who drank excessively themselves and who—for the sake of profit or mere subsistence—participated in the alcohol trade. In this sad chapter of the lower Missouri River trade, few people were entirely blameless, and few were free from victimization, even as they victimized others. As if writing an epitaph for this generation of French and Indian peoples, the Protestant missionary William Hamilton commented in 1840: “Liquor has been their undoing.”

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5. See *Missouri Gazette*, March 14, April 4, 1811; June 3, July 8, August 5, 1815.


8. See *Missouri Gazette*, September 18, 1818; August 29, 1821; November 15, December 13, 1824; October 19, 1826; July 5, December 13, 1827; November 18, 1828; April 27, May 25, 1830; *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, April 2, 1882; *Missouri Gazette and Louisiana Advertiser*, July 5, July 26, 1809; Scharf, *History of St. Louis*, vol. 1, pp. 142-47; passim; Theodore Hunt, *Testimony before the Recorder of Land Titles* (St. Louis, 1825).


10. For example, insolvent Creole or mixed-blood debtors were reported in the *Missouri Gazette*, February 22, 1809; May 10, September 20, October 7, 1810; March 21, April 4, November 9, 1811; March 21, May 9, June 13, July 25, 1812; May 15, August 14, November 13, November 27, 1813; April 16, November 3, 1814; May 20, 1815; June 15, June 22, June 29, July 13, August 10, 1816; February 8, April 19, 1817; December 18, 1818; March 21, 1825.


14. See *Missouri Gazette*, February 8, 1809; January 15, August 6, 1814; April 6, July 27, 1816; May 31, 1817.


24. Pierre Chouteau, Sr., also resented his interpreters’ power. See also Pierre Chouteau, Sr., *Letterbook*, December 1, 1805; April 12, 1806, Chouteau Family Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.


31. Chapman, The Otoes and Missouria, p. 2; Francois Chouteau to Pierre Menard, December 22, 1828, Menard Collection, roll 4, Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield, Ill. (hereafter ISHL); Maurice Blondeau to Russell Farnham?, August 15, 1829, Chouteau Family Papers, MHS.

32. Blondeau to Farnham, July 14, 1829; V. M. Campbell to ?, August 17, 1823; Barthelemy Berthold to B. Pratte and Co., November 14, 1823; Campbell to O. N. Bostwick, March 20, June 20, September 22, 1824, Chouteau Family Papers, MHS.


34. Cabanné to Chouteau, April 28, 1826; June 5, 1825; September 8, 1827, Chouteau Family Papers, MHS; June 28, 1826; September 8, 1827, entries, "Diary of James Kennerly [1823 to 1826]," Missouri Historical Society Collections 6 (October, 1928), pp. 41-97.

35. Geo. Davenport to Bostwick, June 27, 1826, Chouteau Family Papers, MHS. See also Davenport to Farnham, February 12, 1826; Davenport to Bostwick, June 27, 1826, July 25, 1826; Contracts between Pierre Chouteau, Jr. and miscellaneous engagés, June 6-27, 1827; C. McLeod to Farnham, June 18, 1826, Chouteau Family Papers, MHS.


37. Cabanné to Chouteau, April 28, May 5, May 10, June 12, June 13, 1825; July 7, 1829; Berthold to Cabanné, December 9, 1826, Chouteau Family Papers, MHS.

38. Stanley Vestal, The Missouri (New York, 1945), pp. 99-100. Original documentation is in the Menard Collection, ILSH and Chouteau Family Papers, MHS.

39. See Cabanné to Chouteau, November 14, 1823; Berthold to Cabanné, December 9, 1826, Chouteau Family Papers, MHS.


41. Cabanné to Chouteau, October 29, 1827, Chouteau Family Papers, MHS. See also ibid., October 23, 1827.

42. Ibid., May 10, 1828, Chouteau Family Papers, MHS.

43. Ibid., February 27, 1829. See also ibid., October 14, 1828; Robidoux to Chouteau, March 23, 1829, Chouteau Family Papers, MHS. See also St. Louis Post-Dispatch, January 18, 1947.

44. Cabanné to Chouteau, December 7, 1829, Chouteau Family Papers, MHS.

45. P. D. Mitchell and Joshua Penen to Cabanné, November 29, 1829, Chouteau Family Papers, MHS.

46. Chapman, The Otoes and Missouria, pp. 6. For a complete list of incidents, see John Dougherty to Lewis Cass, March 9, 1832, typescript manuscript, pp. 28-31, Dougherty Collection, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kans., (hereafter KSHS).

47. Dougherty typescript, pp. 8-9, 12-13, Dougherty Collection, KSHS.

48. Quoted in Chapman, Otoes and Missouria, p. 5.


51. Clark to Dougherty, June 9, 1836, in "Letters rec'd Council Bluffs Agency 1836-57," RG-75, M-234, R-215, NA.

52. Ibid.


58. Robidoux to Chouteau, January 25, January 26, February 22, 1834; (?) to William Clark, November 10, 1834; Chouteau Family Papers, MHS. For Jeffrey Dorton's tour in the early 1840s, see Carolyn Thomas Foreman, Indians Abroad, 1493-1938 (Norman, Okla., 1939), pp. 185-86.

59. P. A. Sarpy to H. Fraeb, February 18, 1839; Joseph Brazee to Mr. Papin, December 19, 1838; John Rolette and Joseph Juette to Honoré Picotte, January 8, 1839, Chouteau Family Papers, MHS.


61. A. G. Morgan to William Clark, October 5, 1832, Chouteau Family Papers, MHS.

62. Dougherty to Cass, November 9, 1831, Fur Trade Collection, 1826-1839, MHS.


65. Chapman, The Otoes and Missouria, p. 16.

66. Shallcross, Romance of a Village, p. 58; Ms., p. 17, microfilm 16, Provincial Archives, SLU.

67. Dougherty to Clark, June 28, 1837, RG-75, M-234, R-215, NA.

68. Shallcross, Romance of a Village, pp. 31, 63.


71. Lewis Edwards, History of Richardson County, Nebraska (Indianapolis, 1917), p. 83.