

Absaroka and the Mountaineers, Friend and Foe

By Teton Todd Glover

In late October 1807 a fur trading party, led by Manuel Lisa late of St. Louis, arrived at the confluence of the Yellowstone and Big Horn rivers in South Central Montana. Here he halted the expedition and established a small post for the purpose of trading with the local tribes. This was the first building erected in Montana.¹

Lisa chose this location on the advice of John Colter, a former member of Lewis and Clarks' *Corps of Discovery*. Colter knew the area as well as any trapper or trader, having spent the previous winter upriver from here trapping beaver. Lisa had hired Colter as the later was returning down river to St. Louis and employed him as a hunter and guide.

Lisa named this new post Fort Raymond after his son and construction proceeded hurriedly due to the lateness of the season.

The establishment of Fort Raymond was a milestone in the Rocky Mountain Fur trade. It marked the first significant penetration into the area by Euro-Americans for the sole purpose of trading with the native tribes.

Though Lisa had hoped to establish trade with all the local tribes certainly he must have been aware that this location was directly within the territory claimed by the Crow nation. This was a bold move by Lisa as he not only risked offending the Blackfeet tribes by locating in the territory of their sworn enemies the Crow, but at this early date guaranteed safety among the Crow was also not a given.

Lisa quickly dispatched Colter, his fellow Corps of Discovery veteran George Drouillard, and others to find the Crow bands and invite them to come to the new post to trade and become familiar with their new neighbors.

From this point on the Crow were to become the most important tribe to the fur traders and trappers in relation to the latter's success In the Rocky Mountain Fur Trade, for it was in Crow country that they first built their posts, first trapped the streams of the mountains and first had economic success.

An examination of the establishment of relations between the Crow and the Rocky Mountain beaver hunters (Mountaineers) will show that this relationship, vital to both parties, was not always guaranteed to be peaceful and provides an interesting perspective on this most fascinating chapter of western American history.

Today the Crow refer to themselves as the "Apsa'alooke."² The oft seen rendering of "Absaroka" is an interpretation by early non-Indians of how the Crow pronounced their tribal name. Like many North American native peoples, the names given them by the earliest Euro-Americans who first encountered them are often best recognized. In this case French-Canadian traders interpreted the meaning of Absaroka to be *gens du corbeaux* or People of the Long-Beaked Bird. Exactly which bird was being referred to has never been determined, thus Crow became the standard. Fur Trader Edwin Thompson Denig explained,

*Why they are called Crows we cannot say. The word Ap sar roo kai, which is the name they give themselves in their own language, does not mean crow more than any other kind of bird, the interpretation being simply anything that flies.*³

Wilson Price Hunt used the title "Absaroka" as early as 1811 in his travel journal. He wrote, "On the 22nd we ran into what we thought to be the usual route of the Absaroka Indians coming from the Mandan villages."⁴ However, for purposes of this study, the term Crow will be used.

It is important, as well as interesting, to understand the basics of the Crow story since history and geography are so intertwined in this narrative. Robert H. Lowie's classic "The Crow Indians" is a great place to start for those interested in a more comprehensive understanding of Crow ethnology. Denig's "Five Tribes of the Upper Missouri: Sioux, Arikaras, Assiniboine's, Crees, Crows," gives excellent insight into early Crow history.

Most scholars and Crow historians agree that the proto-Crow people dwelt somewhere near the Great Lakes. Like other plains dwelling tribes such as the Lakota/Dakota, they were either pressured to leave their homelands by tribes further to the east who obtained firearms before them or were simply part of a multi-generational migration looking for more promising lands. At this time the "Crow" people proper did not exist but were rather part of the people who became known as the Hidatsa. These displaced tribesmen eventually reached the Upper Missouri region and settled near the Mandan villages, another group of recently arrived immigrants.

When and why the Crow eventually separated from the Hidatsa along the Missouri has not been conclusively explained. Anthropologists suggest that groups of Hidatsa hunters frequently traveled further out onto the plains pursuing buffalo and other big game animals and perhaps looking for new farmlands. These groups eventually spent longer, and longer periods hunting and soon adapted to that new environment.

Eventually they evidently decided there was no reason to continue to make long treks to and from and settled further west. In time, this group came to view themselves as a wholly separate entity from the Hidatsa and became the Mountain Crow. Though now separated, they maintained close relations with their Hidatsa relatives through frequent visits and trade. No conclusive evidence exists to narrow the time frame of this transition within decades, but it was probably generations before the horse arrived in the middle 1700's.⁵

A second migration may have happened after the introduction of the horse. Tribal legend suggests that a dispute arose among different clans of the Hidatsa over the spoils of a buffalo hunt. This dispute became violent, causing one side to leave and seek new tribal territory. This group followed the Yellowstone River upstream and thereafter made the valley their homeland. These are the "River Crow."⁶

These later groups of migrants were certainly introduced to Euro-American influences before their own separation. The Hidatsa and Mandan villages of the upper Missouri were the center of trade for tribes of that region as well as traders from Canada. The Crow were exposed to these outside influences and could both see and understand the distinct advantages of maintaining friendly relations with French-Canadian, British and later, American traders.

The first recorded contact with the Crow by Euro-Americans traders was in June 1805 when the French-Canadian trader Francois Antoine Larocque was trading among the Hidatsa.⁷ The Mountain Crow were also paying a visit to their relations and Larocque was fortunate enough to be there. Larocque gave many presents to the Crow and instructed them on the methods of harvesting and preparing beaver skins that were so desirable to traders.⁸ This act alone may have played a significant role in forming first impressions of the Crow by later traders. Crow beaver became well known while the Blackfoot were never known to be trappers and traders of beaver⁹ Larocque was apparently very impressed by the Crow and sought permission to travel with them to their homelands.

Though extant records indicate this was the first meeting the Crow had with Euro-Americans, Crow oral history suggests otherwise. Dr. C. Adrian Heidenreich quotes Crow elder Barney Old Coyote in 2002 as saying, “the white people were known to the Crows as far back as the 1700s. They had a name for them. They called them the Yellow Eyes (baaishtashiile)...That was the name the Crows identify white people with to this day. During those encounters, they looked at them with some curiosity but did not get to know them well until 1825, when they first entered into their trading at Fort Mandan.”¹⁰

These important early contacts with non-Indians were a critical factor in developing friendly relations. The Crow at this time were fighting with several more powerful tribes to maintain their homeland. The Dakota/Lakota Confederacy to the east and southeast were far more numerous than the Crow. The Blackfeet nation comprised of Siksika, Kainah, Pikani, and adopted GrosVentre were pressing the Crow from the north, while to the west and southwest the Shoshonean peoples were just beginning to lose their power over the region. In such hostile and difficult surroundings, perhaps they took advice from their Hidatsa kinsman that keeping an open trade conduit with outsiders was crucial for survival. The Blackfeet and Dakota/Lakota’s were already being supplied with superior technology in firearms, steel knives, axes, tomahawks and arrowheads, cooking implements and horses. To fall too far behind in trade for these invaluable commodities would have put the Crow at a distinct disadvantage versus their neighboring rivals. However, the Crow had firmly established themselves and had done quite well in not only fending off competition but also becoming known for their wealth of horses. They were by no means subservient to outsiders, nor did they come begging for trade. It was actually quite the reverse as the traders came petitioning for the Crow’s favor.

Subsequent to Colter’s initial exploring foray into here-to-fore unmapped Crow country, he was part of another very significant incident which further tilted Crow/Trader relations toward the positive.

This time Colter had been dispatched to make contact with the Blackfeet and attempt to open trade with them. While travelling toward the Three Forks region, Colter happened upon a village of Crows and friendly Flatheads who were moving in the same direction. For ease in locating the best route, he decided to accompany the combined parties. A day out from the confluence of the three rivers, the vanguard party of Flatheads were attacked by the Blackfeet, The Crow with Colter in attendance came up quickly as reinforcements. Colter had little choice but to fight alongside the Crow and Flathead and was wounded during the battle. This was likely the first time the Blackfeet had observed white traders among their enemies fighting against them and it made a lasting impression¹¹

The question of affable relationships with Euro-Americans really picks up momentum with the sustained contact brought by traders to Crow country through the establishment of the Rocky Mountain fur trade. As contact became more frequent, much more insight and information about the Crow was recorded by these traders. Here is an example of such a colorful description,

*And here a word or two concerning the Crows may be of service to the reader, as they will figure occasionally in the succeeding narration. The tribe consists of four bands, which have their nestling-places in fertile, well-wooded valleys, lying among the Rocky Mountains, and watered by the Big Horse River and its tributary streams; but, though these are properly their homes, where they shelter their old people, their wives, and their children, the men of the tribe are almost continually on the foray and the scamper. They are, in fact, notorious marauders and horse-stealers; crossing and re-crossing the mountains, robbing on the one side, and conveying their spoils to the other. Hence, we are told, is derived their name, given to them on account of their unsettled and predatory habits; winging their flight, like the crows, from one side of the mountains to the other, and making free booty of everything that lies in their way. Horses, however, are the especial objects of their depredations, and their skill and audacity in stealing them are said to be astonishing. This is their glory and delight; an accomplished horse-stealer fills up their idea of a hero. Many horses are obtained by them, also, in barter from tribes in and beyond the mountains. They have an absolute passion for this noble animal; besides which he is with them an important object of traffic. Once a year they make a visit to the Mandan's, Minatare's, and other tribes of the Missouri, taking with them droves of horses which they exchange for guns, ammunition, trinkets, vermilion, cloths of bright colors, and various other articles of European manufacture. With these they supply their own wants and caprices, and carry on the internal trade for horses already mentioned.*¹²

As was pointed out earlier, geographic location played a key role in the development of relations between Crow and Euro-American traders and trappers. Since their separation from the Hidatsa, they had solidified and expanded the territory they called home. The lands they claimed as their own were vast and varied and soon had deep meaning for the Crow people. This frequently repeated quote by Mountain Crow Chief Arapooish concerning the qualities of Crow lands is familiar to those researching Crow history.

The Crow country ... is a good country. The Great Spirit has put it exactly in the right place; while you are in it you fare well; whenever you go out of it, whichever way you travel, you fare worse. If you go to the south, you have to wander over great barren plains; the water is warm and bad, and you meet the fever and ague. To the north it is cold; the winters are long and bitter, with no grass; you cannot keep horses there, but must travel with dogs. What is a country without horses? On the Columbia they are poor and dirty, paddle about in canoes, and eat fish. Their teeth are worn out; they are always taking fish-bones

*out of their mouths. Fish is poor food. To the east, they dwell in villages; they live well; but they drink the muddy water of the Missouri - that is bad. A Crow's dog would not drink such water. About the forks of the Missouri is a fine country; good water; good grass; plenty of buffalo. In summer, it is almost as good as the Crow country; but in winter it is cold; the grass is gone; and there is no salt weed for the horses. The Crow country is exactly in the right place. It has snowy mountains and sunny plains; all kinds of climates and good things for every season. When the summer heats scorch the prairies, you can draw up under the mountains, where the air is sweet and cool, the grass fresh, and the bright streams come tumbling out of the snow-banks. There you can hunt the elk, the deer, and the antelope, when their skins are fit for dressing; there you will find plenty of white bears and mountain sheep. In the autumn, when your horses are fat and strong from the mountain pastures, you can go down into the plains and hunt the buffalo, or trap beaver on the streams. And when winter comes on, you can take shelter in the woody bottoms along the rivers; there you will find buffalo meat for yourselves, and cotton-wood bark for your horses: or you may winter in the Wind River valley, where there is salt weed in abundance. The Crow country is exactly in the right place. Everything good is to be found there. There is no country like the Crow country*¹³

A more clear definition of Crow country during the western fur trade years of 1810-1840 is as follows. This is a necessary generalization as there were no definitive borders. Start with Yellowstone Lake as a western boundary, then north to the Yellowstone River valley or perhaps as far north as the Musselshell River. Devils Tower would approximate the eastern boundary and the Sweetwater River the Southern. Of course, raiding parties were often seen far beyond these boundaries.

This geographic area put Crow people square in the path of the beaver hunting traders and mountaineers who began to penetrate and exploit Crow country in earnest with the Henry-Ashley men of the early 1820s. It is relations with these outsiders that are the primary concern of the current survey. For background, here is Washington Irving's description of these mountaineers:

A new order of trappers and traders, also, has grown out of this system of things. In the old times of the great Northwest Company, when the trade in furs was pursued chiefly about the lakes and rivers, the expeditions were carried on in batteaux and canoes. The voyageurs or boatmen were the rank and file in the service of the trader, and even the hardy "men of the north," those great rufflers and game birds, were fain to be paddled from point to point of their migrations. A totally different class has now sprung up: - "the Mountaineers," the traders and trappers that scale the vast mountain chains, and pursue their hazardous vocations amidst their wild recesses. They move from place to place on horseback. The equestrian exercises, therefore, in which they are engaged, the nature of the countries they traverse, vast plains and mountains, pure and exhilarating in atmospheric qualities, seem to make them physically and mentally a more lively and mercurial race than the fur traders and trappers of former days, the self-vaunting "men of the north." A man who bestrides a horse must be

essentially different from a man who cowers in a canoe. We find them, accordingly, hardy, lithe, vigorous, and active; extravagant in word, and thought, and deed; heedless of hardship; daring of danger; prodigal of the present, and thoughtless of the future. ¹⁴

Examination of contact between Crow peoples and mountaineers in the early fur trade years confirms that a foundation for relations through the fur trade era to the pioneer immigrations to the west and to the Indian Wars era and beyond was established. The first illustration is an example of the often-duplicitous nature of relations between the two cultures. However, this scenario played out repeatedly whenever native people first encountered outsiders who seemingly possessed materials that were coveted by the natives and is not exclusive to the Crow.

The present party of Crows, however, evinced nothing of the invidious character for which they are renowned. During the day and night that they were encamped in company with the travellers, their conduct was friendly in the extreme. They were, in fact, quite irksome in their attentions, and had a caressing manner at times quite importunate. It was not until after separation on the following morning that the captain and his men ascertained the secret of all this loving-kindness. In the course of their fraternal caresses, the Crows had contrived to empty the pockets of their white brothers; to abstract the very buttons from their coats, and, above all, to make free with their hunting knives. ¹⁵

This example suggests that by the time Bonneville encountered the Crows on his 1832 expedition, they had developed a reputation for needing close scrutiny during interactions with the tribe. No doubt this was quite exasperating to the traders and to not retaliate against the pickpockets shows great restraint on their part. The traders obviously saw the need to go to great lengths to maintain the peace with this important ally.

One of the key foundational relationships between early fur traders and the Crow was the remarkable adventures of Edward Rose. Rose, a black mountaineer, was a contemporary of Colter and Droulliard in the service of Lisa on the upper Missouri. Indeed, like the other two, Rose was also dispatched to the Crows for trading purposes. However, it seems that Rose chose to build relations by being overly generous with Lisa's trade goods. Returning to Lisa's post empty handed earned Lisa's great ire and indignation but likely had earned Rose great favor among the Crow. So much so, that Rose lived among the Crow off and on for many years thereafter. He was regarded so highly among the Crow as to have become a prominent man among them and played a significant role in promulgating continued friendly relations. Washington Irving, in a summation of Rose's long influence among the Crow, stated that

After all, his residence among these savages, and the influence he acquired over them, had, for a time, some beneficial effects. He is said, not merely to have rendered them more formidable to the Blackfeet, but to have opened their eyes to the policy of cultivating the friendship of the white men. ¹⁶

If this is true then it may have had a more long term influence as intimated by Irving in this continued quotation

After Rose's death, his policy continued to be cultivated, with indifferent success, by Arapooish, the chief already mentioned, who had been his great friend, and whose character he had contributed to develop. This sagacious chief endeavored, on every occasion, to restrain the predatory propensities of his tribe when directed against the white men. "If we keep friends with them," said he, "we have nothing to fear from the Blackfeet, and can rule the mountains."¹⁷

It is interesting to note that Rose was not always completely one-sided in favor of his adopted tribesmen. When acting as an interpreter for General Atkinson upon his visit to the Crow in 1825, the following incident took place showing that Rose maintained at least some measure of loyalty to his former associates.

The military were stationed at some little distance from the scene of the "big talk"; while the general and the chiefs were smoking pipes and making speeches, the officers, supposing all was friendly, left the troops, and drew near the scene of ceremonial. Some of the more knowing Crows, perceiving this, stole quietly to the camp, and, unobserved, contrived to stop the touch-holes of the field-pieces with dirt. Shortly after, a misunderstanding occurred and the tumult arose. In the confusion, Colonel O'Fallan snapped a pistol in the face of a brave, and knocked him down with the butt end. The Crows were all in a fury. A chance-medley fight was on the point of taking place, when Rose, his natural sympathies as a white man suddenly recurring, broke the stock of his fusée over the head of a Crow warrior, and laid so vigorously about him with the barrel, that he soon put the whole throng to flight. Luckily, as no lives had been lost, this sturdy rib roasting calmed the fury of the Crows, and the tumult ended without serious consequences.¹⁸

A further example of the critical benefit of friendly allies such as the Crow was the immediate aftermath of the Immel-Jones massacre. Michael Immel and Robert Jones were competent field lieutenants of the St. Louis Missouri Fur Company. In 1823 they had led a party of thirty men in the Three Forks region trapping on the Jefferson River. As they were leaving the area they met up with a band of Piegans of the Blackfeet Confederacy. The Piegan leader, Iron Shirt, showed Immel and Jones a document given to him by British officials in Canada. Iron Shirt likely hoped this would calm the suspicions of the American trappers and causing them to ease their guard.

After trading with the Piegans, the Immel-Jones party continued eastward hoping to quickly get to the friendly borders of Crow country, again demonstrating how Crow camps had already become a clear oasis to the trappers. The two leaders of the trapping party were never to find the hoped-for sanctuary. Somewhere on the eastern edge of modern Billings, Montana, as the group was threading through a narrow defile they were attacked by a large party of Blackfeet. Likely it was the same band led by Iron Shirt. Despite heroic efforts on their part, Immel, Jones and five others were butchered there.

The others fled and successfully escaped. One can only imagine the terror of having a horde fresh from the frenzy of bloodletting pursuing them closely. To their great fortune, a village of friendly River Crow was not far distant, and it was there the stricken American party found refuge. Imagine the catastrophe that might have been had the Crow village not been there, or worse, if the Crow were not a friendly tribe to the trappers. Pursued by the Blackfeet, they undoubtedly would have been slain to the last man.¹⁹

Examples abound of the friendliness of the Crow and the benefits derived there from, whether it was in terms of an important trading source or as possible sanctuary from overtly hostile tribes. The story of James P. Beckwourth, a noted Mountaineer, may of itself be sufficient to show the fickle nature of the Crows behavior; often friendly yet occasionally hostile. Beckwourth was initially captured by a band of Crow warriors, yet later became a leader among them.²⁰ The historical record shows however that Crow affability could not be taken for granted.

Jim Hannon's excellent article in Vol. V of this journal, entitled "A Life Wild and Perilous": Death in the Far West among Trappers and Traders," documented at least eight deaths attributable to the Crow. This is twice the number recorded by the Sioux who were known to be very aggressive.²¹

Hannon lists the first death of a trapper or trader by the hands of the Crow as having occurred in 1812.²² This was an Astorian man named Pierre Detaye. This early date suggests that the bonds of friendship may not have been well established yet or were at least not universally practiced by all the bands of the Crow. Sporadic murders by marauding Crows seem to have been a pattern. While large scale attacks on trappers and traders were rare, the Crow, much like the majority of plains and mountain tribes, were not above raiding small parties for horses and other plunder. That an occasional death occurred during these antagonistic episodes is not surprising - that more lives were not lost is astounding.

A situation which is highly illustrative of these tense encounters without serious harm or loss of life occurred to Thomas Fitzpatrick and his brigade of trappers of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. Traveling in the Tongue River country he was followed by a large band of Crows. Fitzpatrick was well aware of the dangers to his property at the hands of the Crows and sought to avoid them. Joe Meek, one of Fitzpatrick's trappers described the ensuing encounters,

The Crow chief kept in his neighborhood, and finally expressed a desire to bring his camp alongside that of Fitzpatrick, pretending to the most friendly and honorable sentiments toward his white neighbors. But not feeling any confidence in Crow friendship, Fitzpatrick declined, and moved camp a few miles away. Not, however, wishing to offend the dignity of the apparently friendly chief, he took a small escort, and went to pay a visit to his Crow neighbors, that they might see that he was not afraid to trust them. Alas, vain subterfuge!

While he was exchanging civilities with the Crow chief, a party of the young braves stole out of camp, and taking advantage of the leader's absence, made an attack on his camp, so sudden and successful that not a horse, nor any thing else which they could make booty of was left. Even Captain Stuart, who was traveling

with Fitzpatrick, and who was an active officer, was powerless to resist the attack, and had to consent to see the camp rifled of everything valuable.

In the meantime Fitzpatrick, after concluding his visit in the most amicable manner, was returning to camp, when he was met by the exultant braves, who added insult to injury by robbing him of his horse, gun, and nearly all his clothes, leaving him to return to his party in a deplorable condition, to the great amusement of the trappers, and his own chagrin.

However, the next day a talk was held with the head chief of the Crows, to whom Fitzpatrick represented the infamy of such treacherous conduct in a very strong light. In answer to this reproof, the chief disowned all knowledge of the affair; saying that he could not always control the conduct of the young men, who would be a little wild now and then, in spite of the best Crow precepts: but that he would do what he could to have the property restored. Accordingly, after more talk, and much eloquence on the part of Fitzpatrick, the chief part of the plunder was returned to him, including the horses and rifles of the men, together with a little ammunition, and a few beaver traps.

Fitzpatrick understood the meaning of this apparent fairness, and hastened to get out of the Crow country before another raid by the mischievous young braves²³

It is difficult to conceive of such an encounter happening between two heavily armed groups without shots being exchanged but it's more difficult to think that any of the trappers would thereafter have considered the Crows to be in any way "friendly."

Kit Carson had an encounter of his own with a Crow war party that ended much less peaceably. In January 1833 Carson wintered with a brigade of trappers west of the Colorado Rockies. One evening a group of fifty Crows ran off some of the trappers' best horses. Carson and eleven others took up the pursuit. They pressed their animals hard through deep snow and cold, and after forty miles were forced to take a much-needed break. They holed up in a grove of trees, but as they were setting camp, they saw the glow of fires in another grove of trees ahead and presumed it must be the Crows. Waiting until dark, the trappers approached the Crow camp having to crawl the last distance through deep snow while enduring incredible cold. They succeeded in stealing their horses back and made for their own camp.

Carson and a couple of the others, however, were not satisfied that the Crows had learned their lesson and proposed a more punitive punishment. Convincing the rest to participate, nine of the men headed back through the snow toward the Crow camp. As they approached, a barking dog gave the Indians warning and the fight was on. As the Indians arose and came out of their ramshackle shelters, the trappers picked them off, reportedly killing many. The fight continued until sunup when the Crows could see the number of trappers was fairly few and counterattacked. The sharp shooting trappers drove them back, but the Crow rallied and attacked again with superior numbers. This time the trappers withdrew, escaping back to their camp and prepared to defend their lives. Apparently, the Crow had learned a lesson about these particular trappers and did

not press the fight. Returning to the trapper's main camp, Carson reported that they had sent "many a redskin to his long home."²⁴

In this instance it is clear that the prevailing amity between the Crow and mountaineers was quickly set aside when one side felt that they had been wronged beyond the point of forgiveness or tolerance.

The largest openly hostile act by any element of the Crow nation against Euro-Americans during the fur trade years occurred in 1835. The American Fur Company had built Fort McKenzie on the Missouri River, six miles above the confluence with the Marias River. Here they carried on trading with the Blackfeet much to the chagrin of the Crow. The division of Mountain Crow under Chief Rotten Belly (Arapooish, as mentioned earlier) had recently fallen on difficult times. Smallpox had reduced their numbers and they were poor in horses and firearms. This they blamed on the traders and trappers.

Meanwhile the Blackfeet were growing stronger through trade with the British and the American Fur Company forts in their midst. Rotten Belly devised a scheme of revenge on the whites and to strengthen his people. They would lay siege to Fort McKenzie, forcing the traders to turn over all the fort's stores. They waited until the Blackfeet had made their annual trading trip north to Saskatchewan thus leaving Fort McKenzie unattended by their enemies. The post was already short on men as the Chief Agent Alexander Culbertson had sent a large party of men down river earlier with robes and skins from the Blackfeet trade.

The Crow moved in and surrounded the fort, pitching their teepees beyond cannon range. The siege had begun. It should be noted that Rotten Belly's objective was not to kill the traders but only to gain the wealth of stores inside the fort. Various subterfuges were tried to no avail since Culbertson was an old hand at the Indian trade. The whites also showed much restraint in not firing upon the Crow as they came to the fort walls to convince the inhabitants to leave. Culbertson wanted to keep the possibility of trade with the Crow open.

As weeks passed the situation inside the fort grew desperate. Food stores had already been short, and now they were denied the opportunity to hunt outside the walls. The fur company men grew near mutinous. Everything that could be eaten was consumed including all rawhide covers and ties. After thirty days, the fort was on the verge of collapse. Rotten Belly was about to realize his goal when the tribe's recent bad luck, i.e. losing Little White Bear and 25 others to the Blackfeet and a smallpox epidemic, returned. From the north came the returning Blackfeet, heavily armed through recent trading with the British. The Crow broke camp with great haste and were soon disappearing over the southern hills. The Blackfeet quickly learned of the fort's desperate situation and gave them relief. They didn't however pursue the fleeing Crow thinking it best to leave an angry dog alone.

Though they had escaped what might have been a disastrous battle with the Blackfeet, Rotten Belly was still not content. A Blackfeet war party of twenty men was discovered returning from raids to the south. Rotten Belly led an attack on them and killed two of the enemy, the rest finding refuge in a small wooden fortification.

Though his tribesmen urged Rotten Belly not to continue to tempt fate and to leave the Blackfeet for another day, Rotten Belly would have none of it. Dressed in his finest raiment, Rotten Belly charged the fortified Blackfeet in spectacular fashion. He

spear one of them but was in turn riddled with Blackfeet arrows. The inspired and enraged Crows then finished off the Blackfeet. Rotten Belly had made good on a previous pledge that he would be victorious, or his body would not return from Blackfeet lands. His people placed his body in a tree near there to ever after be a torment to the Blackfeet.²⁵

Although no lives were recorded as lost during the siege of Fort McKenzie, insight is gained into the Crow disposition toward Euro-Americans conducting business in their region during the fur trade. Undoubtedly the besieged traders and men at Fort McKenzie thought little of the Crow and one can almost hear the curses being shouted toward them from the fort bastions. It is one of the great paradoxes of the Rocky Mountain fur trade that white men along the walls of a fort were cheering the arrival of the Blackfeet to rescue them from the hands of their erstwhile friends the Crow.

Conclusion

As the Rocky Mountain fur trade picked up in earnest following the wake of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, geo-political relations with various Indian tribes proved to be a key element in its success. These relations had begun to be established by various British and French traders even before the great American expedition had launched. The Crow nation occupied strategic terrain at the onset of the exploitation of the fur resources of the region. Therefore, they may have been the most important ally the American trappers and traders could have had, and without Crow assistance the Rocky Mountain Fur Trade would have been severely hindered.

The Crow were a powerful nation and had held their own even while being pressed on several fronts by numerically superior enemies. They were wise enough however to see the benefits of befriending the encroaching Euro-American traders in hopes of gaining arms and other beneficial trade goods. Though they recognized and understood that need, yet they remained a proud people determined to maintain independence and self-reliance.

Numerous examples of their friendship toward the initial traders and trappers can be cited. In the decades after the close of the Rocky Mountain Fur Trade, the Crow became frequent allies of the Euro-American traders and trappers, so much so that the casual observer of history would think the two parties were steadfast friends.

Nevertheless, when different cultures meet, the frailties of human nature often led to inevitable consequences such as jealousies, greed and envy. The Crow were no more immune to these emotions than were the trappers and traders and thus in their dealings with each other, they were often foes as well as friends.

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- ¹ Burton Harris, *John Colter: His years in the Rockies*, (Casper, Wyoming: Big Horn Book Company, 1983) 70.
- ² See www.crowtribe.com
- ³ Edwin Thompson Denig, *Five Tribes of the Upper Missouri* edited by John C. Ewers (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961). 138.
- ⁴ Voyage of Mr. Hunt and his companions from St Louis to the mouth of the Columbia by a new route across the Rocky Mountains, <http://www.xmission.com/~drudy/mtman/html/wphunt/wphunt.html> (16 August 2011)
- ⁵ Rodney Frey, *The World of the Crow Indians as Driftwood Lodges*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press: 1987.) 12.
- ⁶ Frederick E. Hoxie, *Parading through history: the making of the Crow nation, 1805-1935*, (Cambridge University Press, 1995) 40.
- ⁷ W. Raymond Wood and Thomas D. Thiessen, *Early Fur Trade on the Northern Plains*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985) 13.
- ⁸ Francois Larocque, *The Journal of Francois LaRocque*, (Ye Galleon Press, Fairfield, Washington, 1981) 62.
- ⁹ Oscar Lewis, *The Effects of White Contact upon Blackfoot Culture with Special Reference to the Role of the Fur Trade*, (Seattle and London: The University of Washington Press, 1973) 28.
- ¹⁰ C. Adrian Heidenrieck, *Smoke Signals in Crow Country: Beyond the Capture of Horses from the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, (Billings, Montana: By the author. 2006) 41.
- ¹¹ Harris, *John Colter*, 121-122.
- ¹² Washington Irving, *Astoria; or Anecdotes of an Enterprise beyond the Rocky Mountains*, (New York: George P. Putnam, 1851.) 229.
- ¹³ Washington Irving, *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville*. (New York and London: The Co-operative Publication Society, n.d) 161.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 165.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 165.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 164
- ¹⁹ Hiram M. Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West Vol. 1* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 149.
- ²⁰ James P. Beckwourth, *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981.)
- ²¹ James Hannon, Jr. "A life Wild and Perilous": *Death in the Far West among Trappers and Traders*. *The Rocky Mountain Fur Trade Journal*, 5 (2011): 66.
- ²² *Ibid.* 71.
- ²³ Frances F. Victor, *The River of the West*. (Missoula: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 1983.) 160-61.
- ²⁴ Thelma S. Guild and Harvey L. Carter, *Kit Carson: a Pattern for Heroes* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984) 52 It is interesting to note that this large party of Crows was out raiding in the middle of the winter. Carson does not say how he knew they were Crows and not Ute whose land they were camped on.

²⁵ Denig, *Five Tribes*, 170-183.