

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## REFERENCE SERIES

### IROQUOIS FUR TRADE IN IDAHO

Number 866

1987

North West Company fur traders, operating in Idaho from remote bases in Montreal and Fort William, brought out a remarkable variety of trappers from distant lands. These included Abanakee and Iroquois Indians from Quebec, other Indians from Ontario, Crees from northern Canada, and Hawaiians from a very different South Pacific climate. By 1820, about a third of those who hunted fur in Pacific Northwest beaver streams were Iroquois. An independent crew who declined to do nothing but hunt furs--and whose cultural values differed substantially from business preferences of North West Company administrators--Idaho's Iroquois fur hunters spent a lot of their time on detached expeditions. They specialized in exploring new country and often lived with Shoshoni and Northern Paiute (or Bannock) bands. They had a special talent for guarding trappers' horses from local Indians, a highly useful activity in a land where horse stealing--as viewed by British Company leaders--was considered to be a great moral virtue. Blackfeet Indians, for example, regarded any one else's horse herd as a natural resource that an Indian with any energy and ambition to appropriate. French and British trappers somehow were to benighted too appreciate that kind of ethical brilliance, but they frequently relied upon Iroquois sentries to protect their system of transportation.

Representing Scottish business management attitudes, under which trappers were supposed to devote their attention exclusively to providing trading companies with profits, Alexander Ross identified his Iroquois associates as "very unfit for a Snake voyage [meaning an Idaho trapping expedition], being always at variance with the whites, too fond of trafficking away their goods with the native." In 1818-1819, they had less of a beaver catch than they might have if they had trapped more energetically that winter. In their 1819-1820 season, Mackenzie's thirteen Iroquois hunters went off by themselves again, catching 669 beavers that they had to hide in a cache until 1822, when they finally were able to return with Michel Bourdon to recover that loss. That kind of adversity gave them even less incentive to confine their efforts to trapping. But even if they had been inclined to pursue beaver with greater industry, their marketing system discouraged such efforts. Their operating costs too often exceeded any return that they could

anticipate, so even if Iroquois hunters had been inclined to go into commercial ventures that were not compatible with their culture, they began to see that operating at a financial loss did not differ much from giving trade goods away to other Indians.

By 1822, when Hudson's Bay Company management replaced North West Company operations in Idaho, a part of his Iroquois group departed from Michel Bourdon's Snake brigade altogether, but most still continued to help him explore more of Idaho's beaver country. They returned to Pierre's Hole (Teton Valley), named for Pierre Tevanitagon, an Iroquois leader, and Grey's Hole (around Gray's Lake), named for John Grey, whose Iroquois name was Igance Hatchiorauquasha, in 1822 and came back again with Finnan MacDonald in 1823. Battles with Blackfoot intruders made that expedition a particularly dangerous one, and Iroquois enthusiasm for their Idaho fur trade declined perceptibly.

When Alexander Ross took over in 1824, he found that his Iroquois delegation would not accompany him at all unless he cut their outfitting charges in half. Even with that concession, Iroquois trappers had only a small chance to recover their 1824 operating costs, let alone show any profit. Pierre induced Ross to take them back to Boise that season to avoid renewed Blackfoot hostilities. But after he succeeded in frightening off a Blackfoot band, Pierre and some of his Iroquois associates decided to join The Horse and his Bannock band for a Portneuf hunting trip. John Grey and a few other Iroquois remained with Ross and his Snake expedition. When some non-Iroquois trappers with Ross stole some Shoshoni horses far away that summer, The Horse and his Bannock force (who already had wiped out John Reid's Boise post in 1814) retaliated against Pierre's band, leaving them "pillaged and destitute." (The Horse and his followers continued to express their displeasure by wiping out most of Etienne Provost's crew on Provo River later that summer.)

Jedediah Smith and six mountain men from Saint Louis finally rescued Pierre and his Iroquois, accompanying them to rejoin Alexander Ross that fall. Pierre thus succeeded in opening a new era in Idaho's fur trade: for more than a decade, Hudson's Bay Company brigades altered their Snake country trapping policies to trap out a barren zone to protect their northern holdings from Saint Louis competition. Within a year, most of Idaho's Iroquois trappers shifted their commercial dealings from Hudson's Bay to Saint Louis companies that offered better prices. With this new orientation, they moved a lot of their trapping operations from Idaho's Snake country to Rocky Mountain bases.

As late as 1832, when Antoine Goddin--whose Iroquois father had been identified conspicuously with Lost River (Goddin's River in those days)--set off a wild battle in Pierre's Hole between a Gros Ventre band and a Nez Perce-Saint Louis trappers' combine, Iroquois trappers continued to have a prominent place in Idaho fur trade history. Those fortunate enough to survive that experience concluded that two decades of western fur hunting was

enough to satisfy their desire for adventure. In 1836, most of them accompanied John Grey to western Missouri where they joined Francois G. Chouteau and James A. McGee in founding Kansas City in 1839.

Iroquois fur hunters introduced a distinctive cultural element into Idaho's early fur trade that had an interesting impact upon regional development. As an early ethnic immigrant group, they helped make Idaho's fur trade a more turbulent and complex episode. Finally from their Kansas City base after 1836, John Grey and his Iroquois associates helped develop Oregon and California trail migration that had substantial effects upon Idaho's Indian history and led to eventual white settlement of lands that they had helped to explore.

### LITERATURE

Alexander Ross, Fur Hunters of the Far West (London, 1855), provides substantial information concerning Iroquois trappers, although decided cultural differences account for serious misunderstandings of Iroquois activity. Ross kept a journal of his 1824 trip, part of which has been published by T. C. Elliot, "Journal of Alexander Ross: Snake Country Expedition, 1824," Oregon Historical Quarterly (December 1913), 14:370. Relevant works by Dale Morgan include his Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West (Indianapolis, 1953); The West of William H. Ashley (Denver, 1964); and Eleanor Towles Harris, The Rocky Mountain Journals of William Anderson: The West in 1834 (San Marino, 1967).

Biographical accounts of Idaho Iroquois in LeRoy R. Hafen, Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West (Glendale, 1965-1972) includes Antoine Goddin (2:175-178, Ignace Hatchiorauquasha (7:161-175), and Pierre Tevanitagon (4:351-357) along with scattered references to other Iroquois trappers and history.

### HISTORIC SITES IDENTIFICATION

#### Iroquois sites in Idaho include:

1. Donald Mackenzie's Boise Valley rendezvous site of 1819
2. Pierre's Hole
3. Grey's Lake
4. Lost River (Goddin's River)
5. Alexander Ross campsite, January 12, 1824
6. Alexander Ross campsite, October 14, 1824
7. John Grey's Marsh Creek battle site, March 9, 1826
8. Cache Valley rendezvous site, 1826

### CULTURAL RESOURCE EVALUATION

1. Pierre's Hole battleground is registered, September 7, 1984
2. Pierre's Hole rendezvous site is being reviewed for a National Historic Landmark.

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION

Archaeological evidence from fur trade sites should be examined for Iroquois material. [more is needed here]

### RESOURCE PROTECTION

Pierre's Hole sites have been a subject of local interest and have not been affected too much by recent development pressures.

Care needs to be exercised to avoid modern intrusion into a relatively well preserved rendezvous area near Driggs, which qualifies as a National Historic Landmark.

Pierre's Hole battleground has yielded some historic archaeological material but has not been subject to systematic archaeological investigation. This site needs attention.

Other Idaho Iroquois sites cannot be located with precision sufficient to raise protection concerns.