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New Light on the NORTHWESTERN FUR COMPANY

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A PICTURE of the organization and activities of the little-known Northwestern Fur Company, which operated on the upper Missouri River from 1865 to 1870, emerges from the papers of James Boyd Hubbell, recently presented to the Minnesota Historical Society by his daughter, Mrs. Vincent W. Dawson of St. Paul. Only scant and scattered information about the formation and operation of the company was available before the discovery of the Hubbell Papers. Among the sixty-five items in the collection are Hubbell's correspondence with his family and business associates, his diaries for 1880 and 1891, business accounts, articles of agreement, depositions, and miscellaneous papers.¹

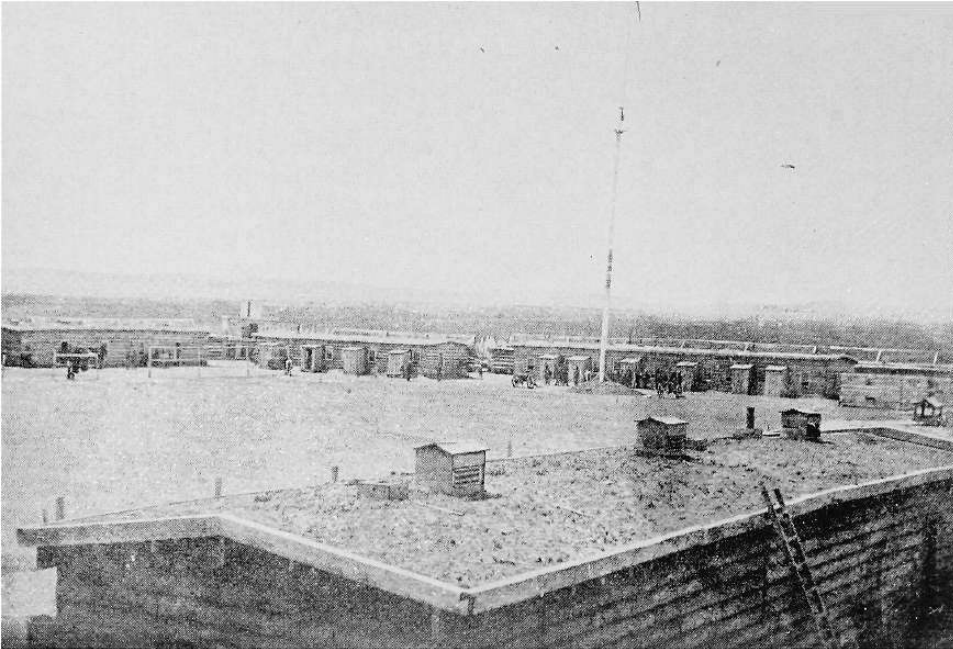
Heretofore, little has been known not only about the Northwestern Fur Company, but about Hubbell himself. According to an obituary published at the time of his death

in 1905, he moved to Minnesota from Winsted, Connecticut, in 1857. At Mankato, his first home in Minnesota, he helped organize the First National Bank and entered the mercantile business. At the time of his residence there, the Indian trade was flourishing, and Hubbell was soon in the thick of it. With his fellow townsman, Alpheus F. Hawley, he formed a partnership to trade in the Far West. By the 1860s, he was engaged in freighting, filling government contracts, and trading with the Indians at several posts on the Missouri River.² It was as a result of the contacts made there that the Northwestern Fur Company was formed.

Earlier, it was known that the Northwestern Fur Company was organized in 1864-65 by Hubbell and Hawley, who bought out the upper Missouri posts of Pierre Chouteau, Jr., and Company; that the firm sold its posts below Fort Union in 1869 to Durfee and Peck; and that it retired from the trade above Fort Union in 1870. General Régis de Trobriand, commandant at Fort Stevenson on the Missouri from 1867 to 1869, added substantially to the elusive lore of the company when he recounted in his diary stories about its traders. Additional bits of information concerning Hubbell's

¹ The names Northwestern Fur Company, Northwest Fur Company, and North West Fur Company are used interchangeably in the papers. Since "Northwestern Fur Company" occurs most frequently, it has been adopted for use in this article. A few manuscripts in the Hubbell Papers, including the diaries of 1880 and 1891, are on microfilm, and the originals of these are owned by Mrs. Dawson.

² *Mankato Free Press*, December 20, 1905.



INTERIOR
of Fort Rice
in the 1860s

trading activities can be gleaned from the papers of Alexander Ramsey and John P. Williamson and from a reminiscent newspaper article published in 1898. But the newly acquired papers constitute by far the most extensive body of information yet discovered about the Northwestern Fur Company.³

The story of the firm, as unfolded in the Hubbell Papers, is fairly detailed. The events leading to its formation began in the spring of 1865, when Hubbell was in Washington, D.C., obtaining licenses to trade with the Indians. There he met Charles P. Chouteau, Jr., who suggested that Hubbell buy the forts and goods of the Chouteau company on the Missouri River. Hubbell made the purchase, and then gave Hawley a half interest. Soon James A. Smith, prime mover in J. A. Smith and Company, Chicago dealers in hats, caps, and furs, heard about the sale from Chouteau's agent in New York, and went to Washington to see Hubbell. According to the latter, "we then decided to organize the N. W. Fur Co., including C. F[rancis] Bates, J. A. Smith, Alpheus F. Hawley and Jas. B. Hubbell."⁴ The agreement creating the company, signed in New York City on March 23, 1865, is among the most revealing items in Hubbell's papers.

There, for example, the arrangements

made by the partners are set forth. Hubbell, who already held government licenses to trade with the Indians at Forts Sully, Rice, and Berthold on the Missouri River, and at points yet unnamed in the Crow Indian country, as well as a sutlership at Fort Sully, agreed to proceed to these posts, where he would carry out "the terms of sale proposed by Messrs Chouteau & Co taking due and formal possession of the forts, trading posts, goods and accessories" for the Northwestern Fur Company.⁵ The obligations and rewards of each partner are clearly defined in the agreement, which

³ See Hiram M. Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, 1:364, 366 (New York, 1902), and the same author's *History of Early Steamboat Navigation on the Missouri River*, 236, 260 (New York, 1903); Lucile M. Kane, translator and editor, *Military Life in Dakota: The Journal of Philippe Régis de Trobriand*, 57, 83, 133, 157, 281, 295, 298, 300, 338. (St. Paul, 1951); and the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, December 11, 1898. The Ramsey and Williamson papers are owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.

⁴ See an undated manuscript signed "A Frontiersman," which was presumably written by Hubbell for an unknown newspaper, and the *Chicago City Directory*, 1865, p. 794. The quoted statement appears as a marginal note in Hubbell's copy of Chittenden's *Steamboat Navigation on the Missouri*, 239, which is owned by Mrs. Dawson. A typewritten copy of the note is among the Hubbell Papers.

⁵ Although the agreement here quoted is undoubtedly that forming the Northwestern Fur Company, the name of the company is not mentioned in the document.

was to run for four years. Hawley and Hubbell, as managing partners, contributed to the new company's capital ten thousand dollars in cash and the goods already at their posts in Dakota Territory; in return they were to receive half of the net profits. Bates and Smith agreed to pay the Chouteau organization debts owed by Hawley and Hubbell and to furnish fifty thousand dollars in goods and cash. In return, each was to receive one-fourth of the net profits.

An adjustment in the distribution of profits was made at the end of the first year, when Bates increased his contribution to the company's capital. Under the terms of the new arrangement, Bates received two-fifths of the net profits; Hawley and Hubbell, two-fifths; and J. A. Smith and Company, one-fifth.⁶ On March 9, 1869, at the end of the four-year period, the partners made another agreement outlining plans for liquidating the business within a year. The document describes the procedure for closing out the trade along the Missouri below Fort Buford and on Devils Lake in Dakota Territory; and for the continuation of business in 1869-70 at forts above Fort Buford with goods transferred from the lower posts. The company's accounts for the years from 1865 to 1870, also among the Hubbell Papers, provide details about the partners' financial arrangements, and include lists of furs gathered at the upper Missouri posts.

Personal letters, as well as business records, in the collection throw light on the history of the fur company. For example, in a letter written on May 24, 1866, while aboard a steamboat going up the Missouri, Hubbell tells his wife in Mankato about the arrangements made with his partners and gives a report on the progress of business. He writes that "Hawley remains at Ft Sully. he is making us a good trade there will probably get from four to five thousand [buffalo] Robes there beside his small Fur. Our collection of Robes will probably be about 25 000 & small Fur enough to swell

the collection up to Equal to 30 000. This will pay for every thing which has been invested and whatever Goods & property are left on hand with the Forts & Buildings at the Post will be clear profit."

Hubbell traded on the upper Missouri during a turbulent period in Indian-white relations. Following the Sioux Outbreak of 1862, military expeditions ranged the plains searching for the guilty bands that had left their bloody mark upon the Minnesota frontier. The Sioux of the Dakota area, intermixed with the hostiles from Minnesota, also had war on their minds. A string of military posts across the plains and up the Missouri served as a stern reminder that the white man was in the West to stay. The Indians uneasily observed the coming of caravans bearing supplies for the posts and of the pathfinders who were to make their hunting grounds a highway to the Pacific. In the mid-1860s the Sioux struck at the enemy in a show of force calculated to stem the white tide. They fought as they always had fought, attacking unguarded supply trains, worrying lonely woodcutters, killing isolated men who ventured too far from the posts, and playing a game of hit-and-run with the soldiers at the forts. Caught in the middle of a sporadic war, Hubbell lost trade goods and furs as his wagon trains moved from one post to another. His business suffered, too, when he furnished supplies to the troops at Fort Buford, the military post at the junction of the Yellowstone and Missouri rivers, which was beleaguered by the Sioux in the winter of 1866-67, and when they destroyed his post on the Niobrara River.

From 1868 until 1904, Hubbell tried to recover his losses by presenting claims on behalf of the Northwestern Fur Company against the United States government. In preparing them, he wrote letters and secured depositions which contain information on his activities in the Indian trade of the West, on the Sioux attacks on Fort Buford, on the ransom paid by Hubbell's men to the hostiles who blocked the passage

⁶This arrangement is defined in an annotation to the original agreement, dated March 5, 1866.

of his wagon trains, on the effect of Indian warfare on the fur trade, and on the hostilities of Indian bands led by Sitting Bull. Although Senators Knute Nelson and Moses Clapp urged that Hubbell's claims be allowed, the government never granted the funds he requested.⁷

In the midst of his difficulties with the hostile Sioux, Hubbell accepted a new responsibility that brought him into still closer touch with that troubled nation. In 1864 he was commissioned by the government to transport the Santee Sioux remaining on a reservation north of Fort Ridgely on the Minnesota River to Fort Thompson on the lower Missouri. Among Hubbell's papers is a deposition dated November 20, 1902, made by Byron E. Pay, the man engaged by Hubbell to make the trip with the Indians. Pay not only describes his journey from Fort Ridgely to Pipestone, where his train was joined by fifty of Hubbell's wagons loaded with supplies for the Indians, but he tells of the difficulties encountered in carrying out his task.

Hubbell's experience as a trader represents only one phase of a varied business career. Operating from his homes in Mankato and St. Paul, he traveled extensively throughout the United States, developing

railroads in Minnesota and Dakota, mines in Montana and Dakota, townsites in Montana, and gypsum mills in Michigan. The fact that railroads seem to have absorbed his attention in the 1870s and 1880s is reflected in items among his papers relating to the Minnesota and Northwestern and the Southern Minnesota railroad companies, the Central Railroad Company of Minnesota, and the Rocky Fork and Cooke City Railway Company of Montana. Included, for example, is a copy of a *Prospectus* published by the latter road in 1887, giving data on gold, silver, and copper mining in Montana, and on the various companies formed for that purpose. This pamphlet is not the only indication in the papers that Hubbell was broadly interested in mining. Also included is a stock certificate of 1903 in the Cook Gold Mining and Milling Company of South Dakota, illustrated with mining scenes. Other references to mining appear in Hubbell's diary for 1880, which

⁷ Most of the information in the Hubbell Papers on Sioux hostilities is to be found in depositions dated November 19 and December 3, 1902, made by Charles W. Hoffman, a sutler at Fort Buford in 1866. Hubbell's claims are summarized in 41 Congress, 2 session, *Senate Reports*, no. 337, p. 1-3 (serial 1443).



GOLD mining
stock certificate
from the
Hubbell Papers

tells of his visits to the Homestake, Father de Smet, and Florence mines during a trip from Montana to St. Paul.

Some personal information about the Hubbell family is to be found in the papers. Hubbell's many references to his home in Mankato, and to St. Paul, where he lived after 1881 and where his business interests were closely allied with those of Amherst H. Wilder, bespeak his affection for the state in which he lived. He kept in touch with relatives in Connecticut through correspondence with an uncle, James Boyd. In a long letter written on September 6, 1868, and preserved in Hubbell's papers, the stay-at-home Boyd displays a keen interest in the nephew who ranged from Michigan to New Orleans, and from New York to Montana. After asking for more news of Hubbell's "goings and movements," he remarks: "To me the rapid growth of the West has an engrossing interest, and my admiration of the energetic men, who are accomplishing such wonders there, is unbounded. I hope I may not only live to see the rails all laid to San Francisco & Pugets Sound, but that I may yet travel over them and see the wonders of the Pacific region."

These newly acquired papers depict Hubbell as a chameleon-like entrepreneur, changing his interests as new opportunities unfolded. In a country where natural resources were abundant and skilled management and capital scarce, he followed the natural lines of economic development, turning from furs to mining, trade, transportation, and townsites. Energetic, imaginative, and optimistic, he entered each new enterprise with fresh enthusiasm. It was not money alone that he sought, for as early as May 24, 1866, he wrote to his wife that "money making for me is now but a game of excitement." He felt the exhilaration of moving along in the mainstream of the Northwest, identifying his interests with those of the fast-growing country.

But the Northwest grew too fast for him. By 1900, a magical change had come over

its "wild regions." Mankato, the boom town from which his wagons traveled westward, had become a quiet city. St. Paul, the rude capital, had almost fulfilled the promise of its raucous boosters as it matured into a metropolis. The Far West, too, had changed, adding to its economy of furs, gold, and silver the sobering alloy of cattle, sheep, and farms. Before he died, Hubbell had already become a man of the past. Out of his adventures, his struggles, his acquisition and loss of fortunes, there remains a small monument—his papers. In them, scholars now have a new avenue to the understanding of his times.

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