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**Trapped:
Steel, Whiskey, Extinction, and the Upper Peninsula Fur Trade**

Robert Archibald Ph.D.

The fur trade in the Upper Peninsula was the first in a string of giant commercial extractive industries that really began in the early 1620s with the arrival of the Frenchman Etienne Brulé and his companion at Sault Ste. Marie. Resources, in this instance fur bearing mammals, were exploited until they were near extermination, or until demand in Europe disappeared. All mammals larger than squirrels, with the exception of porcupine and skunks, were trapped or hunted to the brink of extinction for their skins. Native people eager for guns, European trade goods of all kinds, and whiskey ensured the actual trapping and hunting. Only Europeans prospered. Native people made a devilish bargain in which they destroyed animals that were their major food source in a country where agricultural is marginal in a good year. When the animals were gone, native people went hungry and were no longer able to purchase the trade goods that they now depended upon. Many were addicted to the whiskey that Europeans had introduced to induce native people to trap and hunt animals.

The following are quotes from four Euro-American eyewitnesses to the trade and its impacts on people and prey. Étienne De Carheil, S.J., stationed at Fort Michilimackinac wrote to Governor Louis Hector de Callières, on August 30, 1702. He recounted:

“...we must be delivered from the Commandants and from their garrisons. These, far from being necessary, are, on the contrary, so pernicious that we can truly say that they are the greatest scourge of our missions; for they serve but to injure both the ordinary trade of the voyageurs and the advancement of the faith. . . . All the pretended service which it is sought to make people believe that they Render to the King is reduced to 4 chief occupations, of which we earnestly beg you to

Inform His majesty. The first consists in keeping a public Tavern for the sale of brandy, wherein they trade it Continually to the savages, who do not Cease to become intoxicated, notwithstanding all our efforts to prevent it. The second occupation of the soldiers consists in being sent from one post to another by the Commandants in order to carry their wares and their brandy thither . . . Their third occupation consists in making of their fort a place that I am ashamed to call by its proper name, where the women have found out that their bodies might serve in lieu of merchandise and would be still better received than Beaver-skins; accordingly, that is now the most usual and most Continual Commerce, and that which is most extensively carried on.”¹

François Xavier Charlevoix, another Jesuit priest, explorer, and historian of New France wrote in 1721:

“It appears that the Indians of Canada did not give them (the beaver) much disturbance before our arrival in their country. The skins of the beaver were not used by those people by way of garments and the flesh of bears, elks, and some other wild beasts, seemed, in all probability, preferable to that of the beaver. They were, however, in use to hunt them, and this hunting had both its season and ceremonial fixed; but when people hunt only out of necessity, and when this is confined to pure necessities, there is no great havoc made; thus when we arrived in Canada we found prodigious number of these creatures in it.”²

Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, Indian Agent at Sault Ste. Marie, wrote to Lewis Cass, the Superintendent of Indian Affairs in Detroit, on August 9, 1824:

“The Indian Population in the Agency, being scattered over a great extent of the country---collected into small bands or villages often separated by hundreds of miles of waste and barren country destitute of both game and fish, the Indians could not perform long journies to exchange their furs for those goods which habit has rendered essential to them.”³

And two years later, Thomas McKenney, the Superintendent of Indian Trade wrote from Sault Ste. Marie on August 21, 1826:

“they (the Indians) are three quarters of the time starving, and many of them, as I have often repeated, die annually of want! . . . they kill game in seasons when it is destructive to its multiplication, and hence the entire amount of the furs of the whole coast of Lake Superior, may now be estimated as not exceeding . . . enough to buy a blanket of the most ordinary quality(per person).”⁴

The fur trade began as a profitable offshoot of commercial fishing in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and off the Grand Banks of Newfoundland. In the 16th century before the French or English established North American colonies, European fishermen were catching cod just offshore. They came ashore for several weeks to dry the fish and established the first trading relationships with the native people they encountered. Natives desired European goods, and the fisherman wanted meat, but they also soon discovered that they could make enormous sums in Europe by trading for furs, which they sold upon their return for a huge profit. Thus began the fur trade that lured the French ever further into the interior of the continent and to the Upper Peninsula in only a few decades. Native people were the indispensable partners in the trade.⁵

Hats made of beaver felt became the haberdasher's fashion of choice in the 16th century. But the fur trade was not just about beaver fur, but rather a response to global demand for furs of all kinds. A perusal of account books for Mackinac traders includes a listing of the types of animal pelts received. There are beaver pelts aplenty, of course, but also otter, raccoon, muskrat, bear, bobcat, grey fox, fisher, wolf, fox, elk, and deer.⁶

Through the 17th century the fur trade moved into and through the Upper Peninsula to the west of the lakes in pursuit of furs to meet burgeoning demand. So the hunt extended through Lake Superior, to the north toward Hudson Bay and west toward the Rockies from Grand Portage at the head of the Lake. For much of this period Montreal outfitters sent trade goods up the Ottawa River, down the French River into Georgian Bay and then to Michilimackinac where French and Indian traders brought bundles of furs, which were exchanged for trade goods in what was a raucous and colorful trade fair in the summer months.

While the fur trade remained centered at the Straits of Mackinac the actual post moved from Fort du Baude at St. Ignace to Michilimackinac on the southern side of the straits and eventually the British moved it out to Mackinac Island for defensive reasons. But while the actual trading occurred at the straits most of the animal skins came from far beyond the Upper Peninsula which was largely trapped and hunted out. Antoine LaMothe Cadillac, who was in charge at Fort du Baude until 1696, described the status:

“Beavers are very scarce in the neighborhood of Michilimackinac, and the Indians at this post go as far as 200 leagues to hunt for them . . . They barter their beaver skins for our goods; this is what is called trading, or doing the trade. We supply them with powder, bullets, arms, cloth, tobacco and everything else we use.”⁷

Two hundred leagues is nearly seven hundred miles, so Indians and traders were going great distances in search of pelts. Furs also came to Mackinac from the trade on the Upper Missouri through St. Louis and up the Mississippi and tributaries to Lake Michigan.⁸ Even though furs continued in a torrent through the Straits of Mackinac, few fur bearing mammals remained in the Upper Peninsula by the 18th century.

Most contemporary observers were oblivious to the environmental consequences of the extermination of fur bearing mammals so they left no direct observations. We do know that beaver occupy a vital ecological niche as a “keystone species.” On July 18, 2017 the *Marquette Mining Journal* reported extensive flooding in the Three Lakes area west of Michigamme, and it was not because of heavy rains and rising rivers. The cause was the collapse of a dam built by beavers.⁹ Dams are the centerpiece of beaver engineering. In building dams beaver remake the world around them and create wetlands and food chains that support dozens of other creatures. The new wetlands reduce flooding, improve water quality and stabilize the water table.¹⁰ The near disappearance

of beaver in the 17th and 18th centuries in the Upper Peninsula adversely impacted wetlands and all of the species of plants and animals that depend upon them.

Nearly all other animals were hunted to the brink of extinction, while some populations such as moose, caribou and probably wolverine never recovered and became extinct in the Upper Peninsula. Account books from the 1790s show that beaver and the other most desirable furs were in decline while there were increases in less sought after pelts like muskrats.¹¹ One other window into the status of Upper Peninsula fur bearing mammals is through the accounts of the American Fur Company on Mackinac Island. In 1821 there were twenty-seven licensed traders being supplied from the offices on the island. Each trader was assigned an area to manage. There was one trader assigned to Mackinac, one on Drummond Island and one at L'Anse. Furs traded on Drummond Island and at Mackinac likely came from sources not located in the Upper Peninsula. Only the L'Anse trader did business with native people who resided and hunted in the Upper Peninsula.¹² The company's scant allocation of resources to the U.P. reflects the diminution of the trade in the area. In 1821 Indian Agent Henry Schoolcraft reported that an Indian from the Upper Menominee River told him "he killed last fall, nearly one thousand muskrats, thirteen bears, twenty martins and twelve fishers. Beavers, he killed none, as they were all killed off some years ago."¹³

Historian Alvah Sawyer provided a status report on Upper Peninsula wildlife in 1911. The following animals were extinct or on the brink of extinction; black bears, buffalo, woodland caribou, moose, elk, wolves, wolverines, panther, otter, badger, mink, and beaver. Several of these species including beaver recovered from the fur trade slaughter, and others like moose were reintroduced.¹⁴

The worst casualties of the fur trade were not animals but people. Diseases introduced by Europeans decimated native populations. The viruses and bacteria that caused these diseases are the first onslaught of invasive species to afflict the region, preceding sea lamprey by centuries. The most lethal were smallpox and measles that came in repeated waves taking whole families and villages. Smallpox was a European disease transmitted at first in growing cities where large numbers of people were in close proximity. Native people in the Americas were not exposed to the disease and had little immunity to it.

Many early European traders remarked on the devastation caused by disease. Douglas Houghton, physician and geologist, commented on the epidemics of smallpox that had ravaged the U.P. He estimated that there were at least five epidemics beginning in the 1760s. "People," he said, died off like sheep and fled before it like stricken deer, leaving their dead and dying behind them."¹⁵ Other records prove that there were repeated epidemics beginning at least as early as 1717.¹⁶ Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, Indian Agent quoted a Dr. Pitcher who was familiar with the epidemics. He told Schoolcraft that it is not only smallpox that is to blame for deaths of natives but also measles and influenza.¹⁷ Douglas Houghton reported to Henry Schoolcraft in 1832 that he had vaccinated most native people in the Upper Peninsula, thus reducing the scourge of this pernicious invader.¹⁸

Native people engaged in an escalating slaughter of animals in order to obtain the trade goods that they had come to depend upon. In this endeavor they destroyed much of their food supply, no longer had anything of value to trade for necessities of life, and were impoverished and in many instances starving. Through the years of European

contact native people became increasingly dependent upon the goods sold to them by traders. These included guns, ammunition, metal pots, pans, knives, cloth, blankets, jewelry, buttons, powder horns and many other items including prodigious amounts of whiskey. Heart wrenching contemporary reports detail the slow descent of native people into worsening poverty, indebtedness to traders, begging for food and sometimes even engaging in cannibalism.¹⁹

When the first treaty of Fond du Lac between the United States and the Ojibwa was signed at Duluth in 1826 it granted annuities or annual payments to be made to them, “In consideration of the poverty of the Cheppeways, and of the sterile nature of the country they inhabit for cultivation and almost destitute of game . . . ”²⁰ In the waning days of the trade in 1835, Ramsay Crooks of the American Fur Company pleaded with the Secretary of War to pay annuities owed to native people on time because when the payments are late people suffer greatly from hunger.²¹

Henry Schoolcraft, keen observer of Upper Peninsula affairs, accurately assessed the plight of native people. “Circumstances,” he wrote, “had now inclined the Chippewa and Ottawa tribes of Indians to cede to the United States a portion of their extensive territory. Game had failed in the greater part of it, and they had no other means of raising funds to pay their large outstanding credits to traders . . . ”²² The debts he referred to were incurred because traders advanced natives supplies before the hunting and trapping season. When the returns in pelts fell off the native hunters and trappers were in debt to the traders. As animals were hunted and trapped out native people were twice impoverished, first because they had nothing to eat and second because they no longer had anything to trade.

The whiskey business was the dark underside to the relationships between the indigenous people of the Upper Peninsula and the Europeans. The French, British and Americans attempted to interdict the use of alcohol as a kind of liquid bribe in the trade, and then all turned a blind eye to its blatant abuse. Schoolcraft was blunt with the truth. “Little does the spirit of commerce care,” he wrote, “how many Indians die inebriated if it can be assured of beaver skins.”²³ In 1825 despite official opposition to the whiskey business the agent of the North American Fur Company at the Sault took delivery of 3,300 gallons of whiskey and 2500 gallons of high wine, which was a whiskey distilled multiple times to increase the alcohol content.²⁴

Superintendent of Indian Affairs Thomas McKenny traveled to the lakes in 1826 and recorded his observations of whiskey degradation. At Detour he saw an island filled with Indians—“drunk, noisy and naked!” On Drummond Island he encountered another group. “It is not possible,” he said, “to give a description of the looks of those staggering, besotted Indians, when seen by torch light.” These people had exchanged their blankets, strouds, kettles, knives and calicoes for seventeen barrels of whiskey.²⁵

Schoolcraft summarized the awful toll in a letter to Territorial Governor Lewis Cass in 1822. “The most pernicious effects, however,” he told the Governor, “which long habits of association with Europeans have produced . . . [is] that baneful passion for ardent spirits which threatens and without the most powerful exertions of our government, must completely annihilate this ill-fated race.”²⁶ Euro-Americans accepted no responsibility for the debauchery they brought here, blaming it instead on some inherent defect in native people.

The horrible consequence of the European invasion for native people was a drastic decline in population due to disease, famine, and whiskey. Native population of the Upper Peninsula is estimated at about three thousand people when the first French arrived early in the seventeenth century.²⁷ Henry Schoolcraft again headed to the Upper Peninsula in 1838 charged with appraising improvements on lands that were ceded in the Treaty of Washington signed with the Ojibwa two years earlier for which tribal members were to be compensated. The land cession encompassed Upper Peninsula territory from the easternmost tip to a line following from Lake Superior to Lake Michigan as far west as the Chocolay and Escanaba Rivers. Schoolcraft was told that in this territory there were eight separate bands of people and that the whole population did not exceed 569 souls. He noted lots of abandoned village sites, thousands of acres of land that once was cultivated and he wrote, “the population had evidently deteriorated from the days for French and British rule, when game was abundant.”²⁸ An 1838 census enumerated 1,350 native people in the entire Upper Peninsula. The population declined by almost sixty percent.²⁹

By the 1830s the fur trade dramatically shrunk. Silk hats were in and beaver hats were out. In the Upper Peninsula there were few animals left to trap or hunt for their fur. Native people were dispossessed and destitute. It was not just animals that were ensnared in a trap, but the people who were here first were also trapped and disoriented by another iteration of “storms brewed in other men’s worlds.”³⁰

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- ¹ Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791: The Original French, Latin and Italian Texts, with English Translations and Notes.* (Cleveland: Burrows, 1897), vol. 65, 193-195.
- ² Pierre Francois Xavier de Charlevoix, *Journal of a Voyage to North America*, 2 vols. trans. Louise Phelps Kellogg (Chicago: The Caxton Club, 1923), vol. 1, 152.
- ³ Henry Rowe Schoolcraft to Lewis Cass, Sault Ste. Marie, August 9, 1824, Wisconsin Historical Collections, vol. 20, 343.
- ⁴ Thomas L. McKenney, *Sketches of a Tour to the Lakes* (Minneapolis: Ross and Haines, Inc., 1959), 376-377.
- ⁵ William John Eccles, "Fur Trade," in the *Canadian Encyclopedia* accessed January 9, 2018, <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/fur-trade/>
- ⁶ 1715 account of peltries received from and material shipped to Mackinac traders Raymond Baby and François Larche, in ledger of Montreal outfitter Alexis Monière in Timothy J. Kent, *Rendezvous at the Straits, Fur Trade and Military Activities at Fort de Baude and Fort Michilmackinac, 1669-1781*(Ossineke, Michigan: Silver Fox Enterprises, 2004), vol. 1, 201-204.
- ⁷ Milo M. Quaife, ed., *The Western Country in the 17th Century; The Memoirs of Lamothe Cadillac and Pierre Liette*, (Chicago: The Lakeside Press, 1947), 15.
- ⁸ Ida Amanda Johnson, *The Michigan Fur Trade*, (Lansing; Michigan Historical Commission, 1919), 97.
- ⁹ *Marquette Mining Journal*, "Dam break causes flooding," July 18, 2017, accessed January 9, 2018, <http://www.miningjournal.net/news/local/2017/07/dam-break-causes-flooding/>
- ¹⁰ Mike Callahan, Beaver Solutions, *What Good Are Beavers?*, accessed January 9, 2018, <http://www.beaversolutions.com/beaver-facts-what-good-are-beavers/>
- ¹¹ Ida Amanda Johnson, *The Michigan Fur Trade* (Grand Rapids: The Black Letter Press, 1971), 97.
- ¹² Reuben G. Thwaites, ed., *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, vol. 11 (Madison: Democrat Printing Company, 1888), 370-376, accessed January 9, 2018, <http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/whc/id/5581/rec/11>
- ¹³ Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, *Personal Memories of a Residence of Thirty Years with the Indian Tribes on the American Frontiers* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo and Co., 1851), clxxv.
- ¹⁴ Alvah L. Sawyer, *A History of the Northern Peninsula and Its people* (Chicago: the Lewis Publishing Company, 1911), 91-97.
- ¹⁵ Ron L. Numbers and Judith Walzer Leavitt, *Wisconsin Medicine: Historical Perspectives*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981), 7.
- ¹⁶ Russell M. Magnaghi, *Native Americans of Michigan's Upper Peninsula: A Chronology to 1900* (Marquette: Center for Upper Peninsula Studies, Northern Michigan University, 2009), 33.
- ¹⁷ Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, *Personal memoirs of a residence of thirty years with the Indian tribes on the American frontiers: with brief notices of passing events, facts and opinions, A.D. 1812 to A.D. 1842* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo and co., 1851), 311, accessed January 9, 2018, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015010390519;view=1up;seq=333>
- ¹⁸ Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, *Narrative of an Expedition through the Upper Mississippi to Itasca Lake*, (New York: Harper, 1834), 250-257.
- ¹⁹ Milo Quaife, ed., *Alexander Henry's Travels and Adventures in the Years 1760-1776* (Chicago: The Lakeside Press, R.R. Donnelly and Sons Company, 1921), 190-200, accessed January 10, 2018, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=gri.ark:/13960/t8w980c61;view=1up;seq=367>
- ²⁰ Thomas L. McKenney, *Sketches of a Tour to the Lakes* (Minneapolis: Ross and Haines, 1959), 481.
- ²¹ *Territorial Papers*, Vol. 12, Ramsay Crooks to the Secretary of War, Office of the American Fur Company, 7 May, 1835, 908-909.
- ²² Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, *Personal Memoirs of a Residence of Thirty Years with the Indian Tribes on the American Frontiers: With Brief Notices of Passing Events, Facts and Opinions, A.D. 1812 to A.D. 1842* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo and co., 1851), 524., accessed January 10, 2018, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015010390519;view=1up;seq=333>
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 326.

²⁴ *Minnesota Historical. Collections*, Vol. 20, Letter from Josiah Snelling to James Barbour Sect'y of War. Written at Detroit on August 23, 1825, 385, accessed January 10, 2018, <http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/whc/id/14285/rec/20>

²⁵ McKenney, *Sketches*, 165-170.

²⁶ Bernard C. Peters, "The Impact of Alcohol on the Indians of the Great Lakes/Upper Mississippi Region: Some First Hand Accounts of the Drunken Frolic," in Robert Archibald, ed., *Northern Border: History and Lore of Michigan's Upper Peninsula and Beyond* (Marquette: Northern Michigan University Press, 2014), 169.

²⁷ "Native Americans in the Great Lakes Region," accessed January 10, 2018, <http://geo.msu.edu/extra/geogmich/paleo-indian.html>

²⁸ Schoolcraft, *Memoirs*, 602.

²⁹ Magnaghi, *Native Americans*, 76.

³⁰ Elizabeth Ann Harper John, *Storms Brewed in Other Men's Worlds: The Confrontation of Indians, Spanish and French in the Southwest, 1540-1795* (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University, 1981), iii.