

The Fur Trade

Background Information for Teachers

The first white men to come to Wisconsin were European explorers and priests. The priests came hoping to convert American Indians to Catholicism, (in their minds) saving the souls of people they considered to be “Godless savages.” Explorers came hoping to find valuable natural resources or a trade route to the East where riches in the form of spices and cloth could be found. One such explorer was Jean Nicolet from the French fur trading company called the Company of One Hundred Associates. Nicolet was searching for thickly forested land where animals could be trapped for their furs, and perhaps hoping to find a trade route to the East (Asia). Europeans considered furs valuable at that time because of fashion trends that made items like beaver felt top hats popular.

The French traders were not interested in American Indian lands for establishing farms and homesteads, as later settlers would be. The French viewed Wisconsin Indians as trade partners rather than road blocks to them settling the area. As a result of this desire for cooperation, the French made an effort to learn the Indians’ languages and cultures. Some of the Frenchmen intermarried with Wisconsin Indian women, creating a group of people called the Métis. The French fur traders, also known as Voyageurs, eventually adopted some Native foods, medicines, dress, and methods of transportation, among other customs.

When Nicolet arrived at Green Bay in 1634, he encountered the Ho-Chunk, the Menominee, and the Potawatomi. Within a short period of time, the Menominee, the Ho-Chunk, and the Sauk and Fox were trading furs to the French in exchange for items such

as silver jewelry (called trade silver), copper kettles, iron tools or pots, guns, and glass beads. These trade goods changed Native culture dramatically. Metal hoes, axes, and tools for clearing the land improved the farming of agricultural tribes like the Ho-Chunk and Menominee. Native women began using copper and iron kettles, knives, and utensils. And tribes that relied mainly on forest animals for their food source now had the advantage of flintlock rifles, lead ammunition, and metal traps to make them more successful hunters.¹

However, despite the advantages of the fur trade for Wisconsin Indians, there were several disadvantages as well. The Indians had to supply a very large number of pelts to equal the value of finished trade goods. Several pelts might be necessary to equal the value of one trade item. According to author Patty Loew, “Indian hunters provided an ever-increasing supply of pelts in exchange for lesser quantities of the manufactured items they desired. In this system, it was easy for Indians to fall behind, meaning that they would buy items on credit from the French to be paid for when they were able to bring more processed furs. It was a system that fostered dependency. Tribes that willingly embraced it ultimately discovered that it depleted their natural resources and impoverished their people.” (Loew, *Indian Nations of Wisconsin*, p. 15.)

Excessive hunting of otter, beaver, mink, marten, muskrat, raccoon, wolverine, lynx, and rabbit for their fur led to the depletion of these animals in some areas. When that happened, hunting parties from one tribe would sometimes move into the hunting grounds of their neighboring tribes causing conflict. Tribes also split into smaller hunting

¹ Hunting as commonly defined is not known in Native culture. In the Native philosophy, the creator brings the animal to an individual as a gift and the animal willingly sacrifices its life so that the person may eat and be clothed. There is thus a connectedness between the individual and the animal as well as a spiritual aspect to the action of taking the animal’s life. However, for lack of a better word, I will use the word “hunt” to describe this process.

parties and spread out, thus altering the sense of community present when they occupied a large village together. Fur trading also affected Native customs by causing male hunters to be absent from their families for long periods of time. The roles of women changed as they had to adopt tasks once performed by men. In the absence of their husbands, women had to learn to construct and repair lodges, gather firewood, butcher game, and sometimes hunt and fish.

Because a lot of decisions now revolved around hunting, women were not asked for their advice as much as they had been in the past. Rather than sharing power between men and women, tribes came to be more male dominated.

Another unfortunate result of the fur trade was the introduction of alcohol to the Indians by the French fur traders. Because they had no tolerance for alcoholic beverages, some Wisconsin Indians quickly became addicted to them. As the fur trade depleted the natural world around them, and as Indian communities suffered great losses due to European diseases, many Indians became impoverished. Some Indians turned to alcohol thinking it would help them to forget their problems. The alcohol, however, often made the problems worse.

In the 1740s, British traders arrived to challenge the French. The rivalry between the French and the British erupted into warfare in the French and Indian War (1753-1759). The British defeated the French in 1759 when General James Wolfe crushed the main body of French troops outside of Quebec. From this point on, the British officially controlled the fur trade.

In general, Wisconsin Indians resented this change. The French had understood the Native practice of gift-giving and its importance in establishing good relations. The

British did not understand that gift-giving was an important part of Native culture. In order to gain cooperation from the Indians, the British used fear tactics and threats. The tyranny of the British resulted in Pontiac's Rebellion in 1763. The son of an Ottawa chief and an Ojibwe woman, Pontiac organized Indian groups of the Western Great Lakes (with the exception of the Menominee and Ho-Chunk) in a rebellion against the British. Indian warriors were able to capture many British forts, but not hold on to them. Still, as a result of Pontiac's Rebellion, the British passed the Proclamation of 1763 which forbade colonists from settling west of the Appalachians. This decree was, however, largely ignored by the colonists. Other results of the Rebellion included reintroducing the French practice of gift-giving, relaxing the restrictions on selling guns and ammunition to the tribes, and employing some French traders to work with the tribes.

Following the American Revolution, the new American government took control of the fur trade. The fur trade suffered as the government tried to centralize control with government-run posts. As with the British then they took over from the French, the Americans had little understanding of how to cultivate relationships with Wisconsin Indians. The Americans charged the Indians high prices for their hunting supplies, eating up any profits the Indians might have made and impoverishing them more. The American posts also freely traded alcohol for furs enabling Native traders to abuse alcohol. By the 1830s, the population of some fur bearing animals was dwindling. Beaver were nearly extinct. Also, the once fashionable beaver hat went out of style and the demand for beaver pelts declined sharply.

As the fur trade began to fail, the industry of lead mining became popular in parts of Wisconsin. When lead prices dropped, the miners turned to farming and discovered

rich soil. It was with this discovery that white people began coming to Wisconsin as settlers. When the settlers arrived in Wisconsin, they wanted land – land that Native Americans: the Ojibwe (Chippewa), the Santee Dakota (Sioux), the Ho-Chunk, the Menominee, and the Sauk and Mesquakie had called home for generations. Thus a new era in the history of Wisconsin began.