

# How James Kipp Won Blackfeet Trade From Grasp of Hudson's Bay Company

THE BROWNING CHIEF

Perhaps no other section of Montana bears greater significance or is more interesting from an historical point of view than the old Fort Benton community and its surrounding territory. This is true because it was near the site of this Missouri river town that were, more than a century ago, the first active posts of the American Fur Co.; it was here that the white man first became acquainted with aboriginal northern central Montana.

The relocation of the site of Fort Piegan in 1926 was of vast historical significance, for the establishment of that trading post at the mouth of the Marias in 1831 was the absolute beginning of things in northern Montana, so far as the white man is concerned.

It was an indispensable service that the fur traders and free trappers performed to the country—a service that no other men of their time were able, or at least willing, to do; they were the explorers, the trail-makers for western civilization.

General Crittenden, our first authority on the history of the fur trade, says of these men: "It was the roving trader and the solitary trapper who first sought out these inhospitable wilds, traced the streams to their sources, scaled the mountain passes, and explored a boundless expanse of territory where the foot of the white man had never trodden before. . . ."

Just how much this nation owes to these fur traders of a century ago for their successful fight to prevent the section of the Rocky mountain country which includes Montana from being taken over by the Hudson's Bay Co. for the British empire will probably never be fully realized. And, possibly to no one man is due greater credit for braving the Hudson's Bay Co. in the unbroken wilderness and beating the Canadian fur traders at their own game than to James Kipp, one of the first white men to engage in fur trading in what is now known as the state of Montana. Had it not been for this man Montana might now be included within the bounded confines of the Canadian commonwealth.

## Companies Battle for Trade

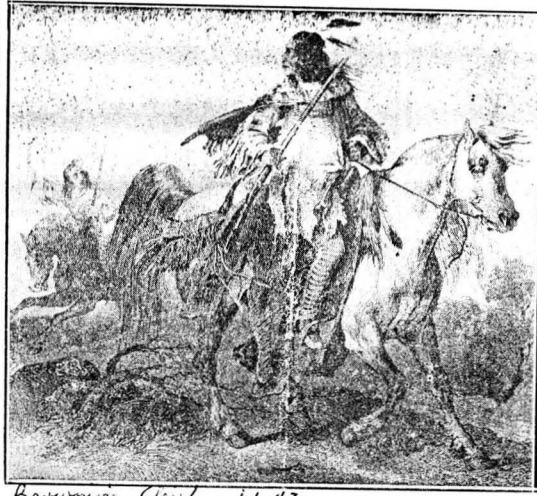
The climax of the war between the British and American fur traders came in the winter of 1830-31, when Kenneth McKenzie, chief factor for the American Fur Co., at Fort Union (located at the mouth of the Yellowstone), decided to make a bold bid for the Blackfeet Indian trade by establishing a trading post at the mouth of the Marias river. It was James Kipp who first urged the wisdom of this course, pointing out, as he did the fact that this great volume of profitable trade was then going to the Hudson's Bay Co. and that it never could be won for the American traders unless the dangers incident to establishing such a post in the Blackfeet country were braved and friendly relations developed between the savage Blackfeet and the Missouri river traders.

Due to the bitter hostility of the Blackfeet toward the Americans, a hostility engendered and fostered by the Hudson's Bay Co. as a measure of trade, McKenzie at first opposed the suggestion, but he was finally won by the force of Kipp's argument, and Kipp was placed at the head of the expedition destined to build Fort Piegan.

## Building of Fort Piegan

In the spring of 1831 the party started from Fort Union. It consisted of 44 men and a 50-ton keel boat laden with a valuable cargo of Indian trading goods. In due time it reached the mouth of the Marias river. Upon the day of arrival at this point there was not an Indian to be seen, but the following morning 500 lodges of the Blackfeet (or Piegan) Indians swarmed down upon the traders and filled up the valley with their lodges.

## A Blackfoot Indian Hunter—By Carl Bodmer



As the presence of these suspicious red men would prove a great embarrassment in the building of the fort, Kipp sought to persuade them to withdraw until his fort had been completed, promising that it should be ready and opened for trade in about 75 days. The Indians consented with apparent good humor, but Kipp's interpreter, Burger, overheard some of the chiefs laughing together and saying that when they got the white men shut up in the pen they were building, they would be easily surrounded and put to death. The Indians departed as rapidly as they had come, leaving three of their head men at Kipp's request to protect them from the annoyances of straggling bands.

The building of the fort progressed rapidly and in 73 days from the time the Indians left, it was completed. It consisted of a stockade enclosing a square 110 feet within, upon the sides of which there were three large buildings of logs, designed as quarters for the men, stock house and the trading room. The gate was protected by an enclosure 25 feet square, the palisades standing 25 feet above the ground, and the interior of these being commanded by loopholes for cannon and small arms for the main fort.

## Indians Were Sullen

Promptly on the 75th day the Indians returned in full force and were astonished at what they saw. Evidently they were unprepared to witness such strong defenses and such readiness to resist attack. They were sullen and refused to trade. Pitching their lodges in the neighborhood, they hovered sullenly about the outside of the post, plainly showing their ill-feeling and distrust.

After exhausting all other measures to induce them to trade, Kipp resolved upon a grand stroke of generosity, rightly concluding that Hudson's Bay Co. had been active in prejudicing the Piegans against the American traders at this new post. Kipp was aware of what the Hudson's Bay Co. paid for furs and peltries and he offered greatly increased rates—sometimes three or four times as much as the British gave. At the same time, he told the chiefs that he would give a grand treat to prove the liberality of the Americans. He then began opening kegs of trade whisky which he had brought for the purpose. Soon every Indian in the great camp was in a state of intoxication.

The whisky was given out lavishly for three days, and the Indian camp was the scene of carousal and merriment. Then Kipp said that his supply had become exhausted. Such liberality astonished the Piegans and elevated the American traders to a place in the estimation of the red men higher by far than that in which they held the Hudson's Bay Co. men. When, they asked, was such a thing known, as a camp of thousands of souls given all the whisky they could drink and kept drunk for three days.

The Piegans no longer believed the representations of the British traders; they saw no snare in the higher prices offered them for their furs; and soon they were besieging the fort in anxious throngs to barter their peltries for the white man's goods.

In a very few days Kipp had secured 6,540 pounds of beaver skins upon which he realized the next spring \$46,000. This was a transaction rarely equalled in the annals of the fur trade and amply compensated him for the gift of a single barrel of alcohol, which had sufficed to make 250 gallons of Indian whisky. Having completed their trading, the Blackfeet departed for the north.

## British Incite Blood Indians

Great was the chagrin of the British traders when they learned of the success of their American rivals, and as the Piegans had failed them, they now sought to persuade the Blood Indians (Canadian tribe of the Blackfeet nation), to undertake reduction of the fort. The Hudson's Bay men represented the Americans as scoundrels of the deepest hue, whose sole object was to plunder and destroy the Indians and take from the Indians their lands. They appealed to the greed of the Bloods by picturing the great stock of merchandise they would secure by taking the post; and killing the traders. The Bloods, convinced of the wisdom of following this advice, consented to attack the post and prepared to do so as soon as spring came.

In the meantime the garrison at Fort Piegan whiled away the winter of 1831-32 as best they could and were yearning for the approach of spring. Early in the spring, a Piegan Indian arrived at the fort and disclosed to Kipp the startling news of the intended attack. (It might be said here that the Bloods were of a far more savage nature than the Piegans and an attack from these warriors was much to be dreaded by the white traders.) About 100 cords of wood had been cut, and Kipp at once had this carried into the fort, after which he turned his attention to the cutting of a great quantity of ice to supply them with water in the event of a siege. This done, he was ready, and in a few days the Bloods arrived to the number of about 1,500 hideously painted warriors. Finding the gates securely fastened against them the Indians at once surrounded the post and opened fire at long range. They gradually grew bolder until they came near enough for the garrison to return the fire with fatal effect. Nevertheless Kipp had wisely decided to fire upon them only at the last extremity, as he desired rather to conciliate them and secure their trade, than to incur their hostility. He therefore, ordered his men not to fire, but to let the Indians see that he was constantly ready to repel any attempt to carry the place by storm.