



Manuel Lisa. Contemporary portrait (about 1818). Unknown artist.

Divide and Conquer: Manuel Lisa Splits the Sioux in the War of 1812

By
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As the War of 1812 began, Great Britain and the fledgling United States of America prepared to do battle across vast distances. War raged from the Eastern seaboard to the edge of the frontier, including the area that eventually became South Dakota. In this wild area, action centered around the dominance of the lucrative fur trade. Competition and conflict with the British who wanted a portion of the revenues of the South Dakota fur trade was fierce and sharp.

The conflict between the British traders and the Americans had high stakes beyond simple business: governments seemed to follow in the footsteps of the fur traders, and whichever side won the contest for the fur trade in the Dakota area would eventually have the opportunity to introduce its own laws, boundaries, and even settlers. That the political ramifications of this battle for dominance in the fur trade eventually tilted in America's favour was due to the mountain men--men such as Manuel Lisa. As Alpheus Favour observed:

Any fair student of this period and territory must acknowledge that these mountain men performed a service to their country [The United States] which was very considerable, a service which in the rapid march of events has been almost forgotten The English lost control of the country occupied by the Hudson's Bay Company largely by reason of these men. Had there been no mountain men the English influence would have lasted on the West and Northwest, so much so that the present boundary of this country would have

been a line further south.¹

The time of greatest danger for American interests occurred during the War of 1812.

It appears from observations and letters by American traders and officials that the British intended to create an Indian uprising along the Missouri River and in so doing unify the Sioux and other Indians against the American fur traders and merchants who had been plying their wares along this great river.

The primary individual concerned in this affair was Col. Robert Dickson. Dickson was a fur trader, based out of Prairie Du Chien (now in Wisconsin) who had connections with the Sioux Indians, and thus, by extension, with South Dakota.² Dickson had a post near Lake Traverse, close to present day Sisseton, South Dakota. His principal assistant was a half breed trapper named Joseph Renville. This post functioned as the Hudson's Bay Company Sioux District Headquarters and was operated by Duncan Graham and John Bourke until they were replaced by Renville in 1821.³

The Hudson's Bay Company's (and Dickson's) association with South Dakota came about because of the energetic activities of an eccentric Scottish earl, Thomas Douglas, 5th Earl of Selkirk. Lord Selkirk was interested in settling Scottish highlanders in the wilderness regions of Canada and saw potential in the charter granted to the Hudson's Bay Company over vast regions of North America. After failing to buy out the existing stockholders of the HBC, he was eventually successful in dominating the affairs of the company through stock purchases.⁴ He then

1 Alpheus Favour, *Old Bill Williams Mountain Man* (Oklahoma, University of Oklahoma Press, 1962 -- originally published 1936), pp.19-20.

2 Doane Robinson, *History of South Dakota* (B.F. Bowen 1904) p.88.

3 Information taken from Fur Trade Exhibit, Old Courthouse Museum, Sioux Falls S.D., April 2008. See also Donald Parker, "Early Explorations and Fur Trading in South Dakota," *South Dakota Historical Collections*, XXV (1951), 179. Parker believes Dickson was Bourke's superior from 1819-1821.

4 P. Newman, *Caesar's of the Wilderness: The Story of the Hudson's Bay Company* (New York, Penguin Books, 1987), pp.145-150.

proposed a colonization scheme to the directors of the HBC involving the settlement of a colony along the Red River Valley in Canada and North and South Dakota. At first hesitant to back this unusual proposal, the directors were won over by Selkirk's agreement to use his own funds for the venture. Dickson assisted Selkirk by attempting to convince settlers to locate in the new colony. Dickson's intentions towards the United States were certainly hostile. Historian Doane Robinson declares that, "He certainly very frankly, while trading on American soil, entered into the employment of the mother country (England) and did what he could to further the English cause at our expense."⁵ At any rate, Dickson also began efforts to recruit Sioux Indians for the British cause.

Dickson's efforts were noticed by American officials. The British were already in South Dakota working with the Sioux against United States' interests, a position confirmed by Superintendent William Clark when he wrote to the Secretary of War from St. Louis, on 13 February 1812:

Mr. Dickson and those British traders who are also Agents who have smuggled an emince [sic] quantity of goods through that Chanel [sic], this year, and now in the Mississippi, could be caught on their return as they go out in the Spring -- This description of people grasp at every means in their power to waive the affections of the Indians from anything that is American, having it in their power to make large presents to the Indians the most of whome [sic] are to be bought and by this means create great difficulty wherever they have an influence.⁶

Indeed, fears about British incitement of Indian tribes extended

5 Robinson, p.88.

6 Letter from William Clark to Secretary of War, February 13, 1812 found in *Territorial Papers of the United States*, XIV, 520 quoted in Donald Parker "Early Explorations and Fur Trading in South Dakota," *South Dakota Historical Collections*, XXV (1951), 124.

to the highest reaches of the American government. President James Madison mentioned this issue in a message to Congress:

In reviewing the conduct of Great Britain toward the United States our attention is necessarily drawn to the warfare just renewed by the savages on one of our extensive frontiers -- a warfare which is known to spare neither age nor sex and to be distinguished by features peculiarly shocking to humanity. It is difficult to account for the activity and combinations which have for some time been developing themselves among tribes in constant intercourse with British traders and garrisons without connecting their hostility with that influence and without recollecting the authenticated examples of such interpositions heretofore furnished by the officers and agents of that Government.⁷

Manuel Lisa and the War of 1812 in South Dakota

At the time of the outbreak of war with Great Britain in 1812, the most prominent fur trader on the Upper Missouri was Manuel Lisa. Lisa was exceptionally daring and successful. He had been able to maintain fur posts in the Upper Missouri country in North and South Dakota where no one else had yet ventured. Thus it was fitting that he served as the principal force for the United States' efforts opposing Dickson and the British traders in the Upper Missouri and South Dakota.

The success of Lisa's efforts was recognized at the time and thereafter by the British. When Doane Robinson conducted an interview with the Rev. John B. Renville, the son of the notorious Joseph Renville, the half-breed British trader at Lake Traverse, in 1901, he had this to say:

During the war (of 1812) the Americans from St. Louis stirred up

⁷ Message of President James Madison to Congress 1 June 1812, *Messages and Papers of the Presidents* (New York, Bureau of National Literature Inc., 1897), Vol. II, pp. 488-489.

much trouble between the Tetons and the Santees, and it seemed as if there was to be civil war in the Dakota Confederacy. Manuel Lisa was the American agent and he set the Tetons against the Santees because the latter supported the English. That is the reason the Santees could not help the English more. Every time they started out to go to the lakes and Canada, runners would come and tell them the Tetons were coming to destroy their families and they were compelled to return to their homes to protect their women and children. Lisa had his post either on American Island, where Chamberlain now is, or on Cedar Island above the big bend of the Missouri [near present day Pierre South Dakota]. He had a big post there and the Tetons were not nearly so poor as were the Santees, for they had plenty of buffalo meat and Lisa bought all their furs. Lisa was a very smart man, and he managed things so that all of the money and work of Dickson to get the Santees to fight the Americans was lost. He got one of our men [Tamaha, the one eyed Sioux] to spy on his own people and let him know all that was being done. Father met Lisa several times after the war and he boasted about the way he managed the Tetons.⁸

One can only surmise what would have happened had Lisa not been available to restrain the scalping knives and tomahawks of the Sioux -- if Dickson and Renville had been successful in uniting the tribes against the American interests in the Upper Missouri. Almost assuredly, all American traders would have been killed and outposts burned. There is also the possibility that Dickson's work against the United States' interests in the Great Lakes regions would have been greatly strengthened if he had been able to rely on the added forces of the Santee Sioux along with the Sissetons and Yanktons he was able to recruit and use in the battles around Detroit.

⁸ Interview of Doane Robinson with Rev. John B. Renville, 10 August 1901, quoted in Walter Douglas Manuel Lisa (New York, Argosy, 1964), p.88.

Lisa had always been an adroit observer of Indian sign and he wrote a letter to Governor William Clark in St. Louis dated 1 July 1817, describing his role in the War of 1812 :

Sir, I have the honor to remit to you the commission of sub-agent, which you were pleased to bestow on me in the summer of 1814, for the Indian nations who inhabit the Missouri River, above the mouth of the Kansas, and to pray you accept my resignation of that appointment. The circumstances under which I do this demand me some exposition of the actual state of these Indians and of my own conduct during the time of my sub-agency. Whether I deserve well or ill of the government depends upon the solution of these questions: 1st. Are the Indians of the Missouri more or less friendly to the United States than at the time of my appointment? 2. Are they altered, better or worse, in their own condition during this time? To the first proposition I have to say, that I received this appointment when war was raging between the United States and Great Britain, and when the activity of British emissaries had armed against the Republic all the tribes of the Upper Missouri and of the northern lakes. Had the Missouri Indians been overlooked by British agents? No. Your excellency will remember that more than a year before the war broke out I gave you intelligence that the wampum was carrying by British influence along the banks of the Missouri, and that all the nations of this great river were excited to join the universal confederacy then setting foot, of which the profit was the instrument and the British traders the soul. The Indians of the Missouri are to those of the Upper Mississippi as four to one. Their weight would be great, if thrown into the scale against us. They did not arm against the Republic; on the contrary, they armed against Great Britain, and struck the Iowas, the allies of that power. When peace was proclaimed, more than forty chiefs had intelligence with me; and together were to carry an expedition of several thousand

warriors against the tribes of the Upper Mississippi and silence them at once. These things are known to your excellency.⁹

Lisa had in fact been named as a sub-agent for the Indian tribes on the Upper Missouri by General Clark in the summer of 1814, when it appeared that the entire group of tribes in the Upper Missouri might be willing to join themselves to the British cause (of course no one involved in these various machinations knew that a peace treaty was in the offing and the War of 1812 would end in December 1814 with the Treaty of Ghent). At the time, Governor Clark had written to the Secretary of War:

Sir you have no doubt been informed by Gen. Howard that the U.S. troops surrendered the post at Prairie Du Chien to the combined army of British and Indians on the 19th after an obstinate resistance of three days and before the reinforcement reached them which were within 80 leagues. The possession of that post and Mackanack has enabled the British to supply the Indians on the Mississippi and towards the Lakes and they are spreading their influence to the tribes of the Missouri -- indeed the most destructive Indian war is now carried on, on that river -- I have sent out the Shoshones and Delaways on the Northern frontiers and policy obliges me to encourage the Osage and the tribes of the Missouri to wage war on the Mississippi Indians and those Missouri tribes must be either engaged for us or they will be opposed to us without a doubt. I have appointed August P. Chouteau Sub Indian Agent for the Osage and Manuel Lisa Esq. Agent for the tribes on the Missouri above the Kanzies, until your approbation is obtained, or they are rejected -- Mr. P. Chouteau the Osage agent is furnished with Merchindized [sic] to the amount of \$2964 -- and Manuel Lisa Agent for the

⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 92-93, letter from Manuel Lisa to Governor William Clark, 1 July 1817.

Missouri tribes with goods to the amount of \$1335.¹⁰

One of Lisa's first actions was to send a Sioux Indian named Tamaha (referred to in the Robinson interview with Rev. Renville above) to travel via a circuitous route to visit the pro-British Sioux who were encamped with the British at Fort Meig. Rev. Renville recollected that Tamaha told these Sioux Indians that unless they returned to their homes, the Tetons would attack and destroy them.¹¹

Apparently, Dickson somehow knew of Tamaha's commission from Lisa and tried every conceivable means to "persuade" him to tell all he knew:

It appeared that on his arrival there, Dickson maltreated him, threatened him with death, imprisoned him and tried in every way to extract information, but the Indian remained firm and would disclose nothing. He was then liberated and made his way to the Sioux tribes, whence he returned to Prairie du Chien and remained until the British evacuated that place. He came back to St. Louis in June 1815. He had promised General Clark to visit the various tribes and he kept his word.¹²

According to Doane Robinson Lisa spent most of his time at his fur posts (one in South Dakota). His main contributions to the war involved keeping the Indians contented by purchasing their furs and so forth:

Most of his time was spent at these establishments, where he had from one to two hundred men in his employ. He had horned cattle

¹⁰ Letter from Governor Clark to Secretary of War, 20 August 1814, *Territorial Papers of the United States*, Vol. XIV, "Louisiana and Missouri Territory 1806-1814", pp.786-787.

¹¹ Statement of Rev. Joseph Renville, *S.D. History Collections*, XII, p.95, quoted in Parker, p.134.

¹² Chittenden, Hiram, *History of the American Fur Trade of the Far West* (New York, F.P. Harper, 1902) vol.II, p.558, quoted in Parker, p.135.

[perhaps the first in South Dakota], hogs, and domestic fowl and he supplied the seed and instructed the Indians in the cultivation of vegetables, which supplied a considerable part of their subsistence. He loaned them traps, bought their furs and made his establishments asylums for the old and decrepit. Thus he retained their friendship and held their allegiance to the United States.¹³

Robinson's summary of Lisa's activities is taken from Lisa's letter of resignation to William Clark detailing his methods of dealing with the Indians:

I have had some success as a trader and this success gives rise to many reports. 'Manuel Lisa must cheat the government', 'Manuel Lisa must cheat the Indians' ... 'Cheat the Indians.' The respect and friendship which they have for me, the security of my possessions in the heart of their country, respond to the charge, and declare, with voices louder than the tongues of men that it cannot be true Ten months in the year I am buried in the forest, at a vast distance from my own house. I appear as the benefactor, not as the pillager of the Indians. I carried among them the seed of the large pumpkin, from which I have seen in their possession fruit weighing one hundred and sixty pounds. Also the large bean, the potato, the turnip; and these vegetables now make a comfortable part of their subsistence ... I lend them traps My establishments are the refuge of the weak and of the old men no longer able to follow their lodges; and by these means I have acquired the confidence and friendship of these nations¹⁴

Lisa's successes in the War of 1812 were endorsed in later letter

¹³ Robinson, *South Dakota Historical Collections XII*, p.96, quoted in Parker, p.136.

¹⁴ Luttig, Daniel, *Journal of a Fur Trading Expedition on the Upper Missouri 1812-1813*, ed. Stella Drum (New York, Argosy-Antiquarian Ltd., 1964). Originally published in limited edition in 1920 by Missouri Historical Society pp.21-22.

from Governor Clark to the Secretary of War:

Sir, as you may not have been made acquainted with the perils and difficulties under which this territory laboured [sic] for the two last years, the great exertions made by the British to engage all the Indians in war against us and the steps taken to counteract the British influence which was beginning to spread amongst the numerous tribes of the Missouri -- I beg leave to observe that after using such military means as was under my control which in its effect did not sufficiently check that influence which threatened every part of the scattered population of this territory with a destructive warfare. I adopted the only expedient in my power calculated to check the British influence and the extension of British warfare which was to set some of the large tribes of the Missouri nearest our southern frontiers at war against the tribes of the Mississippi who were our most destructive enemies. To effect this I furnished suitable merchandise to P. Chouteau Esq. the Osage agent and sent him to that nation, he succeeded in sending a party to war with good effect -- Manuel Lisa Esq. a Spanish gentleman of property, in this place and some influence amongst the Indians of the Missouri, a man of good sense and great perseverance, I appointed subagent, furnished him with some merchandise and sent him to the Sioux, Mahaws and Pawnees, He exceeded my expectations and has produced valuable changes in the dispositions of those tribes as per his report enclosed¹⁵

As Robinson noted, there would no doubt be much more material available to report on these various intrigues except the British army burned the White House and other government structures on 23 August 1814, which housed the Bureau of Indian Affairs, where most of the

¹⁵ Letter from Governor Clark to Secretary of War, 11 December 1815, *Territorial Papers of the United States*, Vol.XV, "Louisiana/Missouri Territory 1815-1821," pp.95-96.

official government records of 1812-1813 were kept.¹⁶ Robinson concludes :

the British defeat in the lake region was due to the defection of the Sioux ... due in large measure to the loyalty of the Sioux of the Missouri, in South Dakota, to the American cause. Out of the bounds of South Dakota came an influence that was very material to the final issue. Within our section was domiciled a master mind whose wise strategy was of great significance In view of these facts, it is not too much to say that South Dakota was an important element in the determination of the War of 1812.¹⁷

Here is certainly ample support for the contention that the fur trade and fur traders like Manuel Lisa, who worked in South Dakota, were decisive elements in quite important international affairs. Lisa played his part in winning the struggle against British interests and securing the territory that later became South Dakota.

¹⁶ Parker, footnote, p.135.

¹⁷ Robinson, *South Dakota Historical Collections*, XII (1924), 98, quoted in Parker, p.138.