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## THE AMERICAN FUR COMPANY'S FISHING ENTERPRISES ON LAKE SUPERIOR<sup>1</sup>

By GRACE LEE NUTE

The history of the American Fur Company is so little known — especially its uniqueness as an example of Big Business half a century before monopolistic and large-scale tendencies are popularly supposed to have originated in the United States — that an interesting and significant episode in its development has been entirely overlooked. This was the establishment of fisheries on Lake Superior — an early instance of the maintenance of a subsidiary industry by an American firm.

The main activity of the American Fur Company was the securing and marketing of furs, skins, and buffalo robes. These were obtained from practically every portion of the present territory of the United States except the eastern and gulf seaboards. Strange as it may appear to the layman, even as late as the period with which this paper is concerned, 1834-41, the Ohio Valley was still a fur-yielding area of great consequence. In fact it was the bone of contention between the trappers and agents of the American Fur Company and those of German and Yankee rivals. No more ruthless warfare was ever waged in the interests of trusts and combinations than that resulting from the company's attempt to secure the entire fur and skin yield of that region in 1839 and 1840 after its chief opponent had first

<sup>1</sup> The facts in this paper, unless otherwise specified, are based on documents in the American Fur Company Papers in the library of the New York Historical Society. This collection consists of practically the entire business correspondence and books of the company for approximately the years 1834-1847 and is divided roughly into three classes: letters received; letter-press volumes; and books giving figures for furs and skins received and sold and for goods bought in Europe and the United States, and a great deal of miscellaneous data. A calendar for the entire collection is being made by the coöperative efforts of seven historical agencies in the Middle West, namely, the Burton Historical Collection of the Detroit Public Library, the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, the Historical Survey of the University of Illinois, the State Historical Society of Iowa, the Minnesota Historical Society, the Indiana State Library, and the Missouri Historical Society.

acceded to and then rejected the gentlemen's agreement which had been devised to put an end to ruinous competition.<sup>2</sup>

In the country about the lakes and the headwaters of the Mississippi fewer rivals operated, and Indian feuds were the chief drawbacks to a lucrative fur business. The robes and beaver of the western plains and mountains were nominally in the hands of a St. Louis firm, Pratte, Chouteau and Company, but the American Fur Company marketed their products and imported their Indian goods, and so, for all practical purposes, controlled even that area. Moreover, the president of the American Fur Company was the son-in-law of the principal member of the firm.

To this main interest the company added others which might be cited as examples of "horizontal development." Such were the building and operating of vessels for transporting the company's goods, and the maintenance of a sort of purchasing bureau to secure provisions for its inland posts. These were not striking departures from the ordinary course of business activities in the thirties and forties, though somewhat unusual. To operate a totally different form of business, however, merely because the company's wide scope and extensive financial resources made it appear a profitable investment, was unique. The fishing business on Lake Superior was a *fait accompli* of

<sup>2</sup> The chief competitors of the American Fur Company in the Ohio Valley were the firms in which William G. Ewing and his brother, George W. Ewing, were partners: W. G. and G. W. Ewing; Ewing, Edsall and Company; and Ewing, Walker and Company. After vain efforts to oust the Ewings from the fur business, the American Fur Company came to an agreement with these three firms on July 24, 1839. The terms of this agreement are significant: the purpose of the agreement was to provide means for carrying on jointly trade in furs and skins; the American Fur Company agreed to increase its capital stock; new books were to be opened for all transactions; W. G. and G. W. Ewing were to be admitted to the Company as stockholders to the amount of \$100,000; the Ewings were to give the Company the benefit of their experience and services on a salary basis; the Ewings, as agents of the American Fur Company, were to manage the business in the region between the Ohio River and Lake Erie and were to be known as the Southern Department. William G. Ewing acceded to the agreement, but on October 14, 1839, he wrote to the Company that his partners refused to be bound by his acceptance and so he must reject it also. Crooks and his associates were much incensed at what they believed to be duplicity, and "war" in the form of bitter competition was declared on the Ewings. The papers of the Ewing brothers have been acquired recently by the Indiana State Library, and when the present arranging and calendaring are completed, a detailed study should be made of their attitude, aims, and opinions in the contest with the American Fur Company.

this nature; and at least one other form of subsidiary industry was planned, though apparently never put into operation, — the purchase and marketing of western flour.<sup>3</sup>

In 1834 John Jacob Astor and his son withdrew from the American Fur Company and a new firm was organized, bearing the same name but with a different personnel. Ramsay Crooks, one of those hardy adventurers whom Astor had employed to found Astoria, and later an agent of the Southwest Company and still later of the American Fur Company, became president of the new concern. At least seven other men or companies were associated with him, but together they owned only slightly more of the stock than he held in his name.<sup>4</sup> His is the predominating figure throughout the remaining years of the company's history; and undoubtedly much of its policy originated with him. He was a benevolent despot, who made extraordinary profit at the expense of the Indian and the trader and was heartless in forcing an opponent from the fur country; yet he personally attended to and often financed the education of his traders' half-breed children, aided the missionaries to the Indians, and pensioned some of his clerks who had become incapacitated in his service.

Whether the fisheries scheme may be attributed wholly to Crooks is uncertain. As early as 1823 Robert Stuart, another of the company's agents, had recommended to Crooks that a plan be evolved for exchanging Lake Superior whitefish for the corn, cheese, lard, and other provisions which the company bought in large quantities in Ohio. In his letter Stuart remarks that he has wished for several years to bring this barter system into

<sup>3</sup> On November 18, 1839, William Brewster, the company's agent at Detroit, wrote to the home office in New York that the New York state banks were in a deranged condition but that they would not in all probability suspend cash payments during the tightness of the money market. The result would be that they would not let out funds with which to purchase produce and, consequently, that the American Fur Company would have no competitors in the West. Thus it could buy from ten thousand to thirty thousand barrels of flour at an average of four dollars per barrel, pay one dollar transportation charges to New York, and sell there so as to make a profit on the whole lot of from ten to twenty thousand dollars. The banks in Detroit, he wrote, would enable him to get the money for six months by paying one per cent, and so all the money would be realized from the sales before the company needed to expend a cent on the proposition. See also another letter by Brewster of November 23 on the same subject.

<sup>4</sup> See post, note 40. There is some evidence that Crooks held the shares of other persons and firms in his name.

operation and adds an obscure reference to what appears to have been an early attempt to operate the fisheries for commercial purposes: "Perhaps Duncan Stuart's White Fish speculation, has given you a bad opinion of that branch of the business, but rely upon its being *the best of any part of the operation.*"<sup>5</sup>

From ensuing correspondence, it is evident that Crooks looked coldly upon the proposition. The matter does not appear to have been taken up again until the company had been reorganized. With the establishment of the new concern, new policies were inaugurated. One of these made possible the commencement of the fishing business and hence needs some consideration.

For years the inland headquarters of the company for the lake region had been at Mackinac, whither every summer resorted the traders and clerks with their packs of furs and skins collected during the winter and spring. Representatives of the firm met them there, announced the policies for the ensuing year, and apportioned the provisions, which had been gathered mainly from the Ohio Valley and western New York. Having received their provisions and goods, the men embarked once more in their Mackinac boats, manned by Canadian voyageurs.

Crooks, upon becoming president, changed the inland headquarters from Mackinac to La Pointe, an old fur-post on Madeline Island, about forty miles east of the present site of Duluth, and close to the southern shore. His reason for making this change was his plan to build a vessel on Lake Superior. Mackinac boats were clumsy, slow, and dangerous. They also required many boatmen. Crooks's plan was to build a schooner and dispense with the services of the boatmen, who were too numerous to be employed profitably as traders during the winter and spring. Even this policy, however, had its drawbacks. The

<sup>5</sup> Robert Stuart to Ramsay Crooks, November, 1823, in the letterbooks of the American Fur Company kept at Mackinac, 1816-1828, and still preserved there. Photostatic copies of these three volumes may be found in the libraries of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, the Chicago Historical Society, the Historical Survey of the University of Illinois, the Minnesota Historical Society, and the Library of Congress. They constitute the most authentic data on the company's activities for the period which they cover.

schooner, as soon as it should be ready for service, would displace sixty-five boatmen, all conversant with the fur-trade and more or less acquainted with the company's policies; and the result would be that they would be engaged by rivals, to the great detriment of the company. Crooks, therefore, determined to employ them in catching fish. The schooner, too, could not pay for itself merely by transporting furs and provisions. With fish to transport to the Sault, however, it would prove itself an asset to the company.<sup>6</sup>

The announcement of his fishing scheme seems to have been made by Crooks in a letter of December, 1834, to General Charles Gratiot in Washington: "We have great hopes of adding to the usual returns of our trade, a new and important item, in the Fisheries of Lake Superior." The letter is marked "confidential," and it requests Gratiot to "enquire of the Secretary of the Treasury whether Fish *taken and cured* within the jurisdiction of Canada on Lake *Huron* by American Citizens, cured with American Salt, and transported wholly in American Vessels, the entire capital employed being exclusively American, are, or are not, subject to duty." Then, to explain his motive for inquiring about fish taken in Lake Huron, instead of Lake Superior, he adds, "We do not at present wish it known that we have it in contemplation to establish any fishery."<sup>7</sup>

This letter also indicates that as late as December, 1834, Crooks had no definite plans as to the exact location of his fishing stations. In fact, though voyageurs had traversed the lake for generations, and though Indians and traders on its shores had subsisted largely on the fish caught in its waters, Crooks could learn but vaguely where fish could be caught in considerable numbers and he had the utmost difficulty in determining whether Isle Royale, reported to be a famous fishing ground, was within the territory of the United States. Even an accurate map of Lake Superior was not to be had, for only one had been prepared, and all Crooks's endeavors to secure a copy were unavailing. He was successful, however, in obtaining as pilot

<sup>6</sup> Crooks to George Wildes and Company, London, Dec. 9, 1835, Letterbook 2:224-26; and Crooks to Lyman Warren, Dec. 10, 1835, Letterbook 2:227-34.

<sup>7</sup> Crooks to General Charles Gratiot, December 20, 1834, Letterbook 1:60-61.

for the schooner the captain of the vessel that had surveyed the lake for the British admiralty preparatory to the drafting of the chart.<sup>8</sup>

The years 1835, 1836, and 1837 saw the exploration of the lake and the establishment of the chief fishing stations. Crooks, who had been at Fort William when the change of the great inland rendezvous of the British traders to that post from Grand Portage was still a recent event, probably remembered that great quantities of fish had been taken in the vicinity of those places. At any rate, he wrote thus to William A. Aitken, the trader in charge at Fond du Lac: ". . . explore the north shore to the old Grand Portage, and even if you went all the way to the River Kaministiquia (where Fort William stands) it will no doubt furnish us with useful information. A visit to Isle Royale if practicable for you to go entirely round it, and examine it well, will also still better enable us to determine where we ought to place permanent Posts for the fisheries."<sup>9</sup> The necessary qualifications for a station, he added, were a safe harbor for the schooner and good fishing grounds.

Crooks could not have been ignorant that Fort William was beyond the international boundary; nor was he certain at the time that Isle Royale was not also within British jurisdiction. In fact, several statements by him give the impression that an understanding existed between the Hudson's Bay Company and

<sup>8</sup> "Lake Superior has however been fully & scientifically explored by the British Government, and a chart has been published, though I understand its circulation has hitherto been confined pretty much to the public Bureaus, and the Officers of Government. . . . If I remember correctly these surveys were executed by Lieut. [Henry W.] Bayfield." Crooks to George Wildes and Company, February 28, 1835, Letterbook 1:224-25. This map, according to testimony in a recent boundary case, was in common use a little later than 1835: "We had no other plat except the Bayfield plat up till after — Meade was here in 1860 . . . it is reported . . . that Meade said it was the greatest engineering feat that had ever been, and the quickest time [1823-25] and the correctest map that had ever been made up to this time — that Bayfield chart." *State of Minnesota vs. State of Wisconsin*, United States Supreme Court Transcript of Record, 1918, I:121.

<sup>9</sup> The North West Company appears to have been accustomed to secure its winter's supply of fish in the waters about Isle Royale. At least a letter from Crooks to Gabriel Franchère, February 18, 1835, states that the spot was "a large Island not far from and directly opposite Point Quiwinan [Keweenaw]." Letterbook 1:178-87. See Crooks to William Aitken, April 30, 1836, Letterbook 3:136-39, for the quotation in the text.

the American Fur Company, whereby the former were to have the exclusive right to the furs in the greater portion of the American territory stretching northeast from Fond du Lac in exchange for a certain sum of money and the privilege of fishing on the British side of the international line. Both arrangements, of course, were contrary to the laws of the two countries concerned.<sup>10</sup>

Aitken's explorations resulted in the establishment of a post at Grand Portage in the fall of 1836. Great things were expected of this post because of its location. Crooks wrote enthusiastically about it: "Being on the *north* shore the Lake is rarely agitated by the prevailing winds, and the operations of the fishermen are seldom interrupted there, while the whole southern coast is constantly exposed to the heavy Winds from West to North, and the sea too rough to allow the people to visit their nets sometimes for several days at a time. This happens most frequently in the very best of the fall fishery."<sup>11</sup>

This post was placed under the direction of a half-breed, Pierre Cotté, who made an agreement with the company to fish for it from 1836 to 1840 inclusive, on a five per cent commission basis. He had the assistance of two coopers, who made the barrels in which the fish were shipped to market, and of three other men in 1838 and of nine in 1839. The coopers received two hundred dollars per year, the fishermen and boatmen from one hundred to one hundred and fifty. He also employed about twenty Indians, whom he furnished with salt, nets, and barrels, and to whom he gave three dollars per barrel for fish.<sup>12</sup>

An accurate and contemporary picture may well be given here

<sup>10</sup> In Crooks to Sir George Simpson, October 9, 1837, Letterbook 5:473-74, is a statement that the American Fur Company is willing to renew its agreement with the Hudson's Bay Company relative to the latter's right to secure furs from the Grand Portage region, but that it also wishes a statement covering the agreement respecting its right to fish in Lake Superior. See also Crooks to Aitken, March 6, 1835, Letterbook 1:234-38. For another angle of the situation, however, see Crooks to Frauchere, May 4, 1836, Letterbook 3:159-62, which concerns the building of a vessel on Lake Superior by the Hudson's Bay Company for fishing purposes, though the company asserted it was merely for carrying traders' goods.

<sup>11</sup> Crooks to William Brewster, Dec. 21, 1836, Letterbook 4:181-86.

<sup>12</sup> This information is given in a paper entitled "Register of Persons in the employ of the American Fur Company's Northern Outfit Lapointe 1 October 1838" which is filed among the miscellaneous papers of the firm. See also post, note 15.



of this post clinging to a rocky spit of American territory, faced by a sea almost as unknown and untraversed as the immense forests that stretched away behind it:<sup>13</sup>

This fishing station extends in a Westerwardly direction 45 Miles to Grand Marais, having along the coast several fit places for setting nets and lines — and to the Eastward as far as Pidgeon River 5 or 6 Miles. fishermen are also sometimes sent to the Western extremity of Isle Royal distant 18 or 20 Miles.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Establishment at this place consists of One dwelling House for Côté, situated on a gentle rising ground, overlooking the Bay, a dwelling occupied by his son on the West side, and a new Store fronting this last building on the East Side, forming a hollow square; Two mens houses, 1 Coopers Shop, 1 Fish Store, Stable Barn, Root house &c below or near the beach, placed here and there without order or symmetry. . . . The dwelling houses and Store on the hill are finished in a Substantial manner and all new. There is on Sheep Island at the entrance of the Bay, an appology for a Store house to receive Salt &c from on board vessels, or to deposit Fish from the Establishment, ready for Shipment. The soil around this station is good. there is at present about three acres of it under cultivation, and laid in potatoes, the crop estimated to produce about 200 @ 250 Bushels.

The fisheries being extended along a barren and rocky bound coast, the collecting of the fish to Grand Portage is necessarily attended with expense and risk, besides taking away the hands from the fishing, and if the fish can not be all brought in, they of necessity must remain exposed all winter on the beach: At Grand Marais, however there is a building of sufficient capacity to Store all the fish which could not be brought away."

Three hundred to five hundred barrels of fish were the usual result of a year's activities at Grand Portage. Whitefish and trout formed the bulk of a season's catch. Wood for staves and hook poles were cut out during the winter, but a dozen men could hardly be kept busy for eight months getting materials for five hundred barrels. Trout did not begin to run in towards shore

<sup>13</sup> In the summer of 1839 Gabriel Franchère and James P. Scott made a tour of inspection of the upper posts. A report was made entitled "G Franchères Journal of his voyage in the 'Brewster' with Mr Scott to Grand Portage, Ile Royale & the Ance in August 1839." This document which has been in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society for many years, is a lengthy and detailed description of the fishing activities of the American Fur Company.

to their spawning grounds until August 20 or thereabout. For two months all hands were busy setting nets, taking them up, cleaning and packing the fish in salt, and transporting the barrels to the storehouses. Then the whitefish appeared and stayed into November. The remainder of the year the company supported men who had little to do except to make nets or to cut and haul a small amount of wood. After Gabriel Franchère's visit to the post in August, 1839, he recommended that all but four men should be transported to La Pointe at the close of the fall fishing, to be available for other fishing grounds in the late fall and in the spring, and to help with the winter's work at La Pointe. This recommendation was adopted the following season.<sup>14</sup>

Franchère made the same recommendation for Isle Royale, one of the most extensive of the fisheries. The stations were established in July, 1837, and placed under the direction of Charles Chaboillez, another half-breed. His stipend in 1838 was three hundred and fifty dollars and for the work he employed two coopers at \$280 and \$200 respectively; eleven boatmen at \$120; six men who served in the double capacity of boatmen and fishermen at \$120 to \$150; one fisherman at \$300 and one at \$200; four fishermen engaged for one fishing season at \$20 per month; and nine "freemen" who fished on their own account and received \$4 for two hundred pounds of fish, the company transporting their salt, barrels and fish.<sup>15</sup>

The description which Franchère gave of these stations in

<sup>14</sup>In Borup to Crooks, October 10, 1839, the writer states that an outfit of six hundred dollars instead of the customary one of four thousand will be sent the following season to Grand Portage, as a result of the new method of sending the fishermen from post to post.

<sup>15</sup>Among the miscellaneous papers of the firm are several bundles grouped according to outfits, which were the regional units in the nature of branches by which the company operated. All the fishing stations fall within the jurisdiction of the Northern Outfit and in its papers for 1837, 1838, and 1839 are "Register[s] of Persons in the employ of Northern Outfit." In 1837 these papers show that there were 14 persons at Grand Portage, 17 at Isle Encampment and 24 at Isle Royale; in 1838 there were 8 men (besides Indians) at Grand Portage and 35 at Isle Royale; and in 1839 36 men operated at La Pointe, 15 at Fond du Lac, 3 (besides Indians) at Grand Portage, and 25 at Isle Royale. No mention was made of the Indian women who dressed the fish. In a letter of December 20, 1839, Borup writes to Crooks of saving \$4000 by the new device of sending the fishermen from place to place instead of wintering them at Isle Royale.

1839 shows the island as it was at the height of its prosperity:<sup>16</sup>

There are at present 5 different Stations for fishing, occupying with himself [Chaboillez] 28 persons on wages, and five free men, disposed as follows, to wit at Siskawaite Bay, Ch<sup>s</sup> Chaboillez, clerk, D McKerchar and P. Quinn, Coopers, and 7 pork eaters [voyageurs], employed as fishermen for the Establishment, and to boat the fish from the diff<sup>t</sup> Stations to this place [Siskawaite Bay]. 5 Men are stationed as fishermen on the chain of small Islands S. E. of the Bay. At Rock Harbour 21 Miles East of this 4 men are employed very lucratively. 19 Miles farther and to the North of the Island 4 more are Stationed; and finally at Washington Harbour 21 Miles West of this bay, there is also four men. Three free-men . . . are fishing 5 or six miles S. W. of the Bay; and the Defrauts with two of the Pork eaters . . . occupy a fishery situated half way between Rock Harbour and the most northern Fishery. . . .

\* \* \* \* \*

The buildings at this place are very good, and comprise, one dwelling House for the resident clerk, one Men's house, one coopers Shop, one store house for Fish Barrels, One large Store house, with Store attached to it, and an additional building at the West Gable, a long Shed South and config[u]ous to the warehouse, for the Storing of Salt, and lastly, one Fish Store house. "

This post was begun under difficulties. Lack of salt and of barrels hampered the first season's activities. Only a small stand of pine was available and that had been cut by 1839. Nets of improper mesh size were sent at first and many trout and siscowet escaped.<sup>17</sup> These two varieties and whitefish were

<sup>16</sup> The quotation is from Franchère's report of his inspection tour in the summer of 1839. See *ante*, note 13.

<sup>17</sup> A good deal of technical information may be found in letters and other documents in the American Fur Company papers on the merits of gilling, Holland, and sturgeon twines for nets; on the number of strands to be used for various kinds of nets and seines; on floats, headlines, leads, et cetera used for setting nets; and on mesh sizes of nets for the different species of fish. In his report Franchère mentions that the mesh size for whitefish was larger than that for the smaller siscowet (often spelled "siskawaite") and trout. The latter was five and a half inches, whereas six inches was the usual mesh size for whitefish. The customary method of catching fish was to set nets of a mesh size just large enough to hold the fish's head by the gills when it attempted to pass. An unpublished paper by Mr. Charles H. Briggs of Minneapolis, which the author has had an opportunity to examine, deals with present-day fishing methods at La Pointe and states that: "These fishermen mostly use gill nets which are set on the bottom of the lake down to a depth of 90 fathoms (540 feet). Lead Sinkers located on the bottom of the net and wooden floats on the other side hold the nets vertically. . . . Each net is six feet wide and 600 feet long.

caught in the waters about Isle Royale. The fishing season began about the middle of June and lasted until the second week in November. During that time fish to fill some two thousand barrels could be caught and packed in an ordinary season.

La Pointe, on the largest of the Apostle Islands, was the center of the fishing industry. Here after the new company was organized, a whole new settlement was built, including storerooms for furs and for fish, a pier for the vessel, and a cluster of dwelling houses for clerks and engagés. From time to time new fishing grounds were found among the numerous islands that make up the Apostle group, as well as along the shore in both directions. Lyman Warren, an old clerk of the company, was in charge at this station. An inspector was established here shortly after the fishing business got into full swing and thereafter all the fish from upper Lake Superior were inspected and shipped to the Sault at this place.

Many minor fisheries were established: at Isle Encampment, about forty-five miles northeast of Fond du Lac; at the Ance, as Keweenaw Point was called at that time; at Montreal River; at White Fish Point; at Grand Island; and possibly at other places. At the Sault many fish were taken in the rapids; pickerel were caught there as well as the other varieties. Gabriel Franchère was in charge of this station and attended to the receiving of fish from La Pointe and the shipping of all the Lake Superior fish to Detroit. For the latter operation the company's brig, the *Ramsay Crooks*, was utilized. This vessel plied between the Sault and Detroit and other points on the lower lakes. At Buffalo blankets, knives, trinkets, and other Indian goods from New York, Philadelphia, and Europe, that had reached that point via the Erie Canal, were loaded; salt for the fisheries was received at the same point; and at Cleveland corn, flour, cheese, lard, and other provisions were taken on for both the fisheries and the fur posts.

William Brewster was in charge at Detroit, both of the forwarding of furs, salt, and provisions, and of the marketing of the fish. He was a resourceful, energetic man and a stockholder

... Recently a single lift of nets near Bayfield yielded 2,500 pounds of white-fish." Besides the three varieties of fish already mentioned, the American Fur Company caught herring.

as well as an agent of the company. In 1839 the increase of fishing operations made it imperative for him to build a new warehouse. When it was completed he wrote: "All of our Fish on hand at this time are Stored in our new ware House, which is quite a Sight, as the first floor is entirely filled, three Bbls deep."<sup>18</sup>

On August 3, 1835, the *John Jacob Astor*, a schooner of 112 tons, was launched on the waters of Lake Superior. By the fall of 1836 the need for additional craft was felt, especially for a small vessel that could run close to some of the rocky islets from which fish must be gathered. The schooner was busy from the opening of navigation, about the middle of May, till the close in early November. Five to seven trips from the Sault were made during that period. When only furs were to be carried, the vessel plied between La Pointe and the Sault. As soon as some fish had been packed, however, the vessel extended its course to Grand Portage, Isle Royale, and other points. A scow, capable of carrying three hundred barrels, was built early in 1837 to aid the *John Jacob Astor*. Still the men in charge of the posts kept urging Crooks to build another schooner, saying that the fishing business was being greatly curtailed through lack of proper transportation facilities. In November, 1837, therefore, the company let the contract for a new vessel and the next year saw the schooner *William Brewster* on the lake. Later the company also built the *Siskawit*. These vessels mark the establishment of continuous lines of sailing and steam craft on the lake.<sup>19</sup> Only company property and missionaries and their possessions might be transported in these vessels, but as rivals were the only others who might care to take advantage of them, the restriction seems just enough.

The output of the fisheries in 1835 was fair, considering the

<sup>18</sup> Brewster to Crooks, Dec. 17, 1839.

<sup>19</sup> Israel D. Andrews in his *Report on the Trade and Commerce of the British North American Colonies and upon the Trade of the Great Lakes and Rivers*, Senate Executive Doc. 112, 32 Cong., 1st Sess., 210, states that by 1850 there were two steamers, four propellers, and a considerable number of smaller sailing craft on Lake Superior. As far as I have been able to determine, there were no other vessels on Lake Superior when the American Fur Company launched the *John Jacob Astor*, though there had been a few in the service of older fur companies at an earlier period.

newness of the industry and the inexperience of the men. At the opening of 1836 Warren reported that he had 320 barrels on hand, collected about La Pointe since the opening of the fall fisheries in the third week in November. A thousand barrels, more or less, were shipped to Detroit in 1836. Franchère at the Sault would have had more than his 107 barrels of pickerel if his seine, recently sent to him, had not broken with the weight of the fish. Fond du Lac's quota for the year was about three hundred barrels and the new post at Grand Portage yielded over a hundred.<sup>20</sup>

Crooks made a tour of the lake in 1836 and felt so well pleased with the state of the fisheries that he wrote to his associates in New York: "There is therefore much more encouragement than ever to prosecute the fisheries with vigour. . . . Next year should give us 2000 Barrels, & 1838 2500 to 3000."<sup>21</sup>

The yield for 1837 was almost exactly what Crooks had anticipated, despite untoward circumstances and lack of proper facilities. The unprecedented lateness of the season prevented the spring fishing from being successful. As most of the pickerel were taken ordinarily at the Sault in seines at the opening of navigation and as the ice left the lake at a late date in 1837, the number of barrels of that variety was but 170 that year. After the pickerel run was over, Franchère sent his men, as usual, to White Fish Point, but no better success awaited them. At La Pointe the season opened as a rule in March, but on June 9 Warren wrote that the lateness of the season had quite ruined the spring operations.

Even as late as September 7 the season bade fair to be an entire failure. On that date Brewster wrote that he could not understand why he had received only 996 barrels of fish from Lake Superior. The fall fishing, however, was always the most lucrative and in 1837 it retrieved a bad situation. By early November Brewster could write, "Our Fisheries are y[i]elding liberally this Season."<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Warren to Crooks, Jan. 2, 1836; Franchère to Crooks, May 22 and July 21, 1836; Aitken to Crooks, Oct. 11, 1836; and Crooks to Brewster, Dec. 21, 1836, Letterbook 4:181-86.

<sup>21</sup> Crooks to Brewster, Dec. 21, 1836, Letterbook 4:181-86.

<sup>22</sup> Brewster to Crooks, Nov. 6, 1837.

Though he was satisfied with the number of fish taken, Brewster was very indignant over the carelessness in packing and inspecting demonstrated by the great quantity of fish that spoiled in 1837. In two letters to Crooks he gave vent to his wrath. In one of them he announced: "We had better abandon the Fisheries entirely, than to continue to be so grossly imposed upon, by those having charge of the business." The other stresses the importance of exercising the utmost care in the business, especially in acquiring a reputation for handling first grade products, because rumors have reached him of the organizing of a rival fishing company.<sup>23</sup>

Most of the inspection difficulties had passed by the end of 1837. When the fisheries were begun, the inspector for all the company's and other fish from Lake Superior was located at the Sault. Again and again Franchère complained of his laziness, his inattention, and his animosity towards the company. Finally Franchère writes that a petition for the inspector's removal has induced that gentleman to be "as active in the discharge of his duty as I could wish."<sup>24</sup> Meantime a request had been made to Governor Dodge to appoint an inspector at La Pointe and when the request was granted in 1837 Warren received the appointment.<sup>25</sup> Thereafter fish were not delayed at the Sault for inspection while the *Ramsay Crooks* lost valuable time waiting for the cargo.

The sales of fish are an interesting part of the story of 1837. Because of the panic of that year, cash sales were practically an impossibility. A very good price for siscowet in an ordinary season was fourteen dollars a barrel; for whitefish and trout, twelve; and for pickerel, eight—all at short credits. By July 6 Brewster had sold two hundred barrels, mainly trout, at eleven dollars on four months' credit with interest after ninety days. By the eleventh of the month he had sold four hundred barrels at the same rates. On August 16 he writes: "I am fearful that Fish will for some time go off very slow. Provisions are falling, especially Flour, which was sold today at \$6<sup>00</sup>" The price of

<sup>23</sup> Brewster to Crooks, Nov. 14, 18, and 29, 1837.

<sup>24</sup> Franchère to Crooks, July 17, 1837.

<sup>25</sup> James Doty to Benjamin Clapp, March 28, 1837; Crooks to Warren, May 9, 1837, Letterbook 4:381-83; and Crooks to Warren, June 26, 1837, Letterbook 5:64-80, which states that he has sent the brand for the new inspector of fish.

Meats has not declined, & think they will not this fall. I do not think it best to fall from \$11. for Fish, as we have so much the Control of the Market in them, that we can get that price, as well as less." By October 24 the logic of events in that extraordinary year had obliged him to change his mind, for he writes: "I think I shall have to reduce the price. Cash sales, I cannot make. I am offered \$10.50 for what Fish I have on hand, about 800 bbls at 6, 7 & 8 mo with interest after 4 m" which I think I shall accept. It is a long Credit, but owing to the State of the times, I think it is as well as I shall do." Still later in the year the price dropped to ten dollars.

If we judge from Crooks's statement that the yield of 1839 was twenty per cent more than that of 1838, the number of barrels for the latter year must have been in excess of four thousand.<sup>26</sup> In this figure is undoubtedly revealed the effect of Crooks's visit to the lake in the summer of 1838, which resulted in a thorough reorganization of the business. So much carelessness, maladministration, and extravagance were discovered that both Warren and Aitken were discharged. In the place of the former, under whose control were most of the stations, Dr. Charles W. Borup was appointed. About the same time, too, and probably as a result of Crooks's visit, John Livingston succeeded Franchere at the Sault.<sup>27</sup> After the summer of 1838 the fisheries were administered with much greater wisdom and results were seen in the doubling and trebling of the number of fish taken.

Until the new fashion for silk hats and the coming into favor of nutria had spoiled the market for muskrat furs, the country tributary to Lake Superior was considered one of the richest fur-yielding areas within the present area of the United States. In view of this fact, a statement by Crooks at the close of his tour of inspection becomes of some weight as indicating the importance which the fisheries were assuming for the company. Crooks writes: "Of our future prospects in this region I shall

<sup>26</sup> Crooks to Stephen A. Halsey, October 5, 1839. It may be interesting to compare the yield of 1839 with that of 1920 as given by Mr. Briggs. (See *ante*, note 17.) Of the four varieties — whitefish, trout, herring, and pickeral — the total for 1920 was 979,918 pounds. For 1839 the amount of fish taken, including siscowet, was approximately 960,000 pounds, allowing 200 pounds to a barrel.

<sup>27</sup> Livingston to Crooks, Nov. 13, 1838.



only be able to speak advisedly when I have the pleasure of seeing you in New York; and until Muskrats get again into favor, our dependence for profits in the trade of Lake Superior will mainly be determined by the result of the Fisheries."<sup>28</sup>

Had numbers of fish taken been the criterion of success, the years 1839 and 1840 would have satisfied Crooks's fondest hopes. By October 5, 1839, three thousand barrels had already been shipped from La Pointe, with prospects of one thousand yet to come, and the Sault had sent twelve hundred, and three to five hundred more were expected. As an index of the value of the season's business to the company, the fact that Brewster towards the close of the year asked for insurance on thirty thousand dollars worth of fish stored in his warehouse at Detroit holds some interest, especially as sales had already been made for some of the fish taken that year.<sup>29</sup> So great, in fact, was the yield of the fisheries in 1839 that the feature which was to characterize the business for the remaining two years of its existence became apparent before the close of the year,—that is, the attempt to create a market throughout the United States for Lake Superior fish.

The idea grew slowly. First the New York market was tested with some six hundred barrels. In a letter of instruction regarding the sale of this lot, Brewster advised that a market be sought "among the manufacturing and mining interests," as well as in the city.<sup>30</sup> On the same date he wrote to an Oswego salt factory inquiring about a market for fish among the salt boilers. "We have got to find a vent for them somewhere," he wrote to Crooks, explaining that he had on hand three to four thousand barrels more than the usual Michigan and Ohio markets could absorb. The most fruitful suggestion, however, was Franchère's. He was now financial agent of the company in Ohio, Indiana and Illinois, where it was striving frantically to corner the fur and skin market.<sup>31</sup> On April 20, 1840, Franchère wrote that several merchants at Evansville and Vincennes were very desirous of trying some Lake Superior fish. Accordingly a few barrels were

<sup>28</sup> Crooks to Stephen A. Halsey, Nov. 20, 1838.

<sup>29</sup> Brewster to George Ehninger, Nov. 23, 1839.

<sup>30</sup> Brewster to George Ehninger, Oct. 29, 1839.

<sup>31</sup> Brewster in his letter to Crooks, Jan. 23, 1839, refers to the instructions he has given his agents in the Ohio Valley to get all skins and furs at any price.

sent and his success in disposing of them led Franchere to advise the company to sell its surplus fish through Ohio, the Wabash country and down the Mississippi. His advice was to exchange fish for produce and deer skins and to take the produce to New Orleans to be sold there for money or for sugar and other articles needed in the company's business.

As a result of his suggestion, 514 barrels of fish were shipped to Franchere in October via the Ohio Canal. This lot was doubtless a part of the cargo of eleven hundred barrels sent "South" in charge of Captain Stanard of the *John Jacob Astor* by way of Cleveland and Portsmouth. On October 31 Brewster writes of sending 1048 barrels of fish consigned to Captain Stanard at Portsmouth, which made 2125 barrels sent that season to Ohio. On November 26 Franchere writes that he has just received the 514 barrels, which he has distributed at Mt. Carmel, New Harmony, and Vincennes. He also states that Captain Stanard passed Evansville on the twentieth on his way up the Mississippi to dispose of 150 barrels, and adds: "He states (what I also observe to be the case in this state) that but very limited sales can be effected at this season: the Farmers & Mechanics have such an abundance of fresh Meat, that they do not wish to purchase fish. But we hope that in 2 or 3 Months hence, they will meet with a market."

Meantime, reports of phenomenal success in catching fish kept coming in from the fisheries. In May, Borup reported that he had already doubled the number of fish taken at that time in the previous year. In the same month Brewster wrote that the fish market was duller than he had ever known it and that he had not sold a hundred barrels, though spring was usually the best season for sales.<sup>32</sup> By October 24 the situation was ridiculous in the extreme. On that date Borup writes: "At present we are engaged in fishing, and I try to get as few as possible." The explanation for such a seeming paradox lies in the fact that contracts had been entered into with fishermen and coopers by which they were assured of employment for a specified number of years. Until these contracts should expire or the fishermen should release the company from its obligations, the *impasse* was perfect.

<sup>32</sup> Borup to Crooks, May 20, 1840; Brewster to Crooks, May 30, 1840.

Franchère's "2 or 3 months" did not bring the expected relief. The fish left by Captain Stanard at Louisville, St. Louis, Maysville, and other points along the Ohio and Mississippi did not sell readily, though on December 10 he felt encouraged by the sales at Portsmouth, where, he writes, "are some 30 to 40 furnaces & forges within 40 Miles . . . that employ from 100 to 200 men each . . . and the probability is after they get in the habit of eating fish, they will use a great many more than what we now think."<sup>33</sup>

As the new year began, reports of sales became more and more discouraging. The small lots left all along the Wabash Valley were almost an entire loss; the New York venture came to nothing; a lot sent up the Tennessee River to a man who, Franchère writes, "has a horse & will visit all the small towns to dispose of them" for "tobacco, Cotton, tar, or any of the produce of that state which can easily be converted into Cash" proved only a partial success. On the whole, the far South was concluded to be the best market because of "the poverty of our 'Hoosiers,' who cannot afford to buy for cash" and because of the extremely low prices of bacon and other local products.<sup>34</sup>

Another shipment of twelve hundred barrels was sent to Franchère in the spring of 1841, most of which were sent South to Memphis, Vicksburg, Natchez, Little Rock, and New Orleans. As Franchère could not go South, he employed his stepson, John Prince, to take charge of these consignments. A report from Texas that Nachitoches would be a good market for fish when the planters came in to sell their crop and buy winter supplies led Franchère to determine to risk twenty-five barrels thither. These trial shipments South brought reasonably good sales in 1841 and more were sent in January, 1842, but with small success.<sup>35</sup> On June 1 Franchère writes of his regret that he could not close the fish business; that he found it impossible to force fish on the market at any price.

Meantime, the policy of the company with regard to future

<sup>33</sup> Benjamin A. Stanard to Brewster, Dec. 10, 1840.

<sup>34</sup> Franchère to Crooks, March 10 and May 15, 1841.

<sup>35</sup> The letters regarding the sales of fish in the Ohio Valley and south to New Orleans, along the Arkansas and in Texas are numerous and full of interesting details. Some of the most interesting are: Brewster to Crooks, Sept. 1, 1840; Franchère to Brewster, Nov. 26, 1841; Brewster to Crooks, Oct. 19, 1840; B. A.

fishing had been indicated by Ramsay Crooks in a letter of February 5, 1841, to Moses D. Burnett, one of the salt dealers of western New York, who supplied the large quantities of coarse salt used in packing the company's fish: "As the usual time has arrived for speaking about our supply of Salt for the current year we deem it proper to inform you that Fish has sold so poorly the past season that we are not inclined to prosecute the business with our former energy until prospects brighten." On July 12 Borup wrote that he had dropped fishing entirely except for a few boats at Isle Royale.

As conditions did not improve in the next year, and as the American Fur Company failed in 1842 as a result of business depression, emigration to the fur country, unwise attempts to monopolize the fur trade of the United States, and other causes, the fisheries were never reorganized. Fish were caught every season to supply the needs of the Company's employees until the affairs of the concern were wound up late in the forties, but fishing on a profit-making basis came to an end in 1841. The enterprise cannot be said to have had a fair trial, chiefly because the period 1837-1842 was one of such extraordinary depression that other food products of the Ohio Valley could find no adequate outlets and so the market was glutted with foodstuffs at very low prices. Against such obstacles a new and comparatively unknown article like lake fish could make no headway towards becoming an accepted article of diet.

A feature of the history of the fisheries that must not be omitted is an account of the rivals that appeared on the scene, stimulated no doubt by the success, or apparent success, of the American Fur Company's fisheries. The coming of these concerns marks the end of the American Fur Company's control of Lake Superior and demonstrates that the period of the fur trader in this portion of the American frontier was over.

The first concern, apparently, was Wallace and McKay of Black River, Ohio, which sent a circular to Crooks in April, 1837, stating its intention to organize a joint stock company with a capital of \$25,000 to carry on fishing in Lake Superior. This was doubtless the company of whose formation Brewster wrote Stanard to Brewster, Dec. 3, 1840; and nearly every letter by Frauchere during the period from December, 1840, to April 22, 1842.

in that year.<sup>30</sup> If it ever actually entered the business, no record of it has been discovered in the American Fur Company's papers.

Representatives of the Northern Lake Company of Cleveland arrived just at the close of 1839 in a vessel which during the winter was drawn over the portage inch by inch and launched on the waters of Lake Superior. Even for the short period during which it was a competitor of the American Fur Company in the fishing business, it caused the older concern a great deal of anxiety and some loss.<sup>31</sup> Its factors brought with them to the lake a cooper, who started at once to make barrels; a carpenter for making fishing boats; and a supply of seines and nets. It also began at once to endeavor to lure away the American Fur Company's best fishermen and sailors. In March, 1840, a Detroit company was also on the lake, which added mining to the fishing and fur-trading which the Northern Lake Company had announced as its object. The ultimate fate of these rivals has not been learned. After their initial efforts in the fishing industry they seem to have turned their attention to other things, forced, like the American Fur Company, to recognize the hopelessness of trying to make money from Lake Superior fish.<sup>32</sup>

The attempt of the American Fur Company to catch and later to market lake fish is interesting as showing the many-sidedness of the firm's business; as revealing economic conditions in the Ohio and Mississippi valleys from 1834 to 1841; as pointing out the demand for home products created by the American Fur Company, probably the largest single buyer of New York's salt and of Ohio's butter, cheese, candles, lard, bacon, corn, and flour; and as marking the advent of a continuous line of vessels on Lake Superior.

In many ways the American Fur Company was a premature example of "Big Business" — as witness its attempt to corner the fur market in 1839-40; its determination to crush every competitor; its ramifications in all the chief foreign countries, especially England, the German states, France, Italy, and China;<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Brewster to Crooks, Nov. 14, 1837. See *ante*, note 23.

<sup>31</sup> Crooks to Brewster, Nov. 25, 1840, Letterbook 14:418-23.

<sup>32</sup> In a letter to Sir George Simpson of Nov. 29, 1844, Letterbook 23:313-15, Crooks states that the Cleveland Company has withdrawn from Lake Superior.

<sup>33</sup> It carried on an extensive business with several important English firms,

the amount of its business as compared with the turnover of any other American firm of its day;<sup>40</sup> and the striking fact that it was the first American business house with a scope as wide as the present boundaries of the United States — and this attempt to increase its profits by adding a subsidiary industry, the fisheries, to its main line of activity is anticipatory of business methods that are generally supposed to have been non-existent until after the Civil War. All things considered, therefore, the fishing scheme of the American Fur Company is worth a somewhat detailed study, despite its brief existence and lack of success.

purchasing every year thousands of dollars' worth of blankets, knives, guns, traps, and so forth. Blankets and wines were bought of French firms; beads and wines of Italian. Immense cargoes of furs were sent to C. M. Lampson in London, one of the biggest fur-dealers of the period, who acted as agent in Europe for the company, especially at the Leipzig fairs. Furs were also sent to the Canton market and exchanged for tea.

<sup>40</sup> Some estimate of the yearly turn-over of the firm may be derived from the following item in volume 2 of the firm's blotter books:

"First Dividend. For the following at the Credit of their respective accounts for a further dividend of 15% declared, due on and after 24 Jan'y 1837

To Ramsay Crooks	For dividend on 441 Share @ 45	19,845
" John C. Halsey & Co	" " " 216 " " "	9,720
" John M. Catlin	" " " 100 " " "	4,500
" John B. Whetten	" " " 100 " " "	4,500
" William Brewster	" " " 100 " " "	4,500
" Lyman Warren	" " " 10 " " "	450
" Samuel Lunell	" " " 33 " " "	1,485

1000 45,000"

The correspondence of 1840 shows that the company was planning a dividend of twenty-five per cent in that year. Other documents show the proceeds of a sale of furs and skins for account of the Sioux Outfit, December 31, 1838, as \$63,982; an invoice of deerskins shipped to England, December 31, 1834, as worth \$10,052; and another invoice on May 30, 1835, valued at \$14,147.11. These are samples of almost daily entries in the sales and invoice books. On May 6, 1840, Brewster wrote Crooks that he expected the business of his department to exceed \$300,000 for the season, of which \$75,000 would be profit. In 1846 the company's capital, according to Franchère's letter (Letterbook 26:37) of August 18, 1846, to A. C. Flagg, comptroller at Albany, was \$300,000.