Journal of the Arkansas Academy of Science

Volume 41 Article 19

1987

Fur Trade Records from Arkansas Factory, Arkansas Post, Louisiana Territory, 1805-1810

Paul J. Polechla Jr.
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

FUR TRADE RECORDS FROM ARKANSAS FACTORY, ARKANSAS POST, LOUISIANA TERRITORY, 1805-1810

PAUL J. POLECHLA, JR.[1]
Zoology Department
University of Arkansas
Fayetteville, AR 72701

ABSTRACT

The United States government established a trading house at Arkansas Post in 1805 on the north bank of the Arkansas River in the newly purchased Louisiana Territory. The goal of this trading house was to foster good relations with the Quapaw tribe and other indigenous peoples. John B. Treat and his successors operated the post and meticulously recorded the number, value, and species of pelts traded. Tabulation of these records, which have been preserved in the National Archives, revealed that 9 or 10 species contributed a total of about 44,000 hides, worth approximately $18,000. White-tailed deer *(Odocoileus virginianus)* pelts comprised the largest volume and percentage (83%) of the total value of the fur harvest, and black bear *(Ursus americanus)* was second largest in both categories. Because these two species were also prized for their meat and lard, they were primary targets of hunters. Although the river otter *(Lutra canadensis)* and beaver *(Castor canadensis)* compromised only a small fraction of the total fur harvest, their pelts brought the highest prices. The raccoon *(Procyon lotor)* had one of the lowest-priced pelts, but more of its pelts were harvested than for the otter and beaver combined. Bobcat *(Lynx rufus)*, fox *(Urocyon cinereoargenteus* and/or *Vulpes vulpes)*, mountain lion *(Felis concolor)*, and red wolf *(Canis rufus)* made up the remainder of the total harvest. Competition from private entrepreneurs, political opposition, and a slump in the international fur market forced the Arkansas Post to liquidate its assets and close in 1810. The lesson from this period underscores the needs to properly handle furs, limit harvest season, and establish stable fur markets.

INTRODUCTION

Many lessons can be learned about the management of furbearing game mammals by examining early fur trade records. The North American continent in general and Arkansas in particular have a rich heritage of fur trade, commemorated by such authors as Phillips (1916) and Hafen (1982). Much of the fur trade literature focuses on the James Bay, Hudson Bay, Great Lakes, Rocky Mountains, and Pacific Coast regions (Phillips, 1961; Hafen 1982; Francis and Morantz, 1983). Occasionally a few authors (Lewis *et al.*, 1807; Arthur, 1982; Lowery, 1974; Foley and Rice, 1983) address the role of the south-central United States in the fur trade. Information on the fur trade in Arkansas, however is limited to a few basic, but interesting, accounts (Holder, 1951; Johnson, 1957; Sealander, 1979; Dickinson, 1985; Golden, 1985). The importance of Arkansas Post to the early fur trade of the region is well known, but Arkansas Post is mentioned only in passing in chronologies of mammals of the region.

After the establishment of a fur trading post by Henri De Tontis' followers near the confluence of the White, Arkansas, and Mississippi rivers, the dominion of the region was transferred from the French (Faye, 1943), to the Spanish (Faye, 1944), and back to the French (Mitchell and Calhoun, 1937). Beginning in 1796, the newly established United States government established official fur trading outposts, called "Factories." After the U.S. government purchased the Louisiana Territory from France in 1803, several Factories were established in the new territory.

The political ideology of the reigning administration was that a good trade rapport with Indian tribes would allow for safe infiltration by a burgeoning American populace into the ancestral home of the native Indians. An officially sanctioned government Factory, called the Arkansas Factory, was established.

Although much has been published on the political and socioeconomic history of Arkansas Post (Plaisance, 1952; Johnson, 1957; Bearass and Brown, 1971), no thorough analysis or compilation of Arkansas Factory fur harvest has been published. The purpose of the present study is to determine the characteristics and faunal composition of the fur trade records of the Arkansas Factory, Arkansas Post, Louisiana Territory, *circa* 1805-1810 and the factors effecting it.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

I examined the National Archives Microfilm Publication's Microcopy No. 142, entitled "Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Record Group 75; Records of the Office of Indian Trade; Arkansas Factory." The number of pelts of each species of fur-bearing mammal were tabulated from the "Journal." The common and scientific names of mammals of Sealander (1979) were used. The number of pelts was cross-tabulated with the "Ledger and Invoice Book" and the "Letter Book." The sources cited in the introduction were used to supplement the interpretation of the fur harvest.

RESULTS

Tabulation of the trade records from 1805 to 1810 revealed that nine or ten species contributed a total of 23,001 hides, valued at $18,158.40 (Table 1). White-tailed deer *(Odocoileus virginianus)* pelts comprised the largest percentage of the total volume (89.03%) and value (82.86%). There were 122 fawn and 20,356 adult deer pelts, made up of 17,652 "shaved" pelts (i.e., with hair removed) and 2,704 "unshaved" pelts. Black bear *(Ursus americanus)* pelts ranked second in percentage of total volume (5.46%) and value (8.91%). The remaining species each had 3% of the total volume of pelts and 4% of the total value.

Although the river otter *(Lutra canadensis)* and beaver *(Castor canadensis)* comprised only a small percentage of the total volume (1.20% and 1.13%, respectively) and value (3.66% and 3.77%, respectively), these pelts brought the highest price per skin ($2.56 and $2.48, respectively). The raccoon *(Procyon lotor)* had one of the lowest-priced pelt values ($0.19), but more of its pelts were recorded than for the otter and beaver combined.

Bobcat *(Lynx rufus)*, fox *(Urocyon cinereoargenteus* and/or *Vulpes*

[1]Current address: Department of Life Sciences, Eastern New Mexico University, Portales, NM 88130.

Fur Trade Records from Arkansas Factory, Arkansas Post, Louisiana Territory, 1805-1810

Table 1. Volume and value of pelts traded at Arkansas Factory, Arkansas Post, Louisiana Territory between 1805-1810 (data from National Archives).

Common Name	Species	No. of Skins	Price/ Skin	Lbs. of Skins*	Price/ Lb.*	Total Value	
White-tailed Deer (Total)	Odocoileus virginianus	20,478	$0.73	45,158	$0.33	82.86%	$15,045.40
White-tailed Deer (Hair Shaved)	Odocoileus virginianus	17,652	0.75	37,177	0.35	---	13,169.43
White-tailed Deer (Hair Unshaved)	Odocoileus virginianus	2,704	0.68	7,981	0.23	---	1,848.27
White-tailed Deer (Fawn)	Odocoileus virginianus	122	0.23	---	---	---	27.70
Black Bear	Ursus americanus	1,257	1.29	---	---	8.91	1,617.50
Beaver	Castor canadensis	276	2.48	571	1.20	3.77	685.25
River Otter	Lutra canadensis	260	2.56	---	---	3.66	664.50
Raccoon	Procyon lotor	620	0.19	---	---	0.67	120.80
Bobcat	Lynx rufus	56	0.19	---	---	0.06	10.55
Fox (Grey or Red)	Vulpes or Urocyon	43	0.21	---	---	0.05	8.90
Mountain Lion (Panther)	Felis concolor	9	0.50	---	---	0.02	4.50
Red Wolf	Canis niger	2	0.50	---	---	0.01	1.00
GRAND TOTAL		23,001					$18,158.40

* Expressed in French weight.
1.0 French lb. = 1.079 English lb. = 0.490 kg.

vulpes), mountain lion *(Felis concolor),* and "wolf" pelts are probably assignable to the red wolf *(Canis niger)* and not to the coyote *(Canis latrans),* sometimes referred to as the "prairie wolf" (Gipson, Sealander, and Dunn, 1974).

Skins of adult deer and beaver were weighed in French pounds (1 French lb = 1.07 English lb = 0.49 Kg), a custom left over from the earlier period of French dominion. An average shaved skin weighed 1.032 Kg per skin (n = 17,652), whereas an average unshaved deer skin weighed 1.446 kg (n = 2,704). A bear skin weighed an average of 1.014 kg (n = 276). All other pelts were graded by quality and size and were purchased by the skin.

DISCUSSION

There are several explanations for the characteristics of the trade at the Arkansas Factory. Deer and bear pelts comprised the largest percentages of total volume and value. Because these two species were also prized for their meat and lard (Johnson, 1957), as well as for their pelts, they were primary targets of hunters. Venison and bear meat were staple fare of the early Arkansas diet (Schoolcraft, 1821). Rendered bear lard, called manteca (Spanish for butter), was sought after because it did not turn rancid like other oils used for cooking (Holder, 1951; Dickinson, 1985). Manteca was traded through private enterprises (Holder, 1951) and not through the Arkansas Factory. The fat from each prime bear could produce up to 25 gallons of oil, worth $20 (Johnson, 1957). Most deer pelts were shaved to remove lard and were tanned for leather articles (Phillips, 1961). Unshaved deer and bear hides were in demand for robes and for bed and floor coverings (Phillips, 1961).

In the colder climates of higher latitudes and altitudes, beavers developed longer, denser, and more lustrous fur. The pelts with darker shades of brown commanded the highest market price for European hats (Arthur, 1928; Sandoz, 1964) rather than the straw-colored pelts of the southern beavers. Therefore pelts from the region were in low commercial demand compared with the northern and Rocky Mountain beaver (Phillips, 1961). Beavers were also trapped for their castor gland, for making perfume, and for their flesh and tails, which were roasted (Schoolcraft, 1821; Peterson, 1914). In spite of the color, the price per southern beaver pelt was higher than other pelts trapped in the area, except for otter. Otter pelts commanded the highest price per pelt on the Arkansas Factory market due to the superior durability and density of the pelage (Polechla, 1987). Otter pelts were fashioned into robes and other garments.

Several other furbearing species are known to have occurred in the region, but were noticeably absent from the Arkansas Factory trade. They include the muskrat *(Ondatra zibethicus),* elk *(Cervus elephus),* and buffalo *(Bison bison).* (Holder, 1951; Sealander, 1979). These species were occasionally traded in 1822 at Spadre Factory, Arkansas Territory (Johnson, 1957). However, elk and bison were not numerous in the region, and muskrat pelts were not in high demand on the European market a that time (Peterson, 1914; Phillips, 1961). Similarly, there was no market for mink *(Mustela vison)* from the region (Holder, 1951). These facts seem to explain the absence of these species from the Arkansas Factory trade record.

Examination of months of Arkansas Factory transactions show that over 50% of the hides were traded during the late spring, summer, and early fall months and stored until shipment. These records also indicate that young mammals (e.g., cubs and fawns), as well as adults, were killed and traded, demonstrating that there was a year-round harvest of some species. Seton (1929) noted that beaver were also taken throughout the year.

Joseph Saul, a U.S. government trading agent in New Orleans who received furs from the Arkansas Factory, was very critical of Factor John Treat's policy of keeping furs during the warm seasons:

> The United States will loose considerably by damaged skins this season....It is pretty universal....to order their agents never to ship skins for this Market later than from the 1st or 10th of April, which will arrive in May, after which all shipments from this post are at an end....We have no convenience to keep them over the Season, and the price falls too low to sell.

The factory's operation depended upon a unique association of rugged individuals. *Couriers de bois* (French for runners of the woods), were a combination of trappers, hunters, and traders, who travelled up the tributaries of the White and Arkansas rivers and the Delta bayous. Equipped with supplies advanced on credit, the couriers traded with natives for furs and collected their own. Although the bulk of the Arkansas Post trade was with the Quapaw and Osage, other Indian people, such as the Delaware, Shawnee, Cherokee, and Choctaw tribes, traded with the engages (Johnson, 1957). Chickasaw and Creek crossed the Mississippi, hunted, and probably traded in present-day Arkansas.

The Indians usually used snares, dead falls, and bows and arrows to capture their quarry (Swanton, 1946), whereas white hunter-trappers of that era used homemade, long-spring, steel-jawed traps and flintlock riffles to capture game. The harvested animals were skinned and their pelts dired as thoroughly as possible. When the couriers had a canoe load of pelts, they floated downstream until they reached Arkansas Post. It was here that the Factor graded the furs according to quality and size and traded merchandise for them. Manufactured goods, including rifles, hunting supplies, knives, kitchen utensils, cloth, equestrian gear, and an assortment of beads and trinkets, were shipped from Pittsburgh down the Ohio River to the Mississippi River and then to Arkansas Post. The last leg of the journey was routed through the White River Cutoff or up the Arkansas River at its confluence to the Mississippi River. A typical transaction included a multitude of trade items.

As described by John B. Treat, pelts were stored in an existing, rented "House for the Factory...about 30 feet by 15, containing two rooms, and those raised six feet from the ground, the under part being perfectly close, with square Timber, being occupied as a Skin House, it being

dark and cook, and therefore well adapted to that purpose." Because rent for the skin house was expensive, Factor Treat planned to build a new one. A drought during a crucial period of construction prevented the lumber from being floated from the dense swamp to the building site. The high cost of skilled carpentry labor and a low project budget caused construction to proceed at a slow pace. The much needed new "Store House and Skin Room" was completed in 1810 (the year the Factory closed) not in time to be used for government factories.

While in storage, the hides often became damaged by "worms", probably the larvae of beetles (Dermestidae) or moths (Tineidae) Borror, DeLong, and Triplehorn, 1976). Traditionally, Indians stored a dried bird, such as a "martin" (Hirundinidae) or "fisher" *(Ceryle alsyon)* with the hides to supposedly repel the insect larvae (Swanton, 1946).

After a number of hides had been collected, they were bailed together in packs. The Factor hired boatmen to take the fur cargo on a flat-bottom barge down the Arkansas and Mississippi Rivers to government agents in New Orleans. Enroute pelts were often damaged due to the vagaries of the arduous passage. The only available boats often leaked. Torrential rains and water that seeped through cracks in bilges soaked the uncovered pelts and caused them to decay. Joseph Saul, New Orleans government agent, strongly advised the traders to wrap the pelts with bear-skin tarpaulins (inside out to protect the pelts from water and insect damage) because "the last eleven packs...were nearly all spoiled." Damaged pelts were salvaged at a mere 2.5 cents per pound for glue.

Undamaged pelts were sold through public auction or other means. Government agents collected the proceeds to be used to defray costs of the War Department. Buyers loaded their furs onto sea-going vessels and shipped them to New York for tanning and to London for garment manufacturing, sales, and distribution (Phillips, 1961).

Despite the hardships, Factor John Treat was optimistic during the first couple of years of the Factory's operation. In the spring of 1806, the total shipment of furs from the entire settlement of Arkansas Post was 975 packs of fur, of which the Arkansas Factory shipped 61 packs. Bright and Morgen, the dominant private fur-trading company, shipped 267 packs that same spring. Arkansas Factory was ranked fourth of 15 trading interests. The second leading interest traded a little more than 100 packs in that season.

In 1807, Arkansas Factory hauled its highest volume of pelts. From that time on, Factory trade declined. Stiff competition came from French, British (e.g., Michilimackinac and John Forbes and Co.), and Spanish trading companies of the Mississippi and Gulf Coast Region, in addition to the legal and illegal private American entrepreneurs (Phillips, 1961). The bulk of the Osage tribe fur trade, which annually amounted to $20,000 (Lewis *et al.*, 1807), went to the merchants of St. Louis, such as Manuel Lisa (of Spanish and Indian descent), August and Pierre (Sr.) Choutaeu (of French descent), and William S. Williams (of American descent) (Hafen, 1982; Foley and Rice, 1983). Fur trade historians (Phillips, 1961) have suspected that competitors of Arkansas Factory received the valuable furs, such as bear, beaver, and otter, and Arkansas Factory competed only for the less valuable deer skins. The modest success of Arkansas Factory was further eroded by European socioeconomic conditions, which created a glut of deer skins on the market (Phillips, 1961).

Other negative influences, in addition to the poor fur handling practices, have been blamed for the downfall of the Factory. The first two Factors suffered from ill health (attributed to the inhospitable climate) and had to be replaced. Treat became ill and was replaced in September, 1808, by James Waterman. The unseasonably cold winter that year severely restricted mobility, trapping, and trading. In July 1810, Waterman grew ill and was replaced by Samuel Treat, the brother of John Treat. The unseasonably cold winter of 1808 severely restricted mobility, trapping, and trading. Because all U.S. Factories were under the supervision of the War Department, stationed in distant Philadelphia and New Orleans, letter communication and cargo transportation was exceedingly slow to the frontier trading posts.

The decline was also due to government mismanagement. At first, the private Bright and Morgan Company was given a monopoly on the private Arkansas Post fur trade. Factor Treat realized that this was detrimental to the government's interests, but the War Department erroneously encouraged Treat to license more private traders, further hampering Arkansas Factory's commercial success. The existing trade regulations prohibiting illicit trade could not be enforced by the small number of troops stationed at Arkansas Post (Plaisance, 1952). Private traders actively lobbied on the local, regional, and national levels against a potential government fur-trade monopoly.

When the Factors attempted to expand their trade, the War Department effectively stifled the innovations. Treat reported that he had sent a party of five traders to an encampment of Cherokee and Delaware people at the confluence of the Black and White Rivers. John Shee, Superintendent of Indian Trade, War Department, Wrote to Treat, cautioning him against future unsanctioned enterprises such as that. When the Osage tribe requested that Treat establish a post north of the Arkansas River among their camps, Treat declined the offer and wrote, in 1808, to John Mason, who had replaced Shee as superintendent, "It might appear improper for my being any further troublesome [sic] on a subject offering so great advantage to the whole Establishment of Indian Trade as he has already at different times been pointed out."

On September 1, 1910, Samuel Treat received a letter from Mason ordering him to close Arkansas Factory and liquidate its assets. Although Arkansas Factory, Arkansas Post, Louisiana Territory, was short lived (1805-1810), it did allow for infiltration of American colonists into the region.

CONCLUSIONS

The history of Arkansas furbears from 1805 to 1810 directly relates to current furbears management in Arkansas. The knowledge gained from this historical analysis should be applied to present situations and the mismanagement not repeated. Unrestricted year-round harvest and removal of young and adult mammals may significantly reduce Arkansas furbearer populations. Improper fur handling (i.e., subjecting hides to elements and insects) and keeping raw hides during warm months results in low quality and market price. Extreme fluctuations in fur supply and demand should be avoided by establishing a stable market.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study (No. 19 of Project W-56-54) was funded under the provisions of the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act (Pittman-Robertson Act), administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of Interior. Funding for the Act is derived from an excise tax on sporting arms and ammunition. The Arkansas Game and Fish Commission and the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, cooperated. Special thanks goes to Georgia S. A. Carrera of the Arkansas Post National Memorial for lending me a microcopy of the National Archives records. Michael Dabrishus and his staff at the Special Collections, Mullins Library, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, graciously allowed me to examine old documents. P. J. Polechla, Sr. painstakingly helped tabulate fur records. John Piazza and Martha Airth-Kindree reviewed the paper. The following individuals were highly supportive of my effort: Harold Alexander, Sam Bolton, Sam Dickinson, Anne Early, Phil Gipson, Doug Golden, Mark Gordon, Trusten Holder, Carl Hunter, Mark Karnes, Joe Neal, Jerry Schoner, and John Sealander.

LITERATURE CITED

ARTHUR, S. C. 1928. The fur animals of Louisiana. State of Louisiana, Dept. of Conserv., New Orleans, 433 pp.

BEARASS, E. C., L. E. BROWN. 1971. Arkansas Post National Memorial, Arkansas; structural history, Post of Arkansas, 1804-1863 and Civil War troop movement maps, January 1863. U.S. Dept. Int., Nat. Park Serv., Washington, D.C., 293 pp.

BORROR, D. J., D. M. DeLONG, and C. A. TRIPLEHORN. 1976. An introduction to the study of insects. Fourth ed. Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Chicago, IL, 852 pp.

DICKINSON, S. 1985. Rangers of the Woods. Arkansas Times 12(4):73-75, 82-84.

FAYE, S. 1943. The Arkansas Post of Louisiana: French domination. Louisiana Hist. Quart. 26(3):633-721.

FAYE, S. 1944. The Arkansas Post of Louisiana: Spanish domination. Louisiana Hist. Quart. 27(3):629-716.

FOLEY, W. E. and C. D. RICE. 1983. The first chouteaus; river barons of early St. Louis. Univ. Illinois Press, Chicago, 241 pp.

FRANCIS, D. and T. MORANTZ. 1983. Partners in furs: a history of the fur trade in eastern James Bay, 1600-1870. McGill-Queen's Univ. Press, Montreal, 203 pp.

GIPSON, P. S., J. A. SEALANDER, and J. E. DUNN. 1974. The taxonomic status of wild *Canis* in Arkansas. Systematic Zoology 23(1):1-11.

GOLDEN, D. 1985. History of trapping in Arkansas. Voice of the Trapper 25(4):77-79.

HAFEN, L. R. 1982. Mountain men and fur traders of the far west. Univ. Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 401 pp.

HOLDER, T. H. 1951. A survey of Arkansas game. Arkansas Game and Fish Comm., Little Rock, AR, 71 pp.

JOHNSON, B. W. 1957. The Arkansas frontier. N.p., 162 pp.

LEWIS, M., W. CLARK, J. DIBLEY, and W. DUNBAR. 1807. Travels into the interior parts of America. Richard Phillips, London, 116 pp.

LOWERY, G. H., JR. 1974. Mammals of Louisiana and its adjacent waters. Louisiana St. Univ. Press, Baton Rouge, 565 pp.

MITCHELL, J. O. and R. D. CALHOUN. 1937. The Marquis de Maison Rouge, the Baron de Bastrop, and Colonel Abraham Morhouse, three Ouachita valley soldiers of fortune; the Maison Rouge and Bastrop Spanish Land "Grant," Louisiana Hist. Quart. 20(2):289-462.

PETERSON, M. 1914. The furtraders and fur bearing animals. Hammond Press, Buffalo, NY, 372 pp.

PHILLIPS, P. C. 1961. The fur trade. Vols. 1 & 2, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, OK, 6868 pp. & 696 pp.

PLAISANCE, A. 1952. The Arkansas Factory, 1805-1810, Arkansas Hist. Quart. 11:184-200.

POLECHLA, P. J., JR. 1987. Status of the river otter *(Lutra canadensis)* population with special reference to reproductive biology. Ph.D. dissertation, Univ. Arkansas, Fayetteville, xxxi & 383 pp.

SANDOZ, M. 1984. The beaver men: spearheads of an empire. Hastingshouse, New York, 335 pp.

SCHOOLCRAFT, H. R. 1821. Journal of a tour into the interior of Missouri and Arkansas. Sir Richard Phillips and Co., London, 102 pp.

SEALANDER, J. A. 1979. A guide to Arkansas mammals. River Road Press, Conway, AR, 313 pp.

SETON, E. T. 1929. Lives of game animals. Vol. 4, Doubleday, Doran & Co., Inc., Garden City, NY, xxii & 949 pp.

SWANTON, J. R. 1946. The Indians of the southwestern United States. U.S. Gov. Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 943 pp.