

# Antoine Robidoux -- Buckskin Entrepreneur

by John D. Barton

At the apex of their glory, the mountain men numbered approximately 1,000 and their heyday lasted less than twenty years. But they continue to occupy a significant portion of American legend and folklore. From the time Washington Irving first wrote about them, to present-day Hollywood movies, the mountain men have been depicted in a highly romantic manner. Without doubt the mountain men were among the greatest outdoorsmen of all time. Survival in the harsh conditions of their place of business demanded constant awareness or they would fall prey to hostile Indians, wild animals, or the elements. Some historians have tried to change the way mountain men have been perceived. William H. Goetzman, for example, argues that the mountain men were individualistic entrepreneurs who hoped to make a living, if not a fortune, from the fur trade which was booming between North America and Europe at the time.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>William H. Goetzman, "Mountain Man as a Jacksonian Man," American Quarterly, 15, (1963), 402-415.

Contemporary with the mountain men, a laissez-faire attitude of business dominated America, in both ideology and practice. There was less governmental restraint on business in the early nineteenth century than perhaps at any other time in our nation's history. Of all the business sectors, none were less restricted than the western fur business. Sharp and sometimes vicious competition existed between the various companies involved in the fur trade, but the government made no attempt at regulation. In fact, the American and British fur traders and mountain men were unofficial representatives of their respective nations in the great race for the Pacific Northwest.<sup>2</sup> And in the Southwest American fur traders and mountain men helped establish friendly relations so that when General Stephen Watts Kearny came to take the area during the Mexican War, he was able to do so without bloodshed or battle.<sup>3</sup>

There are examples of mountain men who left civilization and entered the wilderness for adventure. Some, like Kit Carson, who went west to escape an apprenticeship, sought to escape into the mountains and leave past ties behind. But the majority of men who went into the mountains to trap or trade for fur did so in pursuit of economic advancement.<sup>4</sup> In the majority of cases, all other considerations were secondary.

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<sup>2</sup>Lavender, The Fist in the Wilderness, tells the story of how American Fur Traders, specifically those working for John Jacob Astor, challenged the British for the Pacific Northwest. Also see Oscar Winther, The Great Northwest, (New York: Alfred Knopf Pub., 1950), 33-106.

<sup>3</sup>Weber, The Taos Trappers, 190.

<sup>4</sup>Goetzman, "Mountain Man as a Jacksonian Man," 413. Since Goetzman first argued the entrepreneurial motivation of mountain men in 1963 other historians have insisted that a single causational explanation is too simplistic to explain who the mountain men were. See Harvey L. Carter and Marcia C. Spencer,

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"Stereotypes of the Mountain Men," Western Historical Quarterly, 18 (Jan. 1975), 17-32. For many mountain men this is true, yet in the case of some, and especially Antoine Robidoux, the pursuit of money provides understanding for why he went to the mountains and what his motivations were centered on. Although Carter and Spencer did argue against Goetzman's thesis, Michael Allen recently used Goetzman's logic as a focal point for similar arguments applying entrepreneurial explanations for rivermen. See Michael Allen, "The Rivermen as Jacksonian Men," The Western Historical Quarterly, 21 (August 1990), 305-320.

In search of profitable trapping, mountain men and traders entered the Uinta Basin to trap and/or trade with the Indians. The Utes were "keen traders and collected considerable fur," and therefore were desirable as trading partners.<sup>5</sup> Of the several who came, one man stands as the dominant figure in the Uinta Basin fur trade -- Antoine Robidoux. Unlike most mountain men who left former occupations to enter the fur trade, Robidoux was raised in it. His father owned a fur trade business which operated out of St. Louis and gave the Robidoux family moderate wealth, social and political standing.<sup>6</sup> Antoine Robidoux was born in 1794, and was nine when Lewis and Clark left St. Louis on their epic journey. Having been raised in a family of fur traders, he undoubtedly felt the excitement that swept the town upon the return of that exploratory party. Ambitious men then realized the upper Missouri River country was open to fur traders. Manuel Lisa was the first to lead a significant trading party up that great river, but others soon followed; for there were fortunes to be made. When William Ashley advertized for 100 enterprising young men to go into the mountains and trap beaver on the upper Missouri, the Robidoux had already been in the fur trade for several years. Antoine did not join Ashley, but three years later led a trapping/trading expedition of his own from Taos into the Green River country.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Osborne Russell, Journal of a Trapper, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1956 printing), 120,121.

<sup>6</sup>Wallace, Antoine Robidoux, 5,6. Joseph Robidoux II, Antoine's father was an honorary lieutenant in the militia and on Dec. 7, 1812, the first general assembly of Missouri held its first session in his home.

<sup>7</sup>Missouri Intelligencer, 25 September, 1824.

Many Americans went to New Mexico after Mexico won its independence from Spain in 1821. The newly formed Mexican government was willing to trade with non-Mexicans whereas the Spaniards had not. The Santa Fe Trail opened soon after Mexican Independence and trade between St. Louis and Santa Fe flourished. Included in the numbers of Americans who went to Santa Fe in hopes of getting rich were many who sought wealth in the fur trade.<sup>8</sup> Finding the upper Missouri firmly in the grasp of the American Fur Company, many branched out in search of new places to exploit the fur trade, and the southern Rockies became another center of the fur business. Antoine Robidoux as one of the early fur traders of the southwest, he became a prime mover in the Santa Fe trade even before the Santa Fe Trail reached its full potential. He entered the fur trade in Mexican Territory as early as 1824. By 1828, he was operating solely out of New Mexico, but did occasionally travel to St. Louis.

By 1828, and possibly as early as 1826, he established his first trading fort. Located on the Gunnison River of Western Colorado, Fort Uncompahgre was strategically situated to encourage trade with the Ute Indians of Colorado. The selection of the site for a fort was logical not only for its proximity to the Utes but also the good grazing and water for stock and the temperate climate. This fort was likely made of adobe and cottonwood logs because that was the only building material close at hand. Initially the fort would have consisted of a cabin or two and grew with the passing of years and adding on of more and better buildings. But Antoine must have

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<sup>8</sup>For a complete picture of the New Mexico fur trade, see Weber The Taos Trappers; see also Cleland, This Reckless Breed of Men.

found trapping in the Uintas more profitable than managing the Colorado fort, for he left his brother Louis to operate it for him.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>David J. Weber, "Louis Robidoux," Fur Trappers on the Far West, ed. LeRoy R. Hafen. (Glendale: The Arthur Clark Co., 1965), 42,43.

Using Fort Uncompahgre as a base, Robidoux continued to trap the Uinta Basin and the north side of the Uinta Mountains. John Work, a Hudson Bay brigade leader, recorded that he met Robidoux with a group of trappers on the Malad River of southern Idaho in 1830. Robidoux told Work that he planned to spend the winter on the White or Green River.<sup>10</sup>

The next summer Robidoux took his furs to Santa Fe. In August, 1831, he sold to William Sublette, \$3806.50 worth of fur.<sup>11</sup> Of all the fur purchases Sublette made in New Mexico that summer, Robidoux's was the largest. This indicates that Robidoux was successful in trapping and trading that year. Robidoux went back to the Uinta Basin that fall or the next spring and purchased the Reed Trading Post on from William Reed; very likely using the money he had received from Sublette.<sup>12</sup>

The Uinta River was a haven for beaver. Before the many irrigation canals were built which now drain off a great part of the water, the river was choked with beaver dam after beaver dam. The early settlers of the Uinta River area claim that the land, for hundreds of yards on either side of the river, was a lush natural meadow watered by backed up beaver dams when the spring run off occurred. Little wonder then that the Reeds built there, or that Robidoux coveted their location and/or their business. The

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<sup>10</sup>Charles M. Kelly, "Trapper in the Utah Wilderness," Desert Magazine, 2 (July, 1939): 4.

<sup>11</sup>Morgan, The West of William Ashley, 201.

<sup>12</sup>John D. Barton, "Fort Uintah and the Reed Trading Post," Montana Magazine of Western History, 43 (Winter 1993), 51-57.

details of the sale of the Reed Trading Post to Robidoux are unknown, except for the time, which was the Fall of 1831 or early 1832.

With anticipation of opening a post in the Uinta Basin, Robidoux had applied to the Mexican Government and was granted a license to operate a fort on September 19, 1831.<sup>13</sup> At that time, Robidoux had already been operating Fort Uncompahgre for at least three years. It is unlikely he would apply for a license to operate a fort that was known by New Mexicans to already have been in business for years. It seems more plausible that Robidoux had purchased, or planned to purchase, the Reed Trading Post and was seeking licensing for his new fort. It is doubtful whether the Reeds ever legally operated within Mexican Territory, but Robidoux, with legal, political, and residential ties in Santa Fe, did not want trouble that he could avoid with licensing.

The Reed Trading Post was a single cabin located at the confluence of the Uinta and Whiterocks rivers. After Robidoux purchased the Reed's post, he built his fort about one-hundred yards to the north and west, to avoid the spring floods which had threatened the old location of the post every year. Fort Robidoux, also called Fort Uinta, Fort Winty, or Twinty,<sup>14</sup> was located about 12 miles northeast of the present-day town of Roosevelt. The fort consisted of a small group of log cabins with dirt roofs and floors, surrounded by a log palisade.

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<sup>13</sup>David Waldo and Antoine Robidoux request for trapping, and license to operate a fort, within Mexican Territory, Sept. 19, 1831. MANM, Roll 14, frames 156-160.

<sup>14</sup>Hafen, Old Spanish Trail, 102.

Upon the establishment of Fort Uinta, Robidoux shifted most of his attention there. The fur trade business involved much more than trapping beaver, and Robidoux used all the entrepreneurial skills he had acquired from hard competition to make his fort profitable. His business operation focused in three different areas: 1) trapping, 2) trading with the Indians and free trappers, and 3) horse trading.

Robidoux usually kept about twenty men employed at each fort as trappers. Captain John C. Fremont, while exploring the Great Basin, stopped at Fort Uinta. He referred to Robidoux's men as a "motley collection of Canadian and Mexican engages and hunters."<sup>15</sup> These trappers usually divided into pairs to go out from the fort for the fall and spring hunts to trap. From Fort Uinta they went to the Bear, Green, Grand or Colorado rivers, as well as the rivers and streams of the Uinta Basin to trap primarily beaver but also mink, muskrats, fox, and other fur-bearing animals.<sup>16</sup>

If Robidoux operated his business like others in the West, the engages were under contract to bring their catches back to the fort and sell to Robidoux at a set price. This contrasted with the free trapper who sold his "plews," the mountain men's term for beaver skins, to the highest bidder either at the annual rendezvous or at a trading post. When the fur hunters returned to the fort after a season of trapping, Robidoux reconciled the books for each trapper. Subtracting the goods previously received on credit from the total catch, the remainder was paid to the trapper in cash or credit

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<sup>15</sup>John C. Fremont, Narrative of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains (London: Wiley & Putnam, 1846), 305.

<sup>16</sup>Rufus Sage, Rocky Mountain Life (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, reprint 1982, from 1846 original), 232.

toward supplies. No records survive to indicate how many pounds of fur Robidoux purchased from his engages over the years, but he maintained engages throughout the existence of his forts. If they were not making sufficient money to justify staying, logic suggests the engages would have gone elsewhere at the expiration of their commitment. Likewise, if Robidoux were not showing a profit, he would not have retained their services.

While maintaining the engages, Robidoux also encouraged the business of free trappers and travelers at his fort and traded with the Indians of the region. Robidoux's prices were comparable to other contemporary mountain prices. He stocked the usual supply of trade goods, food, and supplies that could be expected to be found at a trading post which included guns, powder, traps, blankets, beads, vermillion, cloth, awls, etc. as well as food items such as sugar, coffee, flour, and fresh or jerked meat.<sup>17</sup> A list of goods ordered by Robidoux in 1830 for Fort Uncompahgre gives added insight into the items that could be found at his forts. The list includes:

16 Pieces blanketing in the roll 532 yards  
 10 pieces cloth 302 yards  
 7 rolls of same 105 yards  
 2 Pieces colonial blanketing 280 yards  
 1 piece blanketing 9 yards  
 1 Piece ribbed cloth (corduroy) 37 1/2 yards  
 1 roll black ribbed cloth 3 1/2 yards  
 2 maroon church robes  
 2 standard robes  
 4 robes of cotton

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<sup>17</sup>Joseph Williams, Narrative of a Tour from the State of Indiana to the Indian Territory in the Years 1841-42 (Cincinnati: J.B. Wilson Printer, 1843), 42. See also Charles Preuss, Exploring With Fremont, ed. Erwin Gudde, (Norman: Uni. of Oklahoma Press, 1958 reprint), 135.

4 woolen robes  
 4 (Cortes?)  
 3 Sashes  
 1 scarf of silk and cotton  
 4 bandannas  
 5 satchels or bags  
 47 cotton scarves  
 8 pair cotton hose or stockings  
 18 black scarves  
 1 piece of silk with stripe 8 yards  
 1 piece of silk purple 16 yards  
 1 piece silk and cotton 30 yards  
 3 hair ribbons  
 3 white jackets or coats  
 6 pairs of large scissors  
 1 Thousand brass tacks  
 2 large buttons  
 1 large button  
 2 dozen knives  
 8 shaving knives  
 3 pieces blanketing 124 yards  
 92 lined paper ledgers  
 10 pieces bright hairpieces  
 3 hairpieces  
 2 trunks  
 4 women's fine combs  
 11 combs  
 2 umbrellas  
 3 pairs of women's stockings  
 57 yards of binding lace  
 1 piece of baking soda  
 2 fine made knives  
 6 common knives  
 1 woolen scarf  
 2 Jackson peace medals  
 7 bags.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>William McCrea Bailey, Fort Uncompahgre, (Silverton, Colorado: The Silverton Standard and The Miner, 1990), 27-29. Dan Dieter, director of the rebuilt Fort Uncompahgre at Delta, Colorado says the business at Robidoux's forts would be an 1800's version of a combination of K-Mart and the Mustang Ranch.

Robidoux's prices and location encouraged mountain men to trade with him. Kit Carson, for example, sold his furs to Robidoux in 1833 and 1838,<sup>19</sup> and Rufus Sage, a noted traveler and occasional trapper, mentioned that during his ten day stay at Fort Uinta, several free trappers came to the fort.<sup>20</sup> Dr. Marcus Whitman, missionary to the Indians of the Northwest, traveled to New Mexico and enroute stopped at Fort Uinta. While there he too met free trappers, including Miles Goodyear.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Kit Carson, Autobiography, edited by Milo Milton Quaife. (Chicago: R.R. Donnelly & Co., 1935), 62.

<sup>20</sup>Sage, Rocky Mountain Life, 232.

<sup>21</sup>Goodyear addressed a letter to his brother in the East and had Whitman carry it for him from Fort Uinta to be posted in New Mexico. It is reprinted in Charles M. Kelly and Maurice Howe, Miles Goodyear, (Salt Lake City: Publishers Press, 1937), 43.

When enough fur had been acquired to fill a pack train, Robidoux went to New Mexico or occasionally St. Louis to sell the pelts and purchase more supplies to stock his forts. Robidoux had family connections in St. Louis. His brother, Joseph Robidoux, was a noted fur trader in Missouri and could possibly give Antoine premium prices for fur and offer savings on goods to take back to the mountains. For convenience sake, Robidoux usually traded in New Mexico rather than Missouri for New Mexico was hundreds of miles closer to Robidoux's forts.

The going price for fur in St. Louis or Santa Fe was approximately \$5.00 to \$5.50 a pound during the late 1820's and early 1830's.<sup>22</sup> Transportation costs were a major factor in the fur trade. The cost of getting fur out of the mountains and goods to the fort had to be subtracted from the gross figure to show the final net gain of the fur trade. In the late 1820's, Ashley charged Smith, Jackson, and Sublette \$1.12 per pound to transport furs and goods from St. Louis to the rendezvous and back.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, William Sublette charged The Rocky Mountain Fur Company fifty-cents to transport their fur to St. Louis from the mountains in 1832.<sup>24</sup> Using fifty-cents as a low comparative figure to estimate Robidoux's costs; fifty-cents subtracted from the sale price of \$5.50 to \$5.00 Robidoux received for furs in Taos, minus the \$3.00 paid the trapper, left an approximate net of \$1.50 to \$2.00 per pound of fur. Robidoux transported his own goods and furs and may have saved some from the fifty-cents that Sublette charged,

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<sup>22</sup>Gowans, Rocky Mountain Rendezvous, 41,49.

<sup>23</sup>Morgan, The West of William Ashley, 158.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid, 308.

but the combined cost of horses and wages for his packers would have brought his costs close to that figure.

The mark-up of trade goods, from the cost at Taos or St. Louis to what was charged in the mountains, was 200 to 300 percent, and some items were even greater.<sup>25</sup> For example, gun powder could be purchased in the 1830's, at bulk rates for twenty to thirty-cents per pound,<sup>26</sup> lead bars for bullets cost fifteen to nineteen-cents per pound, and tobacco could be purchased for ten to twenty-cents per pound in major cities.<sup>27</sup> Sage mentions powder selling for \$3.00 a pound and tobacco at \$5.00 per pound at Fort Uinta, which is a 2,000 percent markup from what these items could be purchased in St. Louis or Santa Fe, but it must be remembered that Robidoux risked both his investment and life in transporting goods hundreds of miles through rugged and wild country to get supplies to his forts. Being an industrious entrepreneur, Robidoux showed profit on both ends of business, buying furs from the trappers and Indians which sold at a profit in Taos, and selling those same trappers and Indians goods at inflated prices. The above figures indicate that Robidoux made more money from the sale of goods at his forts than he obtained from the sale of furs. This was especially true in the late 1830's when

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<sup>25</sup>Clayton, The American Fur Company, 71.

<sup>26</sup>Carl P. Russell, Guns on the Early Frontier (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1962), 224.

<sup>27</sup>John K. Townsend, Narrative of a Journey Across the Rocky Mountains to the Colombia River and a Visit to the Sandwich Islands, Chile, &c., With a Scientific Appendix, (Philadelphia: Henry Perkins, 1838), 76. The above figures are from the early to mid-1830's, prior to the decline in prices due to the drop in beaver, and before the depression of 1837.

beaver prices dropped by as much as 50 percent and the price of goods throughout the mountains remained about the same.

To travel from Fort Uinta to Fort Uncompahgre, Robidoux went south through Willow Creek in the Bookcliff Mountains to about where Grand Junction, Colorado is today, this is evidenced by the famous Robidoux inscription on this ancient route. Crossing the Colorado River, the trail led south. Following the Gunnison River it led to the junction of the Gunnison and Uncompahgre Rivers and the site of Robidoux's other fort. From there Robidoux could travel the Old Spanish Trail back to New Mexico, or go east up the Gunnison River to where Cochetopa Creek merges with the Gunnison, which is about fifteen miles east of the present site of Gunnison, Colorado. Following Cochetopa Creek to Cochetopa Pass, he then dropped into the San Luis Valley of Colorado. From the San Luis Valley, it was only a short trip down the Rio Grande to Taos and then Santa Fe.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Wallace, 27.

Rufus Sage left an account of traveling with one of Robidoux's mule caravans in 1842. The train consisted of eight mules, loaded with two hundred-fifty pounds each.<sup>29</sup> Traveling an average of thirty-five to forty miles a day, it took Robidoux about fourteen days to go from Fort Uinta to Taos. Sage did not mention a visit to Fort Gunnison while traveling with Robidoux. If he had been there, Sage probably would have indicated so in his journal, for he was a careful recorder. This lack of reference may indicate that Robidoux used an entirely different route that trip which bypassed the other fort. By the early part of the 1840's, and possibly years before, Robidoux was using wheeled carts for transportation of goods to the Colorado Fort. Lieutenant, Philip St. George Cooke met Robidoux in the mountains headed toward Fort Uncompahgre on September 6, 1843. He noted, "I find Mr. Robidoux here, with a dozen light horse carts..."<sup>30</sup> The year previous Joseph Williams noted, "August 19th. We could see snow on the mountains. We had a very cold rain. Next day we came to Rubedeau's wagon, which he had left here the year before. He hitched his oxen to it, and took it along."(sic)<sup>31</sup> It is generally thought that Captain Bonneville was the first to take wagons over the continental divide for the 1832 rendezvous, but Robidoux had crossed into the intermountain corridor with wheeled carts possibly as early as the late 1820's. Due to the terrain between Fort Uncompahgre and Fort Uinta it is doubtful that Robidoux used carts or wagons to supply the northern fort. He would have taken the goods to Fort Uncompahgre by

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<sup>29</sup>Sage, Rocky Mountain Life, 233.

<sup>30</sup>Philip St. George Cooke, Scenes and Adventures in the Army, (Philadelphia: J.P. Lippencott Co., 1859), 243.

<sup>31</sup>Williams, 44.

wagon and then used pack trains into the Uinta Basin. Although freighting was not his main enterprize, with the constant shipping of goods and furs into and out of the mountains, Robidoux could well be thought of as one of the first freighters to operate west of the continental divide.

Robidoux extended his market for sales of trade goods, and at the same time obtained more furs by trading with the Snake (Shoshone) and Ute Indians of the central Rockies. While waiting at Fort Uinta, Rufus Sage, noted the common articles for which the Indians traded were horses, otter, deer, mountain sheep, and elk skins. These were exchanged for powder, lead, guns, knives, tobacco, beads, awls, and trinkets.<sup>32</sup> Taos Lightning or whiskey was another favorite trade item.

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<sup>32</sup>Sage, 232. It is of interest to note that Sage mentioned both Snake and Ute Indians trading at Fort Uinta. These two tribes were usually enemies; however many of the Uinta Band of Utes claim relation to the Shoshoni tribe. The Indian Census of 1900 substantiates their claims. Many of the Uinta Utes are part Shoshoni. Osborne Russell noted that the Utes and Shoshoni intermarried when he visited the Utes who lived along the Wasatch Front in 1828. See Journal of a Trapper, 120,122.

Most fur traders paid the Indians less for their furs than they did non-Indian trappers; and Robidoux seems to have had no hesitation about taking advantage of the Indians. Sage commented of the Indians' trade at Fort Uinta that the Utes and Shoshones brought large and well cured mountain sheep and deer skins to trade. They received in trade "the trifling consideration" of eight or ten loads of ammunition for one skin, which brought from one to two dollars in Santa Fe. Eight to ten charges of ammunition traded for a deer skin worth one dollar equates to two and one-half times the price for powder Robidoux charged non-Indians.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Sage, 233, provides the figure used for the Indian prices. Williams, p.42 supplies the price for non-Indians. For these figures, the author used a standard .54 caliber ball of 300 grains. The mountain standard for figuring how much powder is needed, was 3 grains powder to every 7 grains lead. There are approximately 3200 grains of black powder in one pound, making 25 charges per pound. If the Indians were shooting smaller calibers then the ratio would go higher in Robidoux's favor. With Sage's quote of Robidoux trading eight to ten charges to the Indians for a deer skin worth one dollar, it figures out at 2.4 times the usual \$1.50 sale price of powder to non-Indians.

Although it was illegal in Mexican Territory, Robidoux also traded guns to the Indians. Even before the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, it was against Spanish Law to sell firearms to the Indians. This law was repeated by a "Bando" or ban of the sale of guns to Indians in 1735.<sup>34</sup> After Mexican Independence, Mexican Law also forbid it. As early as March 1825, Francis Robidoux, another of Antoine's brothers, had his trade goods confiscated for trading guns to the Indians. Governor Bartolome Baca ordered the merchandise returned, but instructed the alcalde that Robidoux was prohibited from trading arms to the Indians.<sup>35</sup> In 1845, the governor of New Mexico launched an investigation into a charge that Antoine Robidoux was selling guns to the Utes and Shoshones.<sup>36</sup> Though the governor was convinced that he was in fact supplying guns to the Indians, Robidoux was never formally charged. There are at least three probable reasons for this: First, the Utes had already attacked and burned Robidoux's forts by the time the governor initiated the investigation so further investigation would have been moot. Second, during the year of 1845, the governor died and was temporarily replaced by an interim governor who was succeeded, that same year, by a governmental appointee to the office.<sup>37</sup> The charges were either lost during the change of governors,

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<sup>34</sup>Ralph Emerson Twitchell, Old Santa Fe, (Cedar Rapids, Iowa: The Torch Press, 1925), 11.

<sup>35</sup>Baca to the Alcalde of Taos, March 3, 1825, MANM, Roll 4, frame 814.

<sup>36</sup>Governor of New Mexico to the Ministro de Relaciones Exteriores y Gobernacion, 1844. MANM, roll 35, frame 447.

<sup>37</sup>National Historical Publications Commission, MANM, (Santa Fe: National Archives Publications, 1970), 129.

or paled in significance to the new governor because the fort had already been burned. Third, Robidoux was a small operator, working on the peripheries of Mexican territory. Mexican officials were not even able to control the illegal trapping and trading done south of the 42nd parallel by unlicensed Americans and English/Canadians such as the Ashley men, Hudson Bay Brigades, and many individual trappers.<sup>38</sup> Robidoux would have been questioned and possibly charged if the governor(s) had found him; but after his fort was burned, Robidoux spent little time in New Mexico until he returned with the United States army the next year during the War with Mexico. Robidoux had become General Stephen Watts Kearny's interpreter in 1845, and translated the speeches Kearny made in New Mexico during the Mexican War into Spanish and translated Spanish into English for the general.<sup>39</sup> Robidoux remained with Kearny until after the Battle of San Pasqual, where he was wounded by a lance thrust in his back on December 6, 1846.<sup>40</sup>

Whiskey was a trade item which also eventually caused Robidoux trouble. "Taos Lightning" was the liquor most frequently sold to the Indians by the New Mexican traders. Liquor of any kind was the nemesis of the fur trade. Debauchery and

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<sup>38</sup>According to the Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819, the Red River to the continental divide, north to the 42 parallel, and west to the coast of California was the agreed border between the U.S. and Spain. This was accepted by Mexico when it won independence in 1821.

<sup>39</sup>George Rutledge Gibson, Journal of a Soldier Under Kearny and Doniphan; 1846-1847. ed. Ralph P. Breber. (Glendale, California: The Arthur Clark Co., 1935), 131.

<sup>40</sup>William H. Emory, Notes of a Military Reconnaissance from Fort Leavenworth in Missouri in San Diego, California (Washington D.C.: House Executive Document, no. 41, 30th Congress I session, publisher, 1948), 111.

senseless mayhem often took place when liquor was sold to Indians. George Ruxton, a mountain man and contemporary of Robidoux's, said of Indians and liquor:

"Sometimes, maddened and infuriated by drink, they commit the most horrid atrocities on each other, murdering and mutilating in a barbarous manner, and often attempting the lives of the traders themselves."<sup>41</sup> The most common practice was to pack low grade whiskey or straight grain alcohol into the mountains and then dilute it with water, sometimes by as much as one-third. The more the Indians drank, the more the trader watered his supply.<sup>42</sup> Some traders had unique, and often toxic recipes, for their brew that included a twist of tobacco, rattlesnake heads, and other noxious ingredients determined to give it more kick when mixed with raw alcohol.

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<sup>41</sup>Ruxton, Life in the Far West, 99.

<sup>42</sup>Clayton, The American Fur Company, 238.

Rarely in the history of the fur trade were the Indians who drank modest imbibers. They usually consumed liquor in great gulps and did not stop until the supply was gone or they fell into unconsciousness. During this time, drunken Indians often performed acts of extraordinary aggression which were carried out with enormous energy and continued until they again slipped into unconsciousness or began to sober up, depending upon the supply of liquor available. This state of affairs often lasted for months.<sup>43</sup>

When a dependency for alcohol was created, the Indians often sold all they possessed for a little more "firewater." Unscrupulous traders knowingly plied the Indians with liquor to get them to sell their furs and goods cheaper; also liquor itself was a good trade item. The mountain price of liquor was usually \$4.00 a pint.<sup>44</sup> William Wolfskill's ledger shows that liquor could be purchased for .75 a pint in Taos. Even unwatered, \$3.25 profit per pint is a substantial markup.<sup>45</sup> Although it was illegal in both the United States and Mexican Territory to trade whiskey to the Indians, agents of both countries rarely stopped traders who bought it to transport into Indian country.<sup>46</sup> Robidoux's substantial bill to Simon Turley, the inventor of Taos Lightning who ran a

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid, 240.

<sup>44</sup>Russell, Journal of a Trapper, 60.

<sup>45</sup>William Wolfskill Journal, 1830-31.

<sup>46</sup>Ruxton, 99.

distillery business in New Mexico, suggests that Robidoux purchased liquor in trade quantities.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>Letter dated October 16, 1840, from Simon Turley to Manuel Alvarez. See Alvarez Papers #344.

As the major means of transportation in the mountains, horses and mules were always a major trade item. Indian wealth was counted in numbers of horses. A young warrior obtained a bride with a gift of horses to his prospective father-in-law. Indian culture placed a good horse thief in high social standing. Cases of horses being stolen from mountain men by Indians are numerous. There was always a good market for horses in the mountains; indeed, some Indians and mountain men, such as Wakara of the Utes and Peg Leg Smith made their living by stealing horses in California and selling them in the mountains or states.<sup>48</sup>

Horses were of greater worth in the mountains than the states because of the greater reliance upon them by mountain men and Indians. As riding and pack animals horses were indispensable. Horses were usually classified into three divisions: Indian ponies, which were worth about \$50, Spanish horses were worth \$50 to \$100, and horses from the states were worth up to \$500.<sup>49</sup> The difference in prices was

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<sup>48</sup>L.R. Bailey, Indian Slave Trade in the Southwest (Los Angeles: Westernlore Press, 1966), 152. In one daring raid Wakara and Smith ran off over 1500 head of horses from a San Luis Obispo ranch.

<sup>49</sup>Daniel Potts's letter of 1827 lists horses costing from \$150 to \$300, and some as high as \$500, at the rendezvous that year. See Morgan, The West of William Ashley, 168. See also property list lost or stolen by Indians from the firm of Smith, Jackson, and Sublette from July 1826, to July 1830. They claimed the loss of 480 head of horses, "at the lowest mountain price of \$60 per head," which they figured as a \$28,000 loss. contained in "Selections in the Missouri Society, Huntington Library, San Marino, California. Selected from the Sublette Papers, 1823-1839. Microfilm from the original manuscripts in the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, Missouri. See also, Herbert S. Auerbach, "Old Trails, Old Forts, Old Trappers and Traders," Utah Historical Quarterly 8, (Jan-April, 1941), 16.

determined by the size, strength, speed, and beauty of the animal. These high prices made horses the most expensive items in the mountains surpassing even guns in cost.

Robidoux had poor luck with horses, as did many traders. In 1824, the Arapaho Indians stole all his goods and horses. In 1833, while traveling from St. Louis toward Santa Fe, Robidoux's group encountered a severe blizzard. Snow piled up as high as the wagons and the cold was so intense that eight of his men, and all of the horses and mules froze to death. Stranded on the plains, the group burned the wagons for firewood and ate the dead horses and mules to keep from starving until Antoine's brother, Joseph, sent a relief party to rescue them. On this trip, Robidoux was accompanied by his wife Carmel. While waiting for help, Carmel and her servant girl slept together for warmth. One especially cold night, the girl froze to death, while Carmel, who slept right next to her, survived.<sup>50</sup>

As a good trade item, Robidoux bought and sold horses at Fort Uinta.<sup>51</sup> The worst financial calamity to befall Robidoux involved horses. In the winter of 1841-42, he and a few drovers left St. Louis driving several hundred head of horses and mules. Upon reaching Cottonwood Creek near Council Groves, they encountered a terrible blizzard. Reminiscent of the 1833 incident, that night two of Robidoux's men and over 400 horses and mules are said to have frozen to death.<sup>52</sup> This was devastating to Robidoux's

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<sup>50</sup>Orral Messmore Robidoux, Memorial to the Robidoux Brothers, (Kansas City, Missouri: Smith-Grievess Company, 1924), 185.

<sup>51</sup>Sage, Rocky Mountain Life, 232.

<sup>52</sup>Philip St. George Cooke, Scenes and Adventures in the Army, (Philadelphia: J.P. Lippencott Co., 1859), 243. Also see Wallace, Antoine Robidoux, 31.

finances. Valued at a minimum \$100 each, the low figure for a horse from the states, Robidoux stood to lose \$40,000.

There is some evidence connecting Robidoux with the capture and sale of Indian women and children as slaves. In 1842, Joseph Williams, a Methodist minister from Indianapolis, spent eighteen days at Fort Uinta waiting for Robidoux to return to the fort so he could travel with the pack train to New Mexico. Williams had traveled to the Oregon Territory the year earlier and upon his return trip, he traveled by way of Fort Boise, Fort Hall, and Fort Bridger. At Fort Bridger he found that the company he expected to travel with had left prior to his arrival. He decided to ride over the Uinta Mountains to "Rubedeau's Fort Winty"(sic) and arrived there on July 9. Once there Williams waited eighteen days for Robidoux to return to the fort so he could travel with Robidoux's caravan to New Mexico. Williams recorded:

We had to wait there for Mr. Rubedeau about 18 days, till he and his company and horsedriviers were ready to start with us to the United States. This delay was very disagreeable to me, on account of the wickedness of the people, and the debauchery of the men among the Indian women. They would buy and sell them to one another. One morning I heard a terrible fuss, because two of their women had run away the night before... Mr. Rubedeau had collected several of the Indian squaws and young Indians, to take to New Mexico, and kept some for his own use! The Spaniards would buy them for wives...(sic).<sup>53</sup>

Williams was shocked and disgusted at what he saw at Fort Uinta, and his account is obviously biased. However, his comments about Robidoux and his men capturing Indian women and children for sale in New Mexico, regardless of his opinion of the practice, stands as documentation that Robidoux was involved in Indian slave

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<sup>53</sup>Williams, Narrative, 43.

trade. Many of the Ute People living in the Uinta Basin believe that Robidoux and his men captured Indian women to serve as prostitutes at the forts. While Williams' account does not specifically say as much, it seems to hint that was the case when he said that "Rubedeau kept some for his own use!"

Joe Meek, a mountain man and contemporary of Robidoux's, also links him with trading Indian women. In the winter of 1840, Meek wintered at Fort Davy Crockett. To pass the time, when the streams were too frozen to trap, Meek, Robidoux, and other mountain men gambled by playing hands. Meek remembered that Robidoux lost all his money and even wagered and lost an Indian girl while playing that winter.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>Francis Fuller Victor, The River of the West, (Hartford: R.W. Bliss & Co., 1870), 261.

Most of the menial work performed in New Mexico's colonial era was done by forced labor. Indian slave trade was not a new thing to the area. Indians had been enslaved in Spanish territories since the time Columbus discovered the New World in 1492. In New Mexico the slave trade was so common that in the early 1700's trade fairs were held to accommodate the transfer of Indians from captors to buyers. Thomas Jefferson Farnham, who passed through the Great Basin in 1839 noted:

The New Mexicans capture them (the Indians) for slaves; and the neighboring Indians do the same; and even the bold and usually high-minded old beaver hunter sometimes descends from his legitimate labor among the mountain streams, to this mean traffic.<sup>55</sup>

Uncle Dick Wootten, a mountain man familiar with the Great Basin region, recorded:

...it was no uncommon thing in those days, to see a party of Mexicans in that country buying Indians, and while we were trapping there I sent a lot of peltries to Taos by a party of those same slave traders."<sup>56</sup>

The period from 1830 to the mid-1840's was the height of the Great Basin slave trade which coincided with the height of Robidoux's career in the Basin region.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup>Thwaites, Early Western Travels, 166.

<sup>56</sup>Quoted in, William M. Snow, "Ute Indians and Spanish Slave Trade," Utah Historical Quarterly 2, (July 1929), 76.

<sup>57</sup>Bailey, Indian Slave Trade, 145.

When Robidoux arrived in Taos, the New Mexicans would have quickly purchased any captive Indian women and children as servants. Farnham recorded that a boy was worth \$50 to \$100, and a girl \$100 to \$200. Whenever Robidoux was taking a pack train out of the mountains, a few captives could greatly increase his profit for the trip. There was no investment or financial risk if Robidoux and his men captured the Indians themselves, or if he traded for his captives, the profit was still great enough to encourage not only Robidoux, but many other New Mexicans, to enter the slave trade. In fact, the main use of the Old Spanish Trail, which connected New Mexico with Los Angeles, was to facilitate Indian slave and horse trading.<sup>58</sup> If the moral question of capturing and selling human beings occurred to Robidoux, it did not stop his participation in it.

Antoine was a hard, shrewd businessman who would do nearly anything to show a profit. He learned in a hard school. Joseph Robidoux II, Antoine's father, was a wizened old frontiersman who could and would cheat a competitor such as Manuel Lisa. On one occasion Lisa was setting out to trade with the Pawnees in rivalry with Robidoux. The latter locked him in a whiskey cellar and went and traded with the Pawnees himself. Another time, Joseph III, Antoine's brother had fallen heir to some building lots in St. Louis that his father coveted. Tricking his son into an empty whiskey cellar, he locked him in until in his thirst, young Joe traded a quit claim deed for a glass of whiskey.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>See Hafen, The Old Spanish Trail. See also Bailey, Spanish Slave Trade.

<sup>59</sup>Rudolph Friederich Kurz, Journal, found in Bulletin 115 of



Robidoux employed these business practices in his mountain operation, but having a determination for economic advancement; he utilized love, politics, and investments to further his quest for wealth. From 1824, when Robidoux first left Santa Fe for the Green River country, until 1828, little is recorded about his activities. During this time Robidoux studied the mountains from which he wrested a living for the next two decades, became acquainted with the various Indian tribes, and learned "nearly every Indian idiom in the plains and mountain country."<sup>60</sup>

Ever on the lookout for a way to work with the system and avoid legal entanglements, Robidoux took advantage of love and politics in 1828. That year he married Carmel Benavides, a Spanish girl from Santa Fe, who happened to be the adopted daughter of the governor of New Mexico.<sup>61</sup> Robidoux was not alone in marrying into wealthy and influential Spanish families. Most Anglos who were successful in New Mexico prior to the Mexican Cession married Mexican women.<sup>62</sup> Charles Bent and Kit Carson are but two other examples.

According to Mrs. Orral Robidoux, the Benavides were an old and aristocratic Spanish family. Upon the death of her father, who had been a Captain in the military, Carmel lived with the governor. It was said of her that she was beautiful and brave; daring enough to swim her horse across the Rio Grande when it was swollen during

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<sup>60</sup>Ralph Emerson Twitchell, The Leading Facts of New Mexican History, (Cedar Rapids: The Torch Press, 1911), 2: 478.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

<sup>62</sup>Rebecca McDowell Craven, The Impact of Intimacy; Mexican Anglo Intermarriage in New Mexico, 1821-1846. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974), 1.

spring run off when many men feared to do so. She was fond of dancing, and before marrying, often rode horseback from Santa Fe to Albuquerque, a distance of sixty miles, to attend a dance.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup>Robidoux, Memorial, 183,185.

With the connections of his new bride's family, Robidoux applied for and was granted citizenship in Mexico as a naturalized citizen.<sup>64</sup> The conditions to become a Mexican citizen, which Robidoux had no trouble meeting, were to have lived in Mexican Territory for at least two years, be Roman Catholic, be employed and well-behaved. Some of Robidoux's mountain activities may have excluded him from the last requirement, but he was a respected businessman in Santa Fe. As a citizen of Mexico, Robidoux had many advantages that had been unavailable to him prior to naturalization. License to trap and to operate trading posts within Mexican Territory could only be obtained, except in rare cases, by citizens. Most of those who traded and trapped in Mexican Territory, who were not citizens, did so illegally and were subject to fines and imprisonment if caught. Also as a citizen, Robidoux did not have to pay duty on his sales and transactions in New Mexico as did contemporary traders and mountain men who operated in the Southwest and had not become naturalized.

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<sup>64</sup>MANM, roll 10, frames 697-698, under the date September 18, 1830 lists those approved for naturalization. This is an official list from the governor to the local officials. Antoine Robidoux is on the list. Antoine and Louis Robidoux applied for naturalization to Governor Chavez on July 16, 1829. Ritch Papers numbers 109,111,113, list those approved for naturalization in 1829 which includes the Robidoux brothers.

It is unlikely Robidoux agonized over whether to become a Mexican citizen. Coming from a French family who had lived in Montreal and then moved to St. Louis in the late 1760's or early 1770's, national allegiance had to be compliant. French citizens had suddenly found themselves British citizens after the Peace of Paris, 1763. Moving from Canada to St. Louis, the Robidoux's would have then been in Spanish Territory, until the secret Treaty of San Ildefonso returned the Louisiana region to the French. St. Louis remained a French possession only three years until the United States government gained the area from Napoleon in 1803 with the Louisiana Purchase. Robidoux's concern was probably not over citizenship, but rather, what could advance his opportunities to make money.

Operating out of Santa Fe, Robidoux established a trading house in the main square of town. It was probably more of a warehouse used to store goods and furs than a retail store. Robidoux kept it for several years. His building was broken into two different times during the 1830's.<sup>65</sup> With storage of furs, Robidoux was able to utilize his holdings to his advantage, as is shown when he secured his debt to Charles Bent with 650 pounds of beaver pelts.<sup>66</sup> Such practice was not uncommon among trappers and traders. Beaver pelts were often used as hairy bank notes. In addition to his fur business, both in the mountains and in New Mexico, Robidoux owned a tannery at the northwest corner of Guadalupe and San Francisco Streets, and also invested in mines in New Mexico. In two of these investments, Robidoux lost over eight-thousand

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<sup>65</sup>Weber, The Taos Trappers, 185.

<sup>66</sup>Read Collection. Read I, no. 59. Charles Bent to Alvarez. Oct. 11, 1842.

dollars.<sup>67</sup> The mines did not turn out to his financial gain, and there is no evidence to indicate if his tannery was profitable, but his purchase of them demonstrates Robidoux's willingness to try all within his means to get ahead financially.

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<sup>67</sup>Sale of a mine to Antoine Robidoux, SANM Roll 4, 1325-27, Microfilm copy held in State Records Center, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Once married and naturalized as a citizen of Mexico, Robidoux lost little time in establishing stronger political ties in New Mexico. In 1830 he entered Santa Fe politics and was elected alcalde.<sup>68</sup> As president of the "ayunlamiento" or town council, Robidoux took advantage of his position to enhance his own business. As alcalde he launched a bitter verbal attack upon foreign trappers; French-Canadians and Americans, many of whom had been his friends and former trapping companions. He charged that they were stripping the streams of New Mexico of a valuable asset -- beaver he hoped to catch.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup>MANM roll 9, frame 671,672.

<sup>69</sup>Forbes Parkhill, The Blazed Trail of Antoine Leroux, (Los Angeles: Westernlore Press, 1965), 63.

With his varied interests and business operations, Robidoux presents a multifaceted image that is best understood from an entrepreneurial framework. Of the many and varied actions which can be verified, he was an opportunist to say the least. It is hard to classify Robidoux into a neatly presentable package that fits modern definitions or Hollywood stereotypes. He was not a mountain man in the usual meaning of the term but more a mountain trader. Robidoux was fluent in English, Spanish, French, and several Indian languages. George Gibbon, a soldier with General Kearny, described Robidoux as "tall, slender, and athletic, and had polished manners and possessed a striking personality."<sup>70</sup> Because of his conduct in dealing with the Ute Indians in the Uinta Basin, they associate the name Robidoux with cruelty. With his political and marital connections, and his background from St. Louis, Robidoux could be seen in tailored clothes, as photos of Robidoux evidence, yet he wore buckskins and moccasins for much of his life. For entertainment he could be the guest of the governor of New Mexico or chase antelope onto the ice of the Green River to watch them drown when they broke through.<sup>71</sup> Many of those who were involved in the mountain fur trade have been described as half wild savages. Others have depicted them as James Fennimore Cooper's, Leatherstockings gone west,<sup>72</sup> but an image of an

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<sup>70</sup>George Gibbon, Journal of a Soldier Under Kearny and Doniphan; 1846-47. p. 131 ftn.

<sup>71</sup>Victor, The River of the West, 261. When Robidoux, Meek, and the others tired of playing hands, on occasion they would chase antelope hoping to run them onto the ice of the Green River. There the unfortunate animals would often break through and drown.

<sup>72</sup>Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land; The American West as Symbol and Myth, (New York: Vintage Books, 1950), 88-90.

entrepreneur engaged in unrestricted pursuit of economic advancement fits Robidoux best.

In an era when enterprise and trade were new and feeling their way into untouched territories with the expansion westward by a young nation, Robidoux was, perhaps unknowingly, pioneering trade and settlement. His quest for wealth added to the building up the American interests in the region, just as William Becknell's opening of the Santa Fe Trail did in 1821. Robidoux's entrepreneurship brought about the first settlement for trade on the west slope of the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. He opened new trails for trade goods, and expanded from the shaky beginnings of the Reed Trading Post Utah's dawning of industry.