



Trading ceremony at York Factory about 1780, described in the June 1947 "Beaver." From the painting by A. Sherriff Scott.

Trading into Hudson's Bay

BY KENNETH KIDD

Mr. Kidd is curator of ethnology at the Royal Ontario Museum, and specialises in the subject of trade goods.

AFTER 275 years of activity, York Factory closed its doors this summer of 1957. During those years, the place had been a centre of trade between Indians and whites; the former obtaining there those goods which had, in the course of time, become indispensable to them, and the latter receiving in return the rich harvest of furs produced by the immense country adjacent to the Fort on the south and west. So customary had this two-way traffic become that one might think it would have gone on forever, and feel surprise that it should cease. But change occurs in all things, and York Fort has ceased to be.

What had kept the post in business for these two and three-quarter centuries? To such a question, every school boy in Canada would quickly reply: "The trade in furs." So far as it goes, this is true; but it is only half the truth. A trade in furs implies, in the very nature of things, a two-way transaction. We can readily visualize the Indian laying his furs on the counter, but we know very well that such an act calls for a reciprocal move on the part of the trader; he is expected to give something in return. Without this two-way flow—of furs inward and goods outward—there could be no trade. Nowadays, of course, we are accustomed to a somewhat attenuated "trade," for we do not give goods in return for some other kind of goods; we hand over money for goods. But 275 years ago, money was scarce even in white settlements, and totally useless at remote posts. All trade was done on a sort of barter basis; furs were "bought" with goods.

In time, the commodities used in the purchase of furs, or in any other dealings with the natives, came to be known as "trade goods." They were the very lifeblood of business. All posts required them, not only in the Hudson's Bay Company's territories, but wherever Europeans dealt with natives. The French used them in their early post at Tadoussac; John Smith required them at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1609 and later; and the multitudinous trading posts from here to Acadia, and indeed to Oswego, Niagara, Ohio, Detroit and Michilimackinac, down through the years, depended upon them. Great quantities reached the ports of Quebec, New York and Philadelphia, as well as

those in Hudson Bay, to be distributed to "pack-horse men" or canoemen, and sent off into the wilderness; there to be traded to Indians to satisfy their needs and their vanity. The production of these goods must have kept many men busy, and filled the holds of most of the ships which crossed the Atlantic; yet no accurate estimate of the value of them is available. Some students are of the opinion that the manufacture of trade goods was insignificant; but at least in the case of glass beads, it was the major activity of one great city, Venice.

The effect on the Indian was by contrast profound. For instance, where he had in the past been accustomed to hunting with a bow and arrows, he now became dependent upon firearms, either muskets or some type of gun. By their use, he was able to increase manyfold the number of pelts he could deliver and the amount of goods he could buy. Amongst the latter were metal pots and pans; and these, being more durable, quickly superseded the birch-bark dishes upon which he used to be dependent; no longer did his people have to make them, or the pottery vessels which, in more favoured regions, they had used for centuries. Manufactured clothing, and particularly woollens, soon replaced skin garments, although boots and shoes never ousted moccasins. In the realm of finery, glass beads were eagerly sought by the Indian women to decorate clothing, for they were easier to manipulate than the traditional porcupine quills, more variegated, and being new, considered on the whole more desirable.

In these and a hundred other ways, trade goods affected the life of the Indian; they forced him into new channels of activity (hunting on a commercial basis); they quickened his life, for they made it necessary for him to engage in regular activity; they introduced the competitive idea; they gave him new comforts and new baubles to please his fancy; they made obsolete many of the old crafts (making arrows, stone tools, etc.), and in the long run they spelt the end of native forms of society. It is hardly an exaggeration to say, then, that the trading activity between the white man and the Indian was of little consequence to the former compared with the tremendous significance for the whole way of life of the latter. The fur trade, and the

manufacture of trade goods, made scarcely a ripple in the white man's world, but they turned the Indian's world upside down.

What were these magic goods? Were they something inherently different from what we are accustomed to? Basically, no. On the contrary, they were by comparison with most of ours, cheap and common. Most of them were simple, everyday things of humble use, like iron axes or hatchets, sugar, tobacco, knives, blankets and awl blades. Some were of no practical value whatever and were designed solely to please the fancy, like hawk bells to decorate one's garments and make a merry jingle as one walked; "lac'd hats" to add to one's magnificence; "seal" rings or plain rings for one's own or one's wife's fingers; handkerchiefs, and red leather trunks, the better to carry one's belongings.

Strangely, the two-way nature of the traffic is scarcely realized beyond the fur trader's realm. For some odd reason, the outside world visualizes only the trade in furs, forgetting that for the furs goods were handed out. Yet, of course, this was the whole basis of the Company's business. How was it conducted? Actually, there was a good deal of ceremony connected with it, as was so adequately described by Bacqueville de la Potherie in 1722, and again in an article in the *Beaver* (June, 1947). And since no money changed hands, values had to be reckoned in some other medium, and the most obvious medium was beaver. A Company statement of 1776 noted that, "Beaver being the chief Commoditye we trade for, We therefore make it the Standard whereby we value all other Furs and commodities, dealt for in Trade." The system, however, was in vogue at least a century before, for we find a "Standard of Trade" quoted by Oldmixon in 1708 and the remark that it had already been established some 25 years.

It would require more space than is available here to go into details as to the fluctuations in the values of goods as represented by the beaver skin, but a few observations may be of interest. For instance, in Oldmixon's Standard of Trade a gun was worth "One with the other 10 good Skins; that is, Winter Beaver; 12 Skins for the biggest sort, 10 for the mean, and 8 for the smallest;" in 1748, all guns, whether three, three and one-half, or four feet long, cost 14 beaver at York Fort and remained the same in 1766. A pound of shot cost half a beaver according to Oldmixon in 1708, but in 1748 one beaver bought five pounds; "a great and little Hatchet" cost one beaver in 1708 and at York Fort in 1748, one beaver each. Beads seemed to have remained steady, for a beaver bought one-half pound in 1708 and in 1715 at York Fort; they are not listed for this post in 1748 or 1766. Kettles, which were sold by the pound (in which form they were termed "battery"), sold

29) *York Fort America Anno Domini 1715*
From Septem: 8th 1714 to August 1st 1715

The Acc^t of the Skins & furs as hath been traded for in the time of this Acc^t and packt up to be sent home and valued into Beavers as sheweth made out what hath been over and under Trade as appears by good and true Receipt when Valued p^r Standard Amounts to be

The Several Sorts of Skins trade for in the time of this Acc ^t and packt up to be sent home	Number of Skins	Value in Beavers	Value in Beavers
Whole Parchments Beaver	11120	1	11120
Half Parchment Beaver	2080	2	10400
Coat Beaver	3250	1	3250
Moose	2530	1	2530
Moose Small	20	1	20
Moose Tawn	5	1	5
Two quill hats or Woodpecker	24	1	24
Other	76	2	152
Cat	97	1	97
Wolfe	2	1	2
Bear	22	1	22
Cubs	6	1	6
Red Fox	18	1	18
White Fox	21	2	42
Martins	1550	3	4650
Buffles	2	1	2
Sithovelle	2	2	4
Musk Balls	8	8	64
Deer skins	2	2	4
1000 Beavers worth			1000
Toto. Packt up to be sent home			21078
<i>On Opposite Side appears to have been traded</i>			<i>16602</i>
<i>3 Beavers Cost 24 Guns w^{ch} Acc^t of Guns added</i>			<i>72</i>
<i>3 Musk Balls Cost 30 Moose w^{ch} added</i>			<i>90</i>
<i>40 Deer skins added to the above</i>			<i>80</i>
<i>1000 Beavers added to the above</i>			<i>1000</i>
<i>Which is added to make the total</i>			<i>16602</i>
<i>To have taken out of the above</i>			<i>72</i>
<i>to sent home & 48 720 from above</i>			<i>16530</i>
Value of goods traded & purchas'd by trade			10830
			16530
			Overgaind p^r by trade - 4578

23 *Folio 1 Ledger*

List of skins traded at York from Sept. 8th, 1714, to August 1st, 1715. Parchment beaver was a skin taken from the animal and stretched and dried. Coat beaver—supple, greasy skins worn as "toggies" by Indians—were the kind preferred by the hat makers. Values are in "Made Beaver."

for one beaver a pound in the earliest list and one and one-half beaver at York Fort in 1715 and 1749. Despite wars and the troubles of various sorts which plagued the trade into Hudson Bay, prices seem generally speaking to have remained relatively stable. We do know, however, that there were times when the sharp depreciation in value of beaver skins in the European markets did cause the factors at the Company's post real difficulty in explaining to the Indians why a beaver skin could not buy as much as in the past.

Most of the commodities included under the general term of "trade goods" were practical things, and the remainder could best be described as "finery" and non-essentials. For the hunter—in whom the Company was primarily interested—there were guns of various sorts and sizes, shot, powder, powder horns, flints and gun worms*; and to assist him in gathering a variety of foods while on the trail, fish hooks, nets, ice chisels, lines, sword blades and

*An object like a corkscrew to fit on the end of a ramrod and extract wads from a gun barrel.

The Standard of Trade
As Settled by the Governour

The Several sorts of Trading Goods		Value	Measure	The Several sorts of Trading Goods		Value	Measure
These Sort of Goods Valued by Weight	These Sort of Goods Valued by Piece or Number	as	Beaver	Value	Measure	as	Beaver
Shot of 30. Grs.		1 p	1	Tobacco Pens	1 p	1	7
Powder		1 p	1	Tobacco Boxes	1 p	1	1
Kettles		1 p	1	Combs	1 p	1	1
Baylitt	Tobacco	1 p	1	Combs	2 p	1	1
Rolls		1 p	1	Combs	2 p	1	1
Cap		1 p	1	Stockins	1 p	1 1/2	1 1/2
Camillion		1 p	1	Warr. Glov. p	1 p	1	1
Boads		1 p	1	Warr. Glov. p	1 p	1	1
Towads		1 p	2	Warr. Glov. p	1 p	1	1
Sugar		2 p	1	Warr. Glov. p	1 p	1	1
Hard Soap		1 p	1	Warr. Glov. p	1 p	1	1
Green Wax		1 p	13	Warr. Glov. p	1 p	1	1
Hatchets		1 p	1	Warr. Glov. p	1 p	1	1
Knives		4 p	1	Warr. Glov. p	1 p	1	1
Iron Curballs		1 p	1	Warr. Glov. p	1 p	1	1
Scissors		2 p	1	Warr. Glov. p	1 p	1	1
Baggonetts		1 p	1	Warr. Glov. p	1 p	1	1
Mocotaugons		2 p	1	Warr. Glov. p	1 p	1	1
Moore Blades		2 p	1	Warr. Glov. p	1 p	1	1
Axles		8 p	1	Warr. Glov. p	1 p	1	1
Nett Lines		1 p	1	Warr. Glov. p	1 p	1	1
Wax of America		1 p	1	Warr. Glov. p	1 p	1	1
Rifart		2 p	1	Warr. Glov. p	1 p	1	1
Powder horns		1 p	1	Warr. Glov. p	1 p	1	1
Trays		10 p	1	Warr. Glov. p	1 p	1	1
Iron Tools		4 p	1	Warr. Glov. p	1 p	1	1
Trache Bells		12 p	1	Warr. Glov. p	1 p	1	1
Looking Glasses		1 p	1	Warr. Glov. p	1 p	1	1
Watts Rings		6 p	1	Warr. Glov. p	1 p	1	1
Watts Rings		1 p	7	Warr. Glov. p	1 p	1	1
Watts Rings		1 p	4	Warr. Glov. p	1 p	1	1
Watts Rings		1 p	1	Warr. Glov. p	1 p	1	1
Watts Rings		1 p	1	Warr. Glov. p	1 p	1	1

Standard of trade decreed by Governour James Knight in 1715. "Baggonetts" are probably bayonets. "Mocotaugons" are the curved knives, still used by the Indians. "Bays" is baize. Note that deer and moose skins are listed among the trading goods.

bayonets (apparently for conversion into spears) were available. Blankets, flannels, bays (baize) both red and blue, and broadcloth in red, white or blue, shirts, "stockens," worsted sashes, "lac'd coats," and plain coats provided for the hunter's comfort and for that of his family. Some of the yard goods were intended for making up into garments by the women. Duffels, a coarse kind of cloth originating in Holland was also used, it seems, for burying the dead. Yarn gloves kept the hands of the hunter warm and goggles helped to ward off snow blindness. For those festive occasions which the Indian loved so well, and also as favours to be given to chiefs for special services, there were such things as hats, handkerchiefs, English brandy and "Waters, White or Red," although goods of several other and often less spectacular kinds could serve this purpose as well.

For mundane chores, the Indian man could purchase with his furs fire-steels or burning glasses to ignite his fires in camp; axes and hatchets with which to chop wood, and

files to sharpen them with. He was more likely to buy materials and tools for his wife to use, however—such things as yard goods, buttons, thread, scissors, needles and brass thimbles—in order that she might be able to make his clothes and his family's. Beads, "gartering," "broad Orris lace," worsted binding and hawk bells of brass she could use to ornament them. Her daily round of duties was probably made a trifle easier also by the possession of brass or copper or tin kettles, metal knives, "alchemy," i.e., a kind of brass, spoons, and awls with which to sew birchbark for wigwams and canoes, or the family moccasins.

Diet was not noticeably affected by trading, although sugar was an early import, and better equipment for hunting and fishing must have increased the food supply considerably. "Brazill" tobacco—the kind which came in hanks or "hands"—was introduced at an early date when it was found that the Virginia type was not selling well; from then on, tobacco was an extremely popular item at York Fort as well as elsewhere. And, in addition to the gay note provided by the "Orris lace," the bright coats and the "worsted sashes," the Company very thoughtfully stocked red feathers, vermilion and black lead with which to paint designs on one's face and body, rings of several kinds, silver ornaments (in later times) and looking glasses in which to admire the ensemble. Hard soap is listed in the *Standard of Trade* at York Fort in 1715, but it was probably used for some purpose with which we are unfamiliar.

The same *Standard* classifies trade goods according to the way in which they are valued; some were sold by weight, others by the item. Shot, powder, kettles, tobacco, vermilion, beads, thread, sugar and hard soap were valued according to their weight; all else by the piece.

Furs were the lifeblood of the Hudson's Bay Company, and as the Indian hunters supplied the furs, the Company saw to it that its customers got the best possible equipment consistent with reason. And this was not always easy. There were frequent complaints from the Indians, and these were relayed by the factors to the proper authorities. Almost invariably, the Governor and Committee listened with sympathy and attention, and to their credit it must be said they followed up with action. Guns, hatchets, and textiles are good examples of commodities which were often the cause of complaint.

For the first few years, the Company seems to have experimented a bit with various sorts of firearms (falconets, musquetoons, blunderbusses, fowling pieces and muskets), but by 1682 was ordering heavily from the Englishman, Mathew Hardeman; in that year it took 215 new and 45 old guns from him, and from Thomas Powell, 100 new and 23 old. On the advice of Pierre Radisson, who it will be recalled, more than once deserted the French and joined the



The great store room on the second floor back of the depot, which used to be piled high with trade goods. Photo taken in the winter of 1923 by Martin Bovey.

English Company, the Governor and Committee ordered about 450 guns from Holland to be sent to Port Nelson; but they soon perceived that "the Hollande guns Doe not please the Indians therefore we will not sende any more but have chose rather though much Dearer to us, to send the best English guns, which we doe not doubt will please the Indians beyond any that the French have & must accordingly be regarded in the standard of commerce." And to George Geyer they wrote: "You shall never bee troubled with Holland Guns again; which whether ignorantly or wilfully put upon us, Wee doe believe hath done our Trade great prejudice, but by your prudent Complacency toward the Indians, the best Goods for the future, Wee hope may be Recovered and the Indians retained to our Factoryes."

The English guns seem to have been satisfactory, for no complaint has come to notice until 1716. In that year, James Knight, writing from York Fort, explained that the Indians did not like the guns they were getting for they "are to heavy & Clumsy the butts to bigg and they Insisted very much to have the price abated;" and he observed that "there is no man knows how to Use the Guns better than the Indians." The weapon must indeed

have reached a new low, for Henry Kelsey, writing three years later from York Fort, complained that "Pickfatt's Guns are the sorryest Goods that can be and the armourer does say that they are no better than the Guinea Guns severall he shewed me have not had the forging filed out of them . . . and the main Springs so weak they will not throw the Hammer up. . . ." Such instruments were not of a kind to promote trade and the Company apparently provided better ones until 1785. Those shipped that year "would have been fatal to Life and Limb of the person who might have used them had not a timely discovery been made of the badness of them."

Similar difficulties with regard to other goods beset the Company, despite the belief of the Governor and Committee that as "choice goods as can be bought for money" were being despatched to the Bay in 1684. But the next year it was necessary to return 1100 hatchets from Albany River, Hayes Island and Rupert River. Hatchets, indeed, seem to have been a never-ending source of trouble; the smiths would not forge them properly and they often shattered at the first blow. Even in the mid-nineteenth century, Governor Sir George Simpson complained bitterly about the quality, observing that a defective hatchet could easily

bring about the death of a hunter, since if he could not cut firewood, he might freeze to death.

Cloth was another material which often gave rise to complaints. In 1728, the factor at York Fort reported that his last shipment was "so stretched with the tenterhooks so that the Selvedge is almost tore from the one end of the piece to the other." This would have been bad enough in itself, but taken with the inferiority of the powder, kettles and hatchets received the same year, it played into the hands of the French. The "Natives are grown so Politick," says the same writer, "in their way . . . now is the time to Oblidge the natives, before the French Draw them to there Settlement. . . ." On this alarming piece of news, the Governor and Committee gave instructions for the factor to make a careful examination of his own and the French goods and see why the Natives preferred the latter, and by all possible means to "procure . . . samples of the several Commodities," etc., in order that an examination might be made and the defect remedied; this they felt was achieved in the shipment of 1740.

Some idea of the amount of trading that went on in the earliest years may be derived from studying the outfit for 1684. In that year there were received at York Fort the following:

300 guns	2 gross of lace
185 barrels of shot	8 pieces of "Victory canvas"
29½ doz. powder horns	13 yards of "blew shalloone"
2000 hatchets	350 yards of cloth
3000 jack-knives	390 blankets, ten of them of
3000 large "Rochbury" knives	French make
2000 small knives	445 coats (plus ninety-eight
15 gross of tobacco pipes	for boys)
5000 lb. roll tobacco	2 doz. "plaine shoes"
247 hogsheads of leaf tobacco	80 caps
2 gross of "sissers"	4 doz. French falls
252 brass Kettles	10 lbs. vermilion paint
20 pieces of "plaine Callico"	3 gross of ivory combs

The coats were in assorted colours, such as red, blue, and "plaine," and sometimes they were of the kind known as "Fool's Coats" *i.e.*, multi-coloured like a jester's, while others were "laced."

Very much the same types of goods were recorded for the early 1670s. Indian trade was, in fact, a highly conservative one and except for the introduction now and then of some exciting novelty, remained remarkably stable.

Virtually all the trade goods, except the tobacco, originated in Europe. Holland produced, as we have seen, some of the firearms and probably the tobacco pipes, beads and "battery" as well. The tin kettles, introduced to the trade in 1686 to see how they would take, probably were an English substitute for the last-mentioned item. Flints, strangely enough, were purchased in France, although plenty of them were knapped in England. Hatchets were

originally obtained in the Biscay region of France, but in later times, probably in England. Knives were ordered and perhaps made in England, in 1683, despite the fact that the French cutlery trade was at that time the more advanced. The textiles were almost certainly made in England, except for the "fancy" blankets of French manufacture. Most of the beads must have come from Venice, though some may have been produced in Holland, England and France. Tobacco originated in America, and the silver ornaments which became an article of trade could have been obtained more cheaply in Montreal or Philadelphia than in Europe in the late eighteenth century; they were certainly made in those cities for the Indian trade and were sent in large quantities to Michilimackinac and other points.

The goods were evidently packed in large boxes and put in the holds of the ships outward bound to Hudson Bay. Once there, they were transferred to the stock rooms at York Fort and other posts, there to be opened and the goods sorted. The latter remained on the shelves until such time as there was an opportunity of disposing of them in trade to the Indians who visited the factory, or an opportunity of despatching them in a brigade to some inland post.

Down through the centuries, this scene was re-enacted year after year. Ships brought in cargoes of assorted goods for the Indians; men sorted them and repacked some for shipments to inland posts. Indians came with their furs to pay for the treasures from across the seas; to meet one another; to cajole the factor into giving them higher prices for their furs, or to let them have the goods cheaper; and above all, to have a few days of colourful ceremony and swagger. But of late years, furs and game have become scarce around York Factory, and of necessity the Indians have had to leave too. Without Indians and furs, there could be no trade, and inevitably, York Factory ceased operations. The door closed, and a page of history opened in its place. ♦

Modern Indians trading at the little store in the depot building. A. B. McIvor

